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Mississippi Theatre Program Wins National Award

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Exploring the Intersection of Politics, Drama

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Kenita Miller is on Broadway in the new musical *Xanadu* in the role of Erato.

Ward Billeisen is in the role of Brick Hawvermale on Broadway in *Curtains* starring David Hyde Pierce and Debra Monk.

Gretchen Mol is in the new movie *3:10 to Yuma* in the role of Alice Evans. The movie stars Russell Crowe, Christian Bale and Peter Fonda.

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Tai Dorn of the Gastonia, NC-based Caroline Calouche & Co., performs an aerial dance with fabric during the President’s Reception at the SETC Convention in Chattanooga. Aerial dance uses apparatus typically associated with high-flying circus arts, such as trapeze, aerial fabric, rope and harness, bungee cord and Spanish rope. However, instead of simply performing tricks as circus performers do, aerial dancers use choreography to create themes and concepts using fabric and the human body. For more information, visit www.carolinecalouche.org. (Cover design by Deanna Thompson; cover photo by David Humber)
Chinese Drive, Determination Prove Amazing to U.S. Director

Last December I took a break from my work at the University of Houston to travel to China to direct a play at the Beijing Institute of World Theatre & Film.

The Institute is an outgrowth of the School of Foreign Languages at Peking University (PKU), often called “China’s Harvard.” Every year, 10 million Chinese high school students all take the same national exam, and the top 3,000 or so (less than .03 per cent!) are admitted to PKU. These top-scoring, driven students study practical subjects, such as engineering, law, medicine, economics and international relations.

PKU, like the rest of the universities in China’s state-run system, does not include art, music, theatre or dance in its academic offerings. State-run conservatories train artists and performers, but anyone not in those conservatories goes without university classes in the arts. The Institute provides an extra-curricular outlet for students and professionals to collaborate on plays from around the world.

What was astounding to me was the drive these students brought to rehearsals. After academic schedules that ran from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday, at the very end of their term – facing finals in robotics, comparisons of nonprofit law in the U.S. and China, economic theory of Deng Xiaoping, and more – they were ready and eager for rehearsals in a room that was barely heated.

Joe Graves, the artistic director for the Institute, told me over 1,000 people auditioned for the Institute’s premiere production. These young people bring a great awareness that being “one in a million” in a country of 1.3 billion people means you have 1,300 people just like you. Their desire for self-expression through theatre – among all of their academic work, and without any thought of making theatre their vocation – was humbling.

Back here in the U.S., it’s a real challenge to get young people who think they want a career in the theatre to understand the relentless commitment it takes. The PKU students recognize just how competitive their non-theatre fields are – careers that, in the U.S., can be considered “safe and secure.” Working with an ensemble of 24 young Chinese people performing in their second (or third or fourth!) language was inspiring. They brought a palpable discipline and desire I look for in recruiting people to train. The skills and experience honed with such drive are what our art form requires.
“Celebrating diversity” – the theme of this year’s convention – clearly resonates throughout this issue of Southern Theatre as it did at the convention in Chattanooga.

In embracing diversity, SETC 2008 also spotlighted the increasingly synergistic relationship between theatre and politics. This theme reverberated in places from keynote addresses to workshop sessions -- including Kieu Chinh’s story of her remarkable journey from Vietnam into this country and Michael Rohd’s session on using theatre to bring about community change. Writer J. Caleb Boyd examines some of the ways that politics and drama came together in Chattanooga – and continue to intersect in locations across the country.

This convention was also a banner one in the design field, as convention attendees had the opportunity to learn from three distinguished designers with shows on Broadway in 2008. Kendra Johnson shares their stories and their suggestions for other designers.

After Hurricane Katrina blew ashore in 2005, the leaders and students in the WINGS Performing ARTS program struggled – like others on the Mississippi Gulf Coast – to carry on. But the Gulfport, MS-based program survived and now the program, which targets disadvantaged youth, has been recognized with a prestigious national award. Maria Watson takes readers inside the WINGS program.

If you missed the SETC Awards Banquet in Chattanooga, you also missed the opportunity to learn about the accomplishments of one of the Southeast’s most committed theatre practitioners – this year’s winner of SETC’s most prestigious award for one of its own, the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award. David Wohl shares Mike Murphy’s story.

Also in this issue, you’ll find our regular book column and an “Outside the Box” column that outlines a low-cost portal clamp method. Finally, in our op-ed column, “400 Words,” Jack Young provides a glimpse inside the Chinese education system.

So join us in, once again, celebrating diversity. Just turn the page.

Glen Gourley, SETC President
For several years, we have been using large steel-framed flats to create false prosceniums and show portals for Catawba College productions. The problem we face in doing this is joining the flats to each other. We found that the usual method – bolting the frames together with ¼-inch bolts using a standardized bolt pattern – wasn’t always right for our production. Sometimes our designer would come up with arrangements that did not allow the pattern to work as intended. In addition, it was difficult for our undergraduate students to drill the holes accurately once the frames were built and covered.

I set out to develop a different type of clamping system that would be versatile enough to mount in almost any location on the frames and still be strong enough to keep the joints tight and safe. Working together, Ben Lauer, our scenic studio manager, and I developed a no-cost flat-clamp system that is versatile, fast to install and easy for our students to use.

The Idea

Lauer and I began to brainstorm ideas after set designer David Pulliam developed a design for Catawba College’s production of The Pirates of Penzance that called for four large portals. After receiving the drawings for the portals, we began work on a clamp system.

We came up with a functional design that uses two scrap pieces of 16-gauge, 1-inch x 1-inch square steel tubing and two pieces of 14-gauge, 1½-inch wide flat steel. Here’s how to construct it:

Cut the flat steel into 2½-inch pieces to begin with and then bend the ends to a 90-degree angle to create an angle iron that measures 1½ inches x 2¼ inches x ¼ inch.

Weld the created angle iron to one side of the 1-inch x 1-inch tubing in a way that will allow a second piece of 1-inch tubing to fit tightly in a channel created when two clamp halves are bolted together. (See Top View figure, Page 7)

The construction of our flats posed a problem for our design. Our flats use a ¼-inch glue strip as a mating surface between the steel and the muslin cover. This glue strip
is attached to the steel with panel and foam adhesive and self-drilling, self-tapping Tek screws. This was an issue because we needed the ¼-inch bends to fit between the steel and the glue strip. To solve the problem, we ground the edges of the bent ends to create a beveled edge that forces its way between the steel and glue strip as the ¼-inch bolt is tightened and the clamp is drawn closed. We used another scrap of 1-inch x 1-inch tubing as a spacer to ensure a tight fit prior to welding the modified flat steel to the tubing.

You can use a c-clamp, or welding vise grip clamp, to hold things in place for the welding process. Once the parts for each clamp are welded, use a small pair of vise grip pliers clamped to the inside edge of the tubing halves to hold the portal clamp parts in place and drill a ¼-inch centered hole through the two halves. Use a ¼-inch x 3-inch bolt, flat washer, lock washer and nut to hold the two halves together for the finished portal clamp.

You also can make a jig to hold the clamp halves together in a set position on a drill press to drill the holes. This helps to make sure any clamp half can work with any other clamp half. We also used a vise to slightly bend the flat steel in for more clamping force. This bend spaced the angled ends 1½ inches apart.

