

Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama are working together to build a vibrant and creative community of artists

BY CHRISTINE YACKEL

STAGE PRESENCE



Jenaha McLearn '12 (Lucy) and Maclain W. Dassatti '13 (Tumnus) take a stroll through the forest in Act I of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.



TWO WEEKS INTO THE RUN OF *THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE Wardrobe*, understudy Aisling Halpin '12 was called into action when a lead actor twisted her ankle and couldn't perform. Halpin was fully prepared to step up and step in at a moment's notice, thanks to a unique partnership between Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama that

brings together world-class faculty, highly skilled staff, and visiting artists from around the nation to offer pre-professional training in a university setting. "Last year Aisling had to have her appendix taken out when she was in *Rent*, and her understudy had to go on in her place," says Stuart Plymesser, production stage manager at Syracuse Stage. "I told her this was her comeuppance."

The opportunity to perform alongside professional actors in main stage productions is just one of the many ways drama students benefit from sharing a theater complex with Syracuse Stage, a professional theater in residence at

Syracuse University. Students also put theory into practice by assisting in building sets and costumes, and serving as interns in stage management, marketing, and public relations. "Our students can earn a bachelor of fine arts degree and participate in a conservatory-style program without having to deal with the day-to-day craziness of living in New York City," says Ralph Zito, chair of the Department of Drama in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. "Among undergraduate pre-professional training programs at major American universities, we offer an unequalled level of integration with a professional theater company." »

NEW MOVEMENT

Decades ago, touring shows were the only form of professional theater available in such cities as Syracuse, Philadelphia, and Chicago. "Each community was different, but the shows were pre-packaged by Broadway producers in New York City," says Jeffrey Woodward, managing director of Syracuse Stage. "The desire for communities to have more control over what was presented launched the regional theater movement of the 1960s." The movement took hold in Syracuse in 1964 with the founding of the Syracuse Repertory Theatre, which went on to become Syracuse Stage—established by Syracuse University in 1973 as a not-for-profit LORT theater (League of Residence Theatres). The newly formed company shared facilities with the drama department, and both organizations fell under the leadership of Arthur Storch, who served as artistic director of Syracuse Stage and chair of the Department of Drama.

Although Storch's significant professional and academic experience offered the perfect combination to nurture a symbiotic relationship between the two entities, there were still many challenges to overcome. Out of economic and artistic necessity, Storch decided to produce Syracuse Stage shows in the modern Experimental Theater traditionally used by drama students, who were relegated to the Regent Theatre—a drafty old vaudeville-turned-movie house rumored to be haunted by a ghost known as the "Woman in Red." Furthermore, cramped conditions in the costume and scene shops, and conflicts in production schedules made it difficult for drama students and Syracuse Stage staff to keep out of each other's way.

Many of these issues were resolved in 1980 when Syracuse Stage took up residence in the newly renovated Regent Theatre, now known as the John D. Archbold Theatre, and students returned to the Experimental Theater, later renamed in honor of Arthur Storch. Yet although expanded rehearsal, costume, and scene shop facilities gave both organizations room to breathe and grow, perceptions and attitudes remained entrenched. Costumer Gretchen Darrow-Crotty says she was surprised to encounter a somewhat divisive culture when she started as a costume shop foreman at Syracuse Stage 16 years ago. "I remember the drama department's costume coordinator was stunned when I told her the shop could handle building the students' shows as well as the stage shows," she says. "My philosophy is that a show is a show, so now we deal with both sides of the aisle pretty much the same and build all of the costumes for Syracuse Stage and drama department productions. I'm happy to say we're able to allocate enough resources to all productions."



COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS

When Storch retired in 1992, Jim Clark became producing director of Syracuse Stage and chair of the Department of Drama. But when Clark stepped down, a new administrative structure consisting of three key leaders was put in place, beginning in 2007 with Timothy Bond, producing artistic director of Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama, who focuses on overall artistic direction for the two organizations. Bond was followed in 2008 by Woodward, who oversees daily operations in terms of budget, marketing, fund raising, and theater personnel for Syracuse Stage; and in 2010 by Zito, who provides academic leadership and creative vision for the Department of Drama.