### Materials Needed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MATERIAL</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
<th>COST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 1” x 1” x 1” x 1½” square steel tubing (16-gauge)</td>
<td>Scrap</td>
<td>$.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 1½” x 1¼” flat steel (14-gauge)</td>
<td>Scrap</td>
<td>$.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 3” x ½” bolt</td>
<td>Lowe’s</td>
<td>$.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 1¼” flat washer</td>
<td>Lowe’s</td>
<td>$.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 1¼” split washer</td>
<td>Lowe’s</td>
<td>$.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¼” nuts</td>
<td>Lowe’s</td>
<td>$.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tubing cost based on 68 cents per foot. Flat steel cost based on 47 cents per foot. Steel was scrap, but was originally bought from Davis Enterprises in 20-foot lengths.

### TOOLS

- MIG welder
- Abrasive cutoff saw
- Drill press
- Small vise grip pliers
- C-clamps or vise grip welding clamps
- 2 7/8” wrenches

### Safety Gear

- ✓ Eye protection (safety glasses, safety eye shield, welding helmet)
- ✓ Welding gloves, leather welding jacket and apron
- ✓ Appropriate clothing for working around tools in a scene shop

*Note: Drawings are not to scale.*

### Total Cost:

**$0.85 per clamp**

### Application

We manufactured 100 or so of these clamps for our production. The initial time investment was about 16 hours, but we had the time. We also saw this as a true investment since we will use the system over and over again.

The real time savings came during load-in as the show portals were being assembled. We were able to assemble each portal in 30 to 45 minutes, using our new clamps and student installers with varying levels of experience. That’s a big improvement over the two hours it took us per portal to drill and bolt the flats together the last time we used flats, when we used the traditional method to clamp the flats together. I expect the application time for the clamps to decrease more as we get used to using them.

Another benefit to our clamps is their low profile. I had considered the use of c-clamps but our “portal clamps” are more advantageous in several ways. They do not extend more then an inch from the rear of the flats and also automatically align the front of the flats for a clean seam. In addition, they are safer because the bolt would have to come out for the clamp to fall. Safety lines can be attached easily to a toggle by using tie line because the “portal clamps” are very lightweight.

Christopher D. Zink is an associate professor and the lighting designer in the Department of Theatre Arts at Catawba College in Salisbury, NC. If you have questions about this technique, e-mail him at cdzink@catawba.edu.

### SUBMISSION INFO

Have an idea for an Outside the Box article? E-mail Outside the Box Editor Doug Brown at brownd@ncarts.edu.
This year, the political world is experiencing an unprecedented level of drama. With a historic cast of characters that could star the first African-American or female president of the United States and audiences sitting on the edge of their seats, breathlessly waiting for the final curtain, the presidential campaign reads like a Shakespearean history play. And it’s not just the pomp and circumstance of the campaign season that suggests the theatrical. Between political posturing over the war in Iraq, the dramatic revelations of prominent politicians’ private lives, and an economy that is as predictable as an Ionesco play, sometimes it seems that Washington, DC, is rivaling Broadway for time in the spotlight.

However, if the political realm is becoming more and more theatrical, it is no less true that theatre itself is becoming more political. The intersections between the worlds of politics and theatre are nothing new, however.

One has only to peruse Greek drama to see that the two have been linked since the beginnings of Western civilization. If the programming at the 2008 Southeastern Theatre Conference convention was any indication, the interweaving of politics and theatre is just as vibrant as it was back then. In fact, it seemed that there was no level at which theatre and politics were not inextricably linked.

**International Politics and TV/Film**

Kieu Chinh, Thursday’s keynote speaker at the SETC Convention, has experienced the intersection of theatre and politics firsthand. In fact, it has shaped the course of her life. Born in Vietnam, she became a professional actress at the age of 18 (a decision itself fraught with personal politics, as only certain roles were culturally acceptable for her at the time). She quickly rose to stardom, filming movies all over southeast Asia and Europe. She even had her own film production company and hosted a television talk show. Then, just as she reached the peak of her career, the Vietnam War interrupted not only her career, but her life and family as well.

When Saigon fell in 1975 and everyone else was fleeing the city, Chinh was torn. She had long been separated from her father and brother, and feared that if she left Vietnam, she would never find them. However, her children were in school in Canada, and her husband was a member of the South Vietnamese army who urged her to go. Ultimately, she decided she had to rejoin her children to make sure they were not left without a father and mother. As Communist troops approached the city, she caught one of the last flights out of Saigon to Singapore. (She would never find her father, learning later that he had died destitute after several years in prison. However, on one of her trips back to Vietnam after the war, she was
eventually reunited with her brother, who had spent several years in prison as well.)

When Chinh arrived in Singapore from Vietnam, she was jailed for having a passport belonging to a government that was no longer in power and was released only after friends from the last movie she had worked on intervened on her behalf. She was given 24 hours to leave the city.

Eventually, she landed in Canada with no money and was reunited with her three small children. In less than a week, she had gone from starring roles to cleaning chicken coops just to survive. She called on several of her industry contacts in Hollywood but received little help. With her last dollar, she contacted actress Tippi Hedren (perhaps best known for her role in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*), who sent her a plane ticket to California and offered to sponsor her immigration to the United States.

However, Chinh’s struggles were far from over. “What can I do in Hollywood?” she remembers asking herself. “I lost everything, and now I have to start all over from the beginning.”

She faced an uphill battle to get cast even in small roles due to her accent and the fact that few Hollywood filmmakers could distinguish between actors from different Asian countries. (She has played characters who were Japanese, Chinese and Korean as well as Vietnamese, often having to learn lines in a completely new language in two days in order to keep parts.)

In her first Hollywood role, she played a Chinese woman selling cigarettes in Chinatown, with exactly one line, “Yes, sir.” She arrived at 10 a.m. at the studio, where she was put in a wardrobe truck and driven to Chinatown. She didn’t even get a hot meal, instead eating a cold lunch with the rest of the extras. Finally, at 5 p.m., she was called to the set and delivered her one line. That night, she went home and cried, but didn’t give up. “Acting was my life,” she noted.

Chinh’s first real chance at American success came when she was noticed by one of the producers of the television show *M*A*S*H*. The producers told Alan Alda about her, and he wrote an episode that romantically involved Chinh’s and Alda’s characters. The filming was a reinvigorating experience for her and left a great impression on Alda as well. He even told her, “You make us feel guilty that we take freedom for granted.”

Her next big break came in 1993, when she appeared in the movie *The Joy Luck Club*, playing Suyuan Woo. Chinh saw this movie as a revolutionary step,
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not only for her, but for Asian actors in general.

“The Joy Luck Club broke a barrier in Hollywood,” Chinh says. “Ten to twenty years from now, there will be many more opportunities.”

In addition to acting, she serves as a consultant on many films about Vietnam, helping to tell the stories of her heritage more accurately. She also works closely with the Vietnam Children’s Fund – an organization she founded with journalist Terry Anderson – to build schools in Vietnam to help children better their lives. Chinh and the board of VCF hope these schools one day will serve 58,000 students – approximately the same number of students as there are names listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, DC.

Chinh has been honored by many organizations for her humanitarian efforts. In 1990, she was named “Refugee of the Year” by the U.S. Congress, which presented her with an award for “Outstanding and Multi-Faceted Contributions to the Mosaic of American Society.” She received the “Warrior Woman Award” from the Asian Pacific Women’s Network. Her life also was the subject of the Emmy Award-winning 1996 documentary by Fox Television, “Kieu Chinh: A Journey Home.” Chinh received a special certificate from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences recognizing her contributions to the documentary.

In her keynote speech in Chattanooga, Chinh commended SETC audience members for their dedication to cultural and political diversity and called on them all to “help change the way that theatre and movies look at characters.”

Chinh, whose artistic life has been so impacted by politics, sees hope that theatre can also have an impact in changing politics.

“I am honored by the educational power of acting,” she says. “I have learned about difficult issues, met people from many backgrounds – all because in acting I have more than one life to live.”

**National Politics and Theatre**

Chinh is certainly not alone in this belief. Many theatres and theatrical organizations are taking a very active role in the U.S. to show people that theatre is not just about entertainment. Take for example the Lysistrata Project, a grassroots theatre movement organized in 2002 to protest the United States invasion of Iraq. Hundreds of theatre groups across the country organized performances and readings of the play to unite artists in a common cause. Or look at the proliferation of playwrights tackling complex political issues on the American stage, such as Heather Raffo (*Nine Parts of Desire*), Nikkole Salter and Danai Gurira (*In the Continuum*), Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*), Keith Reddin (*The Missionary Position*) and Suzan-Lori Parks (*In the Blood*, *Topdog/Underdog*).

Many other events at the SETC Convention also highlighted the political nature of theatre in this country. One of those was a workshop presented by Joe Norton, the education director of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, who encouraged participants to be politically conscious in their theatrical work. He began the session with a quotation from Arthur Miller, noting “the mission of the theatre, after all, is...”
to change, to raise the consciousness of people to their human possibilities.”

Norton encouraged participants to model this social and political consciousness in their own work. He debunked the myth that theatre, even Broadway theatre, is pure entertainment by demonstrating that there is even social relevance in *CATS*. Then he gave participants several concrete tactics for making their work more relevant to their community audiences by challenging them to see even the most familiar situations in a new light. Tweak the content of the play, the relationship of actors to audience, the style of presentation and the time of a production, Norton suggested, challenging participants to think critically about their work and incorporate that consciousness in the performances they give to their audiences.

“We are all social activists by the pure nature of our dreams – what we do on stage,” Norton said. “It is our mission in the theatre to make people think.”

Norton also detailed the education and charity work of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, what he calls “the charity leg of theatre.” The organization was founded in the 1980s by a group of actors who wanted to take care of their friends who were contracting AIDS. These actors saw that politicians, established charities and even the medical industry were not really talking about AIDS, so they organized a series of events to raise awareness of the disease as well as money to help their community of actors.

These first events snowballed until Broadway Cares was formed. Now, almost all the shows on Broadway compete to see which show can raise the most money for the organization. Since its inception, the organization has raised over $140 million through sales of merchandise, auctions and other fundraisers to help provide critically needed services to people with AIDS, HIV or related illnesses.

“Theatre needs community to thrive,” said Norton, “but we also have to respond to the community.”

**Racial/Cultural Politics and Casting**

In his Friday keynote address, “Reflecting US/U.S.,” Daniel Banks of New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts took on another political issue – the racial and cultural politics inherent in a controversial cornerstone of American theatre, color-blind or non-traditional casting. He began by asking his audience to consider that language is power, or in the words of highly political American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, “words are spells in our mouths.”

Language, Banks states, has the power to shape our identities and the way we see people who are different from us. With this in mind, he says that terms like diversity and inclusion often carry the connotations of portioning out roles for minority actors or of white culture inviting black culture to participate in their world. He also deconstructs the notion that the term color in color-blind casting is stable.

“Think about your family,” he said. “Do they all look alike, or are there different shades of skin, color of hair or other features? If so, why do we even need a policy that says it’s OK for family members to look different on stage?”

He also gave his audience a number of different resources for evaluating the way they think about race, culture and ethnicity in the theatre and then called for them to envision a new language of race in the theatre. His frank style got the audience thinking about the politics of race in theatre in ways that most are not comfortable even considering. In the remarkably honest discussion that followed, audience members expressed frustration with the limitations placed on minority actors, the reluctance of audiences to accept innovative casting choices, and the power that theatre’s commercial side exerts over casting. Audience members also expressed a great deal of hope in their responses and shared many strategies they had used for overcoming these challenges posed by racial politics in the theatre.

Building on this optimism, Banks shared his own strategy, which is centered on changing the racially and politically charged language around what is known as nontraditional or color-blind casting. He
prefers to use the term integrated casting, modeled after Josephine Baker’s “Welcome Table,” a practice the legendary singer established where everyone was welcome to share her table as an equal at any time. In the theatrical sense, this language shift reflects an equal consideration of actors from all backgrounds, encourages the inclusion of new voices, and reduces the politics of terms like nontraditional casting.

Community Politics and Theatre

One other workshop at SETC 2008 took the intersection of politics and theatre to a new level by empowering its participants to become actively involved in the politics that affect their communities. Michael Rohd, artistic director of the Sojourn Theatre in Portland, OR, led a master class, “Devising New Civic Performance through Ensemble,” based on the work he does, using theatre to engage communities and groups in dialogue.

Rohd’s innovative process has proven remarkably adaptable across many different communities, as Sojourn has been commissioned by companies in San Francisco, Chicago, Ohio, Virginia and even Australia. Upcoming works include a commission by the U.S. Department of Defense to create a collaborative work with soldiers coming home from Iraq, one with Georgetown University on the presidential race of 2008, and one in Chicago with Northwestern University to examine the housing crisis in the U.S.
Rohd, who holds a master of fine arts degree in directing and public dialogue from Virginia Tech, sees theatre practitioners as “devisers of new worlds” who self-define not only their own roles in the theatrical process but also their roles in the world around them. Sojourn Theatre practices what Rohd calls collaboratively devised work – an artistic approach that struggles to redefine the often political hierarchy of theatre where the single director’s voice and/or the voice of the playwright are dominant in the process of creating theatre. Instead, he sees that process as part of a conversation that starts in the rehearsal room and moves out into the community, where all have a voice in creation.

“For me, civic theatre is about initiating conversation through performance, and conversation has to go both ways,” Rohd says.

This makes Sojourn’s shows less about traditional methods of using theatre as a political or social persuader (as in agit prop theatre), and more of a theatrical investigation of issues that impact the community.

One of Sojourn’s most successful shows in this regard was Witness our Schools, a project where Rohd and his company entered into a dialogue with Oregon schools. By working closely with students, parents, teachers, and administrators, they strove to put a human face on the fractious problem of education in our country. In doing so, they presented all sides of the debate, an unusual tactic in most politically minded shows that set out with a particular agenda or strive to tell one side of the story that is rarely heard. Sojourn company members also concentrated on telling the stories of the people they encountered rather than filtering those stories through their own experience. In this way, they presented the issues to audiences and let them come up with their own conclusions. This process of audience engagement extended to post-show discussions following each performance, making the audience an active part of creating the theatre as well. This way audience members are politically and socially engaged in the story as well as artistically engaged in the performance.