Bond believes this new configuration is like a "three-legged stool" that provides a stabilizing force in the management of both Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama. As a result, their relationship is evolving into a community of artists who support and respect each other's missions. "It's a terrific structure for communication and collaboration between the two entities, which are reliant upon each other in an organic way, but have parallel missions that stand alone as well," Bond says. "I never want to go back to talking about us, or them, or two. I see us as one community of artists looking for where our collaborative tendrils meet so we can rise together."

Zito agrees it's important for the Department of Drama—which was founded as part of the School of Public Speech and Dramatic Art in 1921 and grew into a renowned theater program under the legendary leadership of Sawyer Falk—to



Scenes from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: Charlo Kirk '12 (left) as Edmund Pevensie; Father Christmas (James Judy) gives Lucy (Jenaha McLearn '12) a gift as Peter (Amos VanderPoel '12) and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver (Eric Leviton and Jayne Muirhead) look on; Peter, Lucy, Susan (Marie Eife '12), and Edmund Pevensie hide from Mrs. Macready in Professor Kirk's wardrobe.

maintain its own identity while taking full advantage of all the professional theater has to offer. Ann Clarke, dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, explains the complex relationship between the drama department and Syracuse Stage as two organizations zippered together. "I find Dean Clarke's analogy very helpful," Zito says. "When you unzip them, each of the two halves retains its own integrity."

CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Undergraduates majoring in acting, musical theater, stage management, and theater design and technology have many points of contact with Syracuse Stage staff. For instance, several staff members serve as adjunct faculty in stage management, costume and scenic design, and technical theater. "A drama student who takes a course in scenic painting is taught by the scenic painter for Syracuse Stage, students in our stage management program are taught by the production stage manager, and our technical courses are taught by the tech director and props master," Zito says. "It's like the medieval guild model where you work with the master to develop your craft."

Students have opportunities to network with actors and directors involved in Syracuse Stage productions, as well as those in town on tour. And when possible, such notable drama alumni as actors Frank Langella '59 and Taye Diggs '93, and SU Trustee and Broadway producer Arielle Tepper Madover '94, are invited back to campus to hold workshops and share insights about their film, theater, and television careers. "We've been exposing students to each of our main stage productions by bringing in designers, directors, and cast members to speak with them in class or participate in workshops when more than 200 drama students gather for their weekly Theatre Lab course," Bond says. "Even a casual conversation with an actor or director over a cup of coffee can have a profound impact on a student's future job prospects in a highly competitive field."

Each year, Syracuse Stage and the drama department team up to produce a children's tour with student actors, professional directors and designers, and a student stage manager who learns how to conduct a tour. The student actors also serve as classroom facilitators to guide post-play discussions. This year, *New Kid*, a story about a boy who is a recent immigrant to America, was seen by nearly 10,000 elementary school students in the community. "The children's tour



Taye Diggs '93 conducts a workshop with SU drama students.

offers our students a major Scholarship in Action experience," Bond says.

Stage management intern Joseph Trevino '14 is looking forward to the day when he can manage the children's tour—an assignment reserved for seniors. Meanwhile, he has worked on three Syracuse Stage productions doing everything from setting up rehearsals to prompting lines to running spotlight. "What could be better than having a teacher, advisor, and mentor doing the job I hope to do one day?" Trevino asks. "I chose to come here specifically because SU offers the best learning environment anyone could ask for. I'm able to work on real professional shows, then walk down the hall and take top-notch theater classes most conservatory students would envy. I'm halfway through my college career and already working in the business. I have no doubt I'll have multiple jobs lined up before graduation."

TAKING THE LEAD

Since 2000, many musical theater majors have had the opportunity to perform on the main stage in Broadway musicals co-produced by Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama. The idea for the "co-pros," as they are called, was born out of economic necessity due to the high cost of producing full-scale musicals, and out of a desire to provide a meaningful way for students to interact with professionals. At that time, producing director Jim Clark and Syracuse Stage artistic director Robert Moss launched a bold experiment, pooling resources and using a mix of student and professional actors to present *Peter Pan* during the holiday season. Since that first opening night, the co-pros have become so popular they are now a regular feature of the Syracuse Stage and Department of Drama seasons.