To demonstrate this process, he led participants in his master class through a number of exercises designed to build small, self-defined communities within the room. Keeping people from over-thinking the process, he urged them to form swiftly shifting coalitions, making connections based on appearance or other identifying characteristics, only then introducing names into the mix.

One of the most compelling exercises was his exploration of how communities are formed. All too often, he explained, “communities are built in traditional ways so we don’t ask how or why.” To make participants think about community in a more critical way, he had them walk around the room, exploring the space as individuals. At random moments, he would ask people to form groups (without speaking or thinking too much about it) based on a specific characteristic, such as their eye color or what they were wearing from the waist up or waist down. He would count to 10 while they scrambled about to form these subgroups. The idea behind the exercise is to encourage participants to look at the people around them with criteria different than race, gender, religion or culture, Rohd says. This process suggests a way that communities can reach across the differences that tend to divide society and form alliances, empowering members in new and exciting ways.

Once these communities were formed, Rohd had participants partner off and do a blind leader/follower exercise to encourage trust in and responsibility for members of the community, as well as to explore moments of ease and terror — two emotions we encounter in everyday life that make us especially conscious of our community. These moments became the basis for shared stories between partners, again building communal connections through storytelling.

“By giving our stories to our partners and then giving them back a performance of their stories, we have to take responsibility for the stories we are telling, an important part of developing community performances that really speaks truthfully to an audience,” states Rohd. This exchange of voices, he said, would serve as the basis for engaging community in discussions and sharing stories through performance.

These basic but powerful exercises are designed to
be adapted to the specific political and social needs of any community and are the basis of much of the work that Sojourn has produced since 1999, including shows about capitalism set in a car dealership (Good,) war in a democratic society (The War Project) and faith in our contemporary society (Divine.) These productions all draw on the model Rohd utilized in his workshop, using similar techniques to engage everyday people from a specific community in talking about how political and social issues impact their everyday life.

According to Sojourn Theatre’s website, Rohd and his collaborators strive to “create theatre that asks questions. That explores social and political issues in sophisticated, thoughtful ways. That honors complexity and multiple perspectives. And that – through event, story and metaphor – finds connections amid differences, and commonalities in our communities’ disparate narratives.”

**Politics + Drama = Vibrance**

As these initiatives clearly demonstrate, contemporary theatre is just as actively engaged in the political process as politics is in the theatrical. Looking back at theatre history, one finds that the times when politics and theatre were most intertwined (the classical Greek period, the Elizabethan era of Shakespeare, the late 19th and early 20th century advent of modern drama, and the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 1970s) tended to be the most vibrant for the world of theatre. Perhaps it bodes well for theatre that the intersection seems just as vibrant and strong today as it did during those eras. ■

J. Caleb Boyd is the literary manager/dramaturg at the Horizon Theatre Company in Atlanta and an instructor in the theatre department at the University of West Georgia. He is a member of SETC’s Publications Committee.
Outgoing SETC President David Thompson (left) passes the gavel (or is that a Chattanooga Choo-Choo train whistle?) to incoming President Glen Gourley during Saturday’s business meeting at the SETC Convention, held March 5-9 in Chattanooga, TN. Later Saturday, Rosemary Newcott (bottom row, far left) spoke and accepted SETC’s Distinguished Career Award on behalf of Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre. On these pages, we revisit scenes from the annual convention, which was attended by more than 4,000 registered theatre artists, managers, teachers, students and volunteers. The convention provided members with an opportunity to audition, find a job, perform, hear keynote speakers, learn new techniques, network, view exhibits, hire employees, watch top-notch theatre and much more.

Photos by David Humber

Think you were caught on camera at the SETC Convention? View the SETC 2008 gallery on the website at www.setc.org. Clicking on a picture will take you to a site where you can order prints from the SETC photographer.
TC in Chattanooga
Mike Murphy Honored with Suzanne Davis Award

Following are the remarks made by former SETC President David Wohl in presenting the Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award to Mike Murphy at the 2008 SETC Awards Banquet.

I am honored to have been asked to present this year’s Suzanne M. Davis Memorial Award. To those of you who may not know the history of this award, it is named after Suzanne Davis, a longtime costume designer for the outdoor drama Unto These Hills and the wife of SETC’s 10th president, Harry Davis. After Suzie died in 1964, Al Cohen, a commercial exhibitor and a friend of SETC, endowed an award that not only would honor Suzie, but also would recognize outstanding service to SETC and encourage further participation and volunteerism among its members. So, according to the rules of the organization, the Davis Award was established to honor one SETC member each year for distinguished service to the organization, provided that a suitable recipient can be found.

I am pleased to inform you that, this year, a very suitable recipient has been found. I’d also like to point out that it’s been an SETC tradition to keep the name of the honoree a secret until this banquet. We’ve not been as traditional this year and you’ll understand why a bit later.

Our recipient received his associate degree from Pensacola Junior College, his BA in theatre from the University of West Florida, and his MFA in scenic design from Florida State University. He has enjoyed a 30-plus-year career in academic, community, and professional theatre. As the designer and technical director at Theatre Memphis, our honoree served as scenic and lighting designer for productions that performed at various international theatre festivals. Since entering the teaching profession in 1982, he has served as a full-time faculty member at Georgia Southwestern College in Americus, GA, and as a visiting professor at the University of South Florida and Florida State University. His professional credits include design work at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Jekyll Island Summer Music Theatre and Theatre West Virginia, among others.

He has been the resident technical director at three theatres during the design and construction of new facilities. These include Theatre Memphis, the James Earl Carter Fine Arts building at Georgia Southwestern College and the Joan C. Edwards Fine Arts Building at Marshall University. He continues to serve as a consultant for new facilities and renovations in our region.

He has been actively involved with both SETC and USITT for many years. In addition to regular panel and workshop presentations at SETC, he has served on the Board of Directors as a state representative for nine years, the Advisory Council for three years and has chaired either the Design South scenic or lighting panels for 13 years. He also served a stint as Auditions Committee chairman. Our honoree has served on the Conference Committee of USITT since 1994 and was elected to serve on USITT’s Board of Directors for a three-year term beginning in 2006.

OK, this is going to give it away: Our recipient received the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Medallion for Exemplary Service and Excellence in the field of theatre in higher education, in large part because of the Gulf Coast Relief Tour conducted by Marshall’s Pickled Pepper Players after Hurricane Katrina. I’m going to read from a Marshall University press release, and I know I’m going to regret this:

“Mike Murphy and his wife, Karla, accompanied the seven MU students on the Pickled Pepper Players’ 2,400-mile, 10-day tour. The Pickled Pepper Players is a touring children’s theatre company sponsored by Marshall’s Theatre Department. Murphy said that receiving the Medallion was a ‘real honor,’ not only for himself, but for the Pickled Pepper Players.

“It really is a nice feather in the cap of the department and the kids that performed in the Pickled Pepper Players tour,” Murphy said. ‘They had to give it to an individual, but it is really everyone’s award.’”

Pretty powerful praise for Marshall’s Mike Murphy and the performers of the Pickled Pepper Players!

Many of you will recall that Mike came to a SETC Board of Directors meeting after the hurricane and passed out empty sandbags so that we all could collect money for the theatres in our region that were devastated by the hurricanes.