At first, a typical co-pro, such as *Peter Pan*, *Oliver!*, or *West Side Story*, featured six to eight professional actors as leads and a dozen or so students as members of the chorus and



ensemble. But when a student understudy had to take over the lead role of Maria in *The Sound of Music*—and carried the show—it became clear students are capable of taking on leading roles in main stage productions. "By the time we were doing shows like *Little Women*, all but one of the March sisters were played by students," says Plymnesser, production stage manager at Syracuse Stage. "It's nice to be able to cast students in age-appropriate leading roles. By the end of the run, the professional actors don't think of them as students, just other actors."

This year's co-pro, a musical adaptation of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, broke new ground, featuring 21 student actors in a 28-member cast. Director Linda Hartzell says at first she had some trepidation about working with student actors because the show moves very fast, and the students must learn their characters quickly and maintain them throughout the run. "Tim assured me these students are really talented, and when I came to audition them, I was blown away because audition after audition was so strong," says Hartzell, director of the Seattle Children's Theatre. "I liked the professional actors a lot, but the students, oh my goodness, I just loved them. It was really fun for me to work with them."

Musical theater major Jenaha McLearn '12, who played Lucy Pevensie, one of the four main characters performed by students in the show, says she's been fortunate in her time at SU. "Part of the challenge for students is attending classes full time in addition to the many rehearsals and performances, so our class schedules are factored in when the season is being planned," says McLearn, who played Beth in the 2009 co-production of *Little Women*. "I was a sophomore when I played Beth, and I was so scared. But we've had great directors and a wonderful support system from faculty within the department, and the professional actors are so warm and welcoming."

Aisling Halpin '12 (left, as Amy), Mary Kate Morrissey '11 (Meg), and Sarah Shahinian (Jo) rehearse a scene from *Little Women* in 2009.

Photo (top) by Steve Sartori; photo (left) by Michael Davis





Professor Rodney Hudson (left) instructs musical theater students.

Professor Alexander Koziara (bottom photo, left) works with Ryan Shaules '12, a theater design and technology major.

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Stage management intern Joseph Trevino '14

Plymesser says although they are juggling classes, rehearsals, matinees, and final exams, students involved in Syracuse Stage productions don't get cut any slack—they have to be prepared to learn by doing and jump on a moving train because no one is going to pull out a chalkboard and walk them through the process. But, he adds, it is all worth it because by the time they graduate, students are ready to make a smooth transition to professional life with Syracuse Stage acting credits on their résumés and candidacy points toward their Actors' Equity Association union cards. “Students earn one point for every week they are involved in a main stage production,” Plymesser says. “It takes 50 points to get an Equity card, so Jenaha and Aisling were halfway there by the time they graduated in December.”

On their own, neither Syracuse Stage nor the Department

of Drama would have been able to produce *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—with its large cast, 75 costumes, live orchestra, extravagant scenery, and 400 cues for lights, sound, shifting scenery, and flying objects. In fact, because of its enormous size and technical complexity, few theaters in the United States can produce this “musical play,” which was originally commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company. “The copros have proven to be such a valuable vehicle for both organizations that we're thinking about producing two shows with drama next year as part of Syracuse Stage's 40th anniversary season,” Woodward says. “We may include a non-musical so that more of our acting majors can have an opportunity to perform in a main stage production.”



BALANCING ACT

Bond, Woodward, and Zito are continually re-imagining the relationship between Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama. Last season they created a more fluid use of performance space by breaking down artificial barriers between the drama department's 200-seat Arthur Storch Theatre and Syracuse Stage's 500-seat John D. Archbold Theatre. Now, when determined by artistic and pedagogical needs, the drama department can mount its shows in the Arch, with its traditional proscenium, wider stage, and greater audience capacity, as well as

Photo (top) by SU Photo and Imaging Center
Photo (left) by Colleen Woolpert



Timothy Bond is in his fifth season as producing artistic director of Syracuse Stage and the Syracuse University Department of Drama. He has more than 25 years experience in leading regional theaters throughout the country. Most recently, he served for 11 years as associate artistic director of the famed Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Prior to that, he spent 13 years with the Seattle Group Theatre, serving as artistic director from 1991 to 1996. Bond, who has served on the faculties of the University of Washington and University of Wisconsin, received a Theatre Communications Group/National Endowment for the Arts Directing Fellowship Award and twice won Backstage West's Garland Award for Outstanding Direction. Bond holds a B.F.A. degree from Howard University and an M.F.A. degree from the University of Washington.