Some of Mike’s other awards and honors include the 2003 USITT Southeast Founders Award as the Outstanding Educator in the Field of Theatre Design and Technology and the 2005 West Virginia Thespians Lifetime Achievement Award. Mike has been a professor of theatre design and technology at Marshall University for 20 years and has served several stints on the board of West Virginia Thespians and as president of the West Virginia Theatre Conference.

I asked some of the faculty, staff and students to write something about Mike, and here’s a portion of what they sent me:

“Murph, Murphy, Mikey, Edward the Third. You can call him whatever you want, but what we call him is friend.

“In 1988, Mike Murphy joined the Marshall theatre faculty after we had lost a longtime leader and mentor. We had a small department on the verge of enormous growth and a new $13.5-million performing arts center to complete. Mike has been providing wisdom and guidance with his own unique expertise and style ever since.

“Murphy is intent on having his students make connections that can get them into professional situations and top graduate programs. It has been said that students ‘learn from just breathing the air around him.’ It’s true; we all learn from Mike.

“We are proud to be able to call Mike Murphy boss, teacher, colleague and friend and are equally honored that he and his vivacious wife, Karla, consider us a part of their family. For 20 years, he has shared our ups and downs, our successes and failures. Like the rock in Gibraltar, the tree in Godof, Mike is always there for us.

“We can think of no other person that deserves this special recognition more than Mike Murphy. We at Marshall University Theatre are forever proud and grateful for this wonderful gift.”

Now, I know that most of you in this room have been craning your necks looking for Mike. You can stop; he’s not here tonight. In fact, this is the first SETC Convention that Mike has not attended in over two decades. Many of you are aware that Mike’s wife Karla has been ill. Throughout this latest challenge, Mike has maintained his sense of humor and exhibited a courageousness that we all envy and admire. If he were here, he’d give us that famous laugh, shake his head and tell us that he doesn’t deserve all this attention. But, if you do see him or contact him in the weeks to come — please tell him that there is no one more deserving. Accepting the award for Mike tonight is one of his students, Erika Courtney.

And so, I’m proud and honored to present the 2008 SETC Suzanne M. Davis award to a consummate theatre artist, a passionate and giving teacher, and a man who has served this organization for many, many years — our good friend and colleague and my fellow West Virginian, Mike Murphy.”
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Many people who choose theatre as a career path dream about landing a show on Broadway. But how do designers who are passionate about the art and craft of design work their way to what some consider the top?

The three distinguished designers who attended the SETC Convention all had shows running on Broadway in 2008 – and each followed a very different path to a Broadway opening.

**TODD ROSENTHAL, SET DESIGNER**

*August: Osage County*  
(Currently playing on Broadway; winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama)

Todd Rosenthal, who holds bachelor of arts degrees in theatre and English from Colgate University and a master of fine arts degree from Yale University, lives in Illinois, where he teaches set design at Northwestern University and designs often for regional theatres.

“Broadway is always the farthest thing from my mind when I design a show,” Rosenthal says. “I’m more interested in doing interesting work than doing commercially viable work. I have had a lot more shows not go to Broadway.”

Rosenthal has over 100 design credits from major regional companies across the country: Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre, Baltimore’s Centerstage, Goodman Theatre and Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Actors Theatre of Louisville and Yale Repertory Theatre, just to name a few.

Rosenthal’s journey to Broadway came about as a result of his extensive work relationship with Steppen-
wolf Theatre Company, which led to an opportunity to design *August: Osage County*, a new play by Tracy Letts. Within several weeks of the show’s opening, critical acclaim and enthusiastic reviews led to offers to move the show to New York.

What does he suggest to young designers who would like to make a similar move to Broadway?

“My advice to a young designer is just do the best work possible, and maybe the show will move to a Broadway house,” says Rosenthal.

Rosenthal also suggests making contacts with successful New York designers.

“If you really want to work on Broadway, find a designer who works a lot on Broadway, and whose work you admire, and find a way to assist them,” Rosenthal says.

KEVIN ADAMS, LIGHTING DESIGNER

*Spring Awakening*

(Currently playing on Broadway; winner of the 2007 Tony Award for Best Lighting Design of a Musical)

Kevin Adams didn’t set out to be an award-winning lighting designer on Broadway. In fact, the Obie and Tony Award winner didn’t set out to be a lighting designer at all. A set designer by training, he also is a visual artist, photographer and videographer who is self-trained in lighting design.

While in high school, Adams was introduced to theatre by a teacher and went on to receive a bachelor of fine arts in set design from the University of Texas. He continued his studies as a set design student at California Institute for the Arts, where he earned a master of fine arts degree. While on the West Coast, Adams earned a living in the film and television commercial industries and worked in theatre when he could find work. He found his interest moving toward lighting design.

In a 2007 interview with Erika Rasmusson Janes, “Lighting the (Great) White Way,” published in *Bizbash New York*, Adams recounted how his evolution from set designer to lighting designer began: “I was living in Los Angeles and going to museums and galleries and seeing work by light and space artists, and I started incorporating the techniques that those artists were using into my work, and lighting my own sets.”

By 1992, Adams was working in New York, as
well as L.A., doing lighting design for theatre. When he moved to New York from the West Coast in 1996, Adams notes, “I already had a career somewhat established. I had work set up for a year. Once I decided to move to New York City, I had an agent and was in the union.”

Since then, he has designed the lighting for many shows on and off Broadway, including Passing Strange, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, Hedda Gabler and Take Me Out. He won an Obie Award for Sustained Excellence in 2002, and his design for Spring Awakening won a Tony Award for Best Lighting Design of a Musical in 2007.

What does he see as the secret to his success on Broadway?

“I’ve just kept busy over the years trying to develop my unique sensibility and the ability to ‘look’ at things in different ways,” Adam says. “I’ve designed a lot of shows over the last 20 years, and I’ve tried to keep growing as an artist.”

Asked his advice on achieving success in the design field, Adams prefers to offer advice for achieving “artistic fulfillment.” His suggestions:

“Work more at developing yourself and the unique interests you have, and the world will come to you. Put more energy into making work instead of getting work.

“Read. Read books and watch films about stage directing, actors and acting, artists’ lives, artists at work, musicians’ lives and filmmaking.

“Try to be open to opportunity when it comes along. Try to be optimistic, and don’t burn bridges.”

JENNIFER CAPRIO, COSTUME DESIGNER

The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee
(Closed in January after a nearly 3-year Broadway run)

Opportunity knocked early for Jennifer Caprio, costume designer for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. She was 28, only two years out of graduate school and “I had $637 in my bank account” when her show debuted on Broadway, she says.

Raised in Chatham, NJ, less than an hour from New York, Caprio knew after seeing her first Broadway play at 13 that theatre was her dream career. She majored in costume design at Ithaca College before going on to earn a master of fine arts in costume design at Carnegie Mellon in 2003. At one point in her student career, she says, faculty doubted her abilities. Nevertheless, she believed in herself and marched on.

Today Caprio has over 100 regional and educational costume design credits.

Soon after graduating from Carnegie Mellon, Caprio joined a team working on a quirky new musical about kids in a spelling bee, which was being workshopped by the Barrington Stage Company in Massachusetts. It soon moved to off-Broadway at the Second Stage Theatre. By spring 2005, The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee made its Broadway debut at Circle in the Square. It closed in January 2008.

When asked her advice for those interested in pursuing a Broadway career, Caprio has a different perspective than Rosenthal and Adams,

“Having achieved that goal myself at such a young age, it is truly a difficult question for me to answer, because most of my professional career has been spent with a successful Broadway show,” she says. “I think that it is always good to have high goals – it’s what keeps you going. But you should also set realistic goals, because getting a show on Broadway, let alone a hit, is akin to being struck by lightning…. You can have that be one of your goals, but I don’t think it’s good to have it be the only goal.”
Caprio offers seven tips for aspiring designers:

1. Do your homework, and find the best people to execute your designs. “A good deal of your success is the talent of the people working with you, and to know which shops do what, and who there can do what, is an enormous asset.”

2. Take time to understand how garments are constructed. Work in the shops and see firsthand how things are built the correct way. “Having worked as a shopper for Tricorne, Inc. [costume house in New York], I watched other designers make garments their own and learned how modifying them can make even the simplest shirt special.”

3. Listen to the actors and dancers. Although you need to remain true to your design, remember that it is the actor who will be standing in your lights, on your set or wearing your costumes. “A lot of people will tell you that you shouldn’t care how the actor feels, that it’s about the look, but I’ve gotten a lot of mileage by gaining actor trust. If they are comfortable, then I can push the look a lot further than I think I ever could have by just forcing something onto them.”

4. Acknowledge and appreciate your assistants and those who work in the shops. “My assistants are, like the shops, my strongest assets. They are like a walking rolodex of information, and you have to treat them as such. They have just as close a relationship with actors as I do, and that should be respected.”

5. Have a certain degree of humility, but also confidence. “When I started on Spelling Bee, I was the youngest person in the room by almost 10 years, and I respected the immense talents of those around me. I also remained confident in my choices, and that gained the respect of my collaborators. I believe it is possible to be humble and confident. Having an inflated ego will only get you so far.”

6. Remember the following: “Things change. They just do. And it’s not about you.”

7. Have a positive attitude. “I’m consistently told that I’m rehired at places because people find me so positive. Then I’ll hear stories about other designers who’ve been there before me who are not. And I think this, combined with a person’s inherent talent, is what can really get someone far, especially at the beginning of your career.”

Kendra Johnson is an assistant professor of costume design at Clemson University and a member of the Editorial Board of Southern Theatre.

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Giving Kids

Mississippi Theatre Program Wins National Award

Nothing – not even a monster like Hurricane Katrina – could keep the WINGS Performing Arts Group down for long. When the storm roared ashore in 2005, WINGS lost its home in the new performing arts center it was building in Gulfport, MS, on the campus of the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center, a nationally acclaimed children’s museum.

But students and their leader kept the organization alive despite that obstacle and nearly three years later, WINGS is a national award winner. In January, it was one of an elite group of arts programs selected to receive the Coming Up Taller Award, given by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities to the nation’s most exemplary after- and out-of-school cultural programs – and to the adults who make them happen.

The eight-year-old WINGS program is led by Tonya Hays, a writer, actor, teacher, director and mother of two young actresses, who has devoted her life to leading children and youth to self-confidence, poise and productive lives through theatre arts. In addition to winning the national award, Hays also received SETC’s 2008 Sara Spencer Award. (See story, Page 28.)

“My passion,” she says, “has always been theatre for young audiences.”

Hays, who holds a master of fine arts degree in theatre from Texas Christian University, built her first children’s program at Gulfport Little Theatre in the 1990s, before moving on to become executive director of the community theatre.

“But my true love was and is working with children and youth,” she says.

So, in the late 1990s, she began taking programs to the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center (LMDC), a hands-on museum ranked among the top 50 children’s
museums in the country by *Child* magazine, where she and her work were welcomed with open arms.

“I thought it would be great to have a children’s arts program as part of the museum,” she recalls.

The board of LMDC, which had opened in 1998, thought so, too. At the time, they were seeking to expand the nonprofit museum’s horizons and develop programs for older children and teens. It was a win/win situation.

Hays’ idea – a performing arts program that reached out to disadvantaged youth and helped them gain confidence and achieve success – soon became LMDC’s WINGS Performing Arts Group.

The name came from the idea of “giving children roots and wings,” roots with which to firmly plant themselves and wings with which to soar, Hays says. The name also “seemed angelic” to Hays, providing a fitting spiritual component to the drama program – which is housed in a center named in memory of a young college student, majoring in elementary education, who died in a car crash. Of course, the theatre connection – waiting in the wings – didn’t go unnoticed either.

Funding for WINGS came from the Mississippi Arts Commission and the Mississippi Humanities Council, as well as many corporations and individuals who recognized the potential of Hays’ dream. Celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse and his wife, Alden, a high school friend of the museum’s namesake, made LMDC and WINGS a major focus of their philanthropic efforts.

**The WINGS Structure**

WINGS, which has an annual budget of $100,000, could be a model for anyone who wants to start a creative youth organization that not only teaches students the skills of theatre, but also encourages them to become active in their community through public service, Hays says. It seeks out at-risk children, working closely with school counselors and administrators to identify students who would benefit from participation in the program.

Annual dues for the program are $60, and scholarships are available for all aspects of WINGS work, including camps and trips. Along with traditional students, several home-schooled students are now involved in the program.

WINGS’ mentoring and academic support produce a 100 percent high school graduation rate among members of the program. Its graduates average $80,000 per student in scholarship offers each year, and 35 percent of alumni return to inspire younger students in their pursuit of excellence during breaks from school, Hays says. Four of her students have won SETC’s Keynote Emerging Artists of Promise (KEAP) Award, which provides funding to attend the SETC Convention to deserving students who otherwise could not afford the experience.

The WINGS program boasts numerous success stories:

- Christina Brotzman graduated from Millsaps College in Jackson, MS, and is now executive assistant at the Mississippi Arts Commission.
- Jacqueline Coale graduated in May from Millsaps College, where she received numerous scholarships, and has been accepted into New York University’s graduate opera program.
- Dustin Ballard and Lacey Jones are on full-tuition scholarships at Kean University, just outside New York, which they discovered through SETC.
- Haley Moon is on a full scholarship at Barnard. She’s prominent now, especially on the Mississippi Coast, for her book *Katrina Tears*, about dealing with depression after a natural disaster. She was a recipient of SETC’s KEAP Award.
- Angelina Davis has won numerous awards for her recordings in the Catholic music genre.
- Jordan Lord, a senior in the WINGS program this year, won the Voice of Democracy Award for an audio essay he wrote on “Honoring Veterans,” and earned $30,000 in scholarships to Columbia University for fall 2008.

The group started in 2000 with 11 junior high school students who called themselves the Shooting Stars. Its ranks now have swollen to 90 in three groups: the Comets (students in grades 3-4); the Constellations (grades 5-8); and the Shooting Stars (grades 9-12).

To join, students complete written applications. All applicants are accepted until enrollment is full – a maximum of 90 this year. Members attend monthly workshops throughout the year, based on topics requested by the officers of the high school WINGS group. Those topics range widely, from theatre
production issues to writing college resumes.

The Shooting Stars are self-governed, notes Hays. “They make up their own trip rules, their own dress code,” Hays says.