Yackel: Stage Presence



Jeffrey Woodward became the managing director of Syracuse Stage in 2008. Previously, he served as the managing director for the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, New Jersey. During his tenure, McCarter was honored with the Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre and produced more than 40 world and American premieres. Woodward has served as a trustee and secretary to Theatre Communications Group, secretary to the League of Resident Theatres, president of ArtPride New Jersey, and panel chairman, panelist, and on-site evaluator for the National Endowment for the Arts. Woodward is also a board member of the University Hill Corporation and the Cultural Resources Council. He holds a B.A. degree from Pomona College and an M.B.A. degree from New York University.



Ralph Zito, who assumed his duties as professor of drama and chair of the Department of Drama in 2010, oversees administrative and curricular processes, faculty, student, and staff recruitment, and faculty and student mentoring. A voice, text, and dialects coach with extensive experience on- and off-Broadway and at major regional theaters, Zito previously served as chair of the Juilliard School Drama Division's voice and speech department and as associate director of the school's mentoring program. His teaching experience also includes positions at Barnard College and numerous guest artist positions at programs around the country, and he is a member of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association and the Voice Foundation. Zito holds an A.B. degree from Harvard University and a diploma in acting from the Juilliard School Drama Division.

NOW APPEARING ON BROADWAY...

SU DRAMA ALUMNI, such as Frank Langella '59 and Vanessa Williams '85, have achieved great success on the Broadway stage. Here are some recent graduates who are making their mark on the Great White Way.

Stephen James Anthony '08 — *War Horse*
 Rosie Benton '01 — *StickFly*
 Catherine Charlebois '09 — *Wicked*
 Brad Koed '11 — *Death of a Salesman*
 Marissa McGowan '03 — *Bonnie and Clyde*
 Jessie Mueller '05 — *On A Clear Day....*
 Patti Murin '02 — *Lysitrate Jones*
 Sean Michael Murray '11 — *American Idiot*
 Sharone Sayegh '06 — *Mamma Mia!*
 Brendon Stimson '09 — *Newsies*
 Blake Whyte '05 — *Mamma Mia!*
 Josh Young '05 — *Jesus Christ Superstar*

The cast of *Rent* performs a show-stopping number on the Archbold Theatre stage. *Rent* was a co-production of the Department of Drama and Syracuse Stage during the 2010-11 season.



FOR A MORE comprehensive update on the professional activities of Generation Orange drama department alumni, go to sumagazine.syr.edu.

in the Storch, where the false proscenium has been removed and new mobile risers installed to create a flexible performance venue readily adaptable to a variety of stage configurations, such as three-quarter round. “The ability to move back and forth between the two stages is a real plus for student actors and designers because they’re not limited to working in one kind of performance space,” Bond says. “And it’s great for Syracuse Stage because it allows us to do smaller, more intimate pieces in the Storch.”

The more fluid use of performance space has added an exciting new artistic dimension—and layer of complexity—to the process of planning the repertoire for the 11 shows plus one co-production that make up the Syracuse Stage and drama department seasons, which offer a full range of classic works as well as some of the most exciting new voices in American theater today. The entire season must be looked at artistically, financially, and academically, while taking into account the amount of time the scene and costume shops need to build each show. Then the academic calendar is factored in to determine how it will affect performance schedules.

Bond, who is responsible for seeing the whole picture for both Syracuse Stage and the Department

of Drama, says it’s a tough balancing act, but a lot of fun. “Planning a season is like a game of three-dimensional chess,” he says. “Sometimes there are shows we’d love to do, but they don’t fit pedagogically with the academic mission, or artists we want to work with aren’t available. Having all of us under one roof promotes open communication, and we get a great stew of ideas going.”

For Woodward, putting a season together is a complicated exercise because it’s almost like they are two theaters in one. “It’s challenging, but also exciting because it keeps us on our toes,” he says. “We’re never bored.”

Zito believes the relationship between the Department of Drama and Syracuse Stage is still evolving because the nature of theater has changed, the economy has changed, and the administrative structure of the two organizations has changed. “We’re looking at every aspect of how we can work together on a day-to-day basis,” Zito says. “We don’t have any easy answers because we’re currently engaged in the task of fine tuning how to make this partnership work best for everyone going forward. We’re not there yet, but one thing is certain—together we have the talent and potential to become the premier pre-professional training program in the nation.” ‹‹