During the summer, the students have a planning retreat to consider the year ahead, and in the fall, a “sleep-over” at LMDC during which they work all night, planning what they want to do as a group and as a competitive show. They go to the Mississippi Theatre Association’s state competition, returning frequently with trophies. They’ve yet to win the state competition and advance to the regional competition, but each year Hays brings students to the SETC Convention to audition and attend workshops.

Each school year is launched with a dance for all of the groups. Other events include a Christmas party and an end-of-year awards banquet.

Members must commit to participating in one major production and one community service project annually. The service projects, which are sometimes linked with a production theme, are varied and wide-ranging – from working in a soup kitchen to ringing bells for the Salvation Army.

“We aren’t preparing these kids for Broadway; we’re teaching them to be better people,” Hays says.

That doesn’t mean some won’t make it to Broadway – just that, along the way, they also will become better people.

As part of that commitment, WINGS guides its committed members – actors, designers, writers, musicians, technicians and others – through the college application and auditions process.

When school is not in session in the summer, WINGS continues its work. Summers typically include three productions as well as summer workshops, trips and camps. An annual trip to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival is part of the program, as is a trip in alternate years to New York or London.

“This year,” Hays says, “we’re doing a Cirque du Soleil trip to Las Vegas,” where the students will see two shows, get to meet staff, take backstage tours and hike in Zion National Park. Many WINGS members are already familiar with Cirque as the company was a long-standing opening act at the Gulf Coast’s premier casino resort, the Beau Rivage – a prominent WINGS corporate partner.

**Teaching More than Theatre**

The program emphasizes learning about the world through theatre. Hays asks much more of her young charges than that they just show up for rehearsals and produce quality youth theatre. She also requires that they learn about the history and culture of the show they’re bringing to the stage. Because of her unusual gift for working with young people, she manages to make it not only fun but also educational.

“When we do a show, we don’t just ‘do a show,’” says Jason Gillis, a high school senior bound for Kean University, who joined WINGS in 2006.

Gillis learned that lesson soon after beginning his WINGS career in a big burst of energy as Motl in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the senior project of another WINGS member. As the cast members began working on the show, they realized that none of them was Jewish. Clearly, they had to know more about what they were doing and how to best portray the culture. So they called the local synagogue and sought instruction. The synagogue, in turn, invited the show’s cast to celebrate one of its holiest of holy observances – Passover – with its members. Says Gillis: “We dig deeper.”

Last year WINGS headed off to state competition with a *commedia dell’arte* production, *The Servant of Two Masters*, using a theatre form that was popular in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries. For the show, students researched the staging (traveling theatre troupes) and made their own costumes and masks.

Then, of course, there’s the community service component of WINGS. When the Shooting Stars did their big spring musical, *Guys and Dolls*, this year, they called in the Salvation Army for help. In exchange, WINGS members manned the famous red Christmas kettles and rang bells for donations to the less fortunate. They invited a Salvation Army...
representative to speak to the audience before the
curtain opened on each show.

*The Trojan Women*, chosen by this year’s Shooting
Stars as their competition piece, focused on Darfur
and the genocide there. Connecting the Darfur
treatment of women and children with that of the
Greek rulers in *The Trojan Women* was the idea of
WINGS members Jordan Lord and Mallory Myers.

On a Sunday spring afternoon, Myers, Gillis and
another WINGS member, Ravin Floyd, gathered
with Hays to talk about the group and the special
friendships it engenders among its members. Both
Floyd and Myers have been in WINGS since fifth
grade. As high school graduation nears, they know
they’ll miss not just Hays’ instruction and deep
involvement in their lives, but also the camaraderie
of the group.

“People who would never be friends are friends
in this group,” says Myers. “We come from all
backgrounds. I just love these people so much.”

Much of that camaraderie is due to Hays’
nurturing. Says her friend and longtime assistant,
Flo Williams: “Her heart is so big and she is so thin.
She is just all heart.”

Hays maintains amazing patience with unruly
children whom others would jettison from the
program at the outset, says Williams.

**Katrina’s Winds Separate Group**

Hays’ – and the program’s – biggest test,
undoubtedly, was Hurricane Katrina. Williams
remembers going with Hays and her young daughters
after the deadly hurricane ripped the Gulf Coast
asunder in August 2005 to survey the damage at
LMDC, located just a couple of blocks north of the
beach. The wind and water had given a serious
pounding to the former school gymnasium that was
being transformed into a performing arts center for
WINGS. The museum, located in an adjacent former
elementary school building, sustained significant
damage, but remained standing.

Hays and her daughters were in tears of disbelief
as they viewed the damage, Williams recalls. “At one
point,” she says, “Tonya turned to me and asked,
‘Should I leave?’”

“Absolutely!” Williams counseled her to take her
children and get away, at least until the debris had
been cleared.

So, like many others who knew their children
should be continuing their education long before
schools on the Coast reopened, Hays left. Her

**WINGS Rises Again**

Two months after Katrina hit, WINGS members
began doing coffeehouses, where anyone was invited
to come in and entertain “in any genre,” says Wil-
liams, “except striptease and dirty words.”
The first one, in November 2005 at a Gulfport church, was phenomenally successful. Hays flew in from Albuquerque for it, then returned to Gulfport for good at Christmas and the group began to plan for a new year.

WINGS wasn’t just without a performing space. It also had no scenery, no costumes and no place to rehearse. But members took a creative approach. Even in that blighted time, numerous donors offered items that could be used as props or clothes that could become costumes, but there was no place to store anything. So they relied on their own ingenuity.

They borrowed costumes from Mississippi State University. Others were creatively recycled from local carnival attire that had escaped Katrina’s wrath.

WINGS had planned *Cyrano de Bergerac* as its first show of the 2005-06 season but, Hays says, it was just too sad. “The kids wanted to laugh,” she says, so they changed to a different play, *The Seussification of Romeo and Juliet*, featuring the Capitulations and the Monotones as the famous feuding families. “The playwright waived the royalties,” Hays notes.

After her selection for the Sara Spencer Award, Hays wrote the following thank you note, which she asked SETC to share with members: “To say I was surprised when my name was called at the SETC Awards Banquet would be a huge understatement. I was shocked, and as [fellow Mississippian] MJ Etua held my hand, she kept saying, ‘Stop shaking!’ The wonderful introduction given about me shared with all attendees the honor of the Coming Up Taller Award that the WINGS program received recently in Washington, DC. While this was an amazing experience and a tremendous gift to our program, the Sara Spencer Child Drama Award will be a treasured memory. To be honored by the nation is one thing, but to be honored by your peers and colleagues is a priceless gift. Working in the field of theatre for youth has been my passion for many years. It is continually rewarding as I see the young people I work with blossom and become the leaders of tomorrow. WINGS seeks to nurture talent and spirit, and when a young cast member recently came to me and asked, ‘Can we use our production of *The Trojan Women* as a vehicle to create awareness of the atrocities in Darfur and to raise funds for aid organizations?’ I knew we were doing our job. I want to thank SETC from the bottom of my heart for this tremendous honor and to close by quoting my hero, Mother Teresa, ‘I can do no great things, only small things with great love.’”
The show featured Shakespearean scenes, classical music, and madrigal music and dance, and included a major outreach into the schools. Originally scheduled for October 2005 – two months after Katrina – it was performed in April 2006, using borrowed sets and costumes.

The group’s production of *Shakesongs* in the aftermath of Katrina prompted the Mississippi Humanities Council to nominate WINGS for the Coming Up Taller Award it received this year from the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

In a press release announcing the award, Adair Margo, chair of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, noted that “arts and humanities activities have a wonderful way of enabling young people to discover their unique talents and interests while forging a path to success in school and life. The WINGS program lifts students’ spirits and expectations through experiences that enable them to realize that they are all capable of great achievements.”

Tim Bergman, executive director of the Gulf Coast Symphony Orchestra, partnered with WINGS on the *Shakesongs* event as director of the Gulf Coast Youth Symphony Orchestra and has worked with Hays on numerous productions. He says the key to WINGS’ success is the spirit of inclusiveness that Hays has created, enabling all children to strive for their dreams.

“Every child,” he says, “has an opportunity to be engaged on a level that matches their abilities and interests.”

Recognizing the daunting task of fulfilling each child’s needs in every production, he marvels that “WINGS manages to achieve this with consistency and quality.”

This architect’s drawing shows the first phase of the WINGS Performing Arts and Education Center, now under construction. Later phases call for a major renovation of the adjacent former gymnasium, where WINGS now rehearses, into a first-class theatre space.
Hurricane Katrina reduced the Bay St. Louis Little Theatre (BSLLT) to rubble (right), as Southern Theatre reported in its Fall 2006 coverage of the natural disaster. However, members of the all-volunteer community theatre have kept alive the spirit of “The Show Must Go On!,” a sign that was posted on its grounds within days of the destruction.

Thanks to a $250,000 grant from the Mississippi Arts Commission and additional fundraising efforts, the theatre (located on Mississippi’s coast 16 miles from Gulfport) has a new home. If fundraising progresses as planned, the theatre hopes to be producing shows in its own facility by the fall. Since the hurricane, the theatre has used other spaces to present two full-length productions, two small-scale holiday shows, and other fundraising events.

Its new home is a historic building constructed in the 1920s and referred to locally as the This Property Is Condemned building. It was the setting for the 1966 movie version of Tennessee Williams’ one-act play of the same name, which starred Natalie Wood and Robert Redford. The building suffered damage from Katrina and was scheduled for demolition before BSLLT chose it from among 15 locations as its new home. The building has been gutted and sports one of the blue-tarp roofs that became such a familiar sight along the post-Katrina Gulf Coast. Once a new roof is in place and other structural renovations are complete, BSLLT plans to open a small theatre downstairs. Storage space for props and costumes and a rehearsal space will be located upstairs, according to Michelle Kessling of the BSLLT board. With seating for around 70 audience members, the space will offer some flexibility for stage configuration. The building is located in Bay St. Louis’s Depot District, which has been undergoing a renaissance in recent months. BSLLT Board President Cheryl Grace is determined to make the theatre “an anchor for the community,” opening it up for year-round activities, including music events, film showings and poetry readings.

The board is continuing fundraising efforts, including a “Picnic at the Playhouse” scheduled for June and featuring a performance of the Williams play. The theatre will accept donations of costumes, props and scripts once the storage spaces are renovated, Kessling said. (For more information on donations, send an e-mail to mkessling@bsllt.org.) While “Katrina is still not over for us,” Kessling says, the theatre’s membership has been growing and has returned to its pre-Katrina level. “We’re a work-in-progress,” Kessling says.

Williams points to Hays as the key reason that WINGS has been successful.

“She seeks out children who need help and she works with them,” Williams says. “She sees potential in them that others don’t.”

Hays, however, says one of the major attractions of WINGS is that it allows kids to escape from the real world, especially the one they find on the Mississippi Coast now. Theatre provides both a safe haven and a place where they can fly. “They’re doing this because they love it,” Hays says.

Even the WINGS alums who are away now at college on scholarships flock home in the summer and on breaks to coach and help with production of shows. Once students gain their WINGS, it seems, they wear them forever.

Visit WINGS on the Web at: www.lmdc.org/Wings.htm

The Show Must Go On! Bay St. Louis Little Theatre Finds a New Home

by Jim Stacy

Hurricane Katrina reduced the Bay St. Louis Little Theatre (BSLLT) to rubble (right), as Southern Theatre reported in its Fall 2006 coverage of the natural disaster. However, members of the all-volunteer community theatre have kept alive the spirit of “The Show Must Go On!,” a sign that was posted on its grounds within days of the destruction.

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Maria Watson is director of development for Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, MS. She is also a freelance journalist who lives in Gulfport, MS.
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Shakespeare’s Wordcraft
by Scott Kaiser
2007. Limelight Editions, Softcover
www.applausepub.com
ISBN: 0879103450
Pages: 312. Price: $18.95

Scott Kaiser’s previous book, Mastering Shakespeare – An Acting Class in Seven Scenes, offered us a Stanislavsky-based approach to the challenges of acting Shakespeare. His new book, Shakespeare’s Wordcraft, focuses on Shakespeare’s language devices in all their breadth and beauty.

Like many of today’s vocal directors, Kaiser, who serves as head of voice and text at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, is concerned about the young actor’s disconnect from the visceral and vibrancy of language in general and Shakespeare’s heightened texts in particular.

In a culture saturated with visual images, sound bites and reductive oral communication, this generation of actors-in-training can certainly benefit from a guide that explains how to listen for, identify and utilize the words and rhetorical devices contained in Shakespeare’s language.

Shakespeare’s Wordcraft provides just such a guide. In the author’s words, “The aim of the book [is] to take the reader ... where the stellar patterns of Shakespeare’s language can be seen for their exquisite beauty, appreciated for their power to excite the imagination, and revered for their ability to tell stories.” It is Kaiser’s stated intention to avoid the complex technical terms that can confuse and intimidate the reader/actor and to focus on those inventive and accessible patterns that help convey the humanity in the plays in all its poetic grandeur.

The book has nine chapters, each organized around a definitive pattern. In detailing his sequence, the author states, “Each pattern is explored in depth, beginning with a general explanation of the qualities of the pattern, then introducing, in a logical progression, the various devices that follow that particular pattern. Each of these devices is explained, then illuminated by many examples of Shakespeare’s use of the device in context.”

Kaiser sets this sequence clearly in Chapter 1, Words, which is subdivided into prefixes, suffixes, front clipping, end clipping and compound words. The following chapters – Additions, Repetitions, Reverberations, Transformations, Substitutions, Omissions, Order, and Disorder – all adhere to the same structure. Occasionally subcategories – such as verse and prose, soliloquy and dialogue – are added for clarity.

A number of books have been written about Shakespeare’s rhetorical figures and the acting clues encoded within, but this text has three features that make it unique and immeasurably useful as a teaching tool.

First, it is refreshingly readable. The prose is clear, direct and engaging, and the material is organized in a logical and orderly fashion, making it easily accessible to students.

Second, it uses contemporary examples of these figures of speech and word patterns, providing an effective bridge to Shakespeare’s devices. The explanations of the functions of the language devices are useful in acting terms, and the range of the patterns – and the examples from the plays that illustrate them – make it a significant reference.

Finally, the unabashed passion with which this book is written is infectious and will hopefully inspire a new generation of actors and those who teach them.
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