

# DAILY TROJAN

## ***USC's Master of Fine Arts revamps Repertory Style***

*Graduate students put on repertory productions of "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream"*

Kelsey Borresen

Thursday, November 20, 2008

For anyone who has ever harbored an uncontrollable jealousy toward actors, prepare to feel a hell of a lot better about yourself.

It's easy to envy actors- these people (if you can even call them that) who seem to work so much less and get so much more in the way of fortune, fame, fashion and foxy arm candy. But sometimes the road to all the glitz and glamour is, quite frankly, a bitch.

For the first graduating class of the Master of Fine Arts Acting Program, this has meant working six days a week.

Yes, six. The 10 aspiring actors have been forced to part with their beloved Saturdays, which for most college students, provide a much needed 24 hours to catch up on sleep and reruns of "The Hills". Monday through Friday, they sit through classes and rehearsals that last from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and on Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

While a 12-hour workday seems rather excessive, the long hours have provided the actors with the necessary amount of time to master what is referred to as "repertory style" theater. Essentially, in one night, the cast will perform one play and the next night perform a different play in a rotating cycle. On matinee days, they will really put their acting chops to the test by doing one play in the afternoon and another in the evening.

The graduate students explore the rotating repertory style by performing two plays, "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot" by Stephen Adly Guirgis and William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Though both plays can be characterized as dramatic comedies, they differ dramatically in their subject matter and delivery.

"Judas Iscariot" is a contemporary piece starring Christ's betrayer by the same name and is set in a courtroom in a limbo between heaven and hell. The play is the linguistic opposite of Shakespeare's

work, which is widely known for being anything but colloquial. Guirgis' play, written only three years ago, is peppered with R-rated language and pop-culture references.

Case in point: Satan enters the courtroom to "I'm Too Sexy" just before the prosecutor alludes to his alleged affair with Ricky Martin.

The performances are held in McClintock Theatre where you can use the words "fourth row" and "nosebleed seats" interchangeably, creating an intimate setting. It's especially needed in "Judas Iscariot" where the audience unofficially acts as another character: the jury.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream, the more well-known of the two plays, consists of three markedly different worlds that eventually converge, including upper class Athens, working-class Athens and a fantasy fairy realm. While Shakespeare's dramas have a certain hoighty toighty air to them, his comedy has more low-brow appeal.

"It's a very physical show so even if you're not following all the language you can still follow what we're doing", said cast member Kristin D'Andrea, who plays two male characters in the play. "It's visually pleasing and ridiculous."

Beginning next semester, the actors will take it a step further and add two one-act plays by the French playwright Marivaux to the rotating repertory.

Repertory-style theater, while still popular in parts of Europe, has gone out of vogue in the United States for primarily economic reasons. And it's these underlying economic reasons that have people asking why anyone would spend tens of thousands of dollars and three additional years of study to pursue acting when, in many cases, it has proved to be more about raw talent than education. After majoring in theater as an undergraduate, many students rush into the real world of auditions, callbacks and all too often, rejections.

But many others choose the proverbial road less traveled.

"Going to grad school for three years gives you an opportunity to focus on where you're personally going and what your gifts are", Andrea said. "It is kind of a bubble. All crafts and artist people need to have a bubble of safety for at least a period of time before they can really do something in the world - where you can have strength and security in yourself. I was making choices like that - taking jobs that were taking away from me really exploring the artistry and craftsmanship that I wanted acting to be for me."

One of the most trying aspects of the repertory style is the challenge of playing several characters that are not only a far cry from the actor himself but also from his other roles. This undertaking, characteristic of repertory-style theater, leads to what the Dean of the School of Theatre, Madeline Puzo, refers to as the "triumph of miscasting."

"In repertory theater you can't cast people to type", said Andy Robinson, senior lecturer and director of MFA Acting. "For instance we're doing three plays. I have 10 actors. All 10 actors have to play all the

roles in the three plays so some of them are just going to be far removed from the description of that role. Young people will be playing old people. That is definitely miscasting in a traditional sense, but that's the beauty of it. By playing an older person, by playing someone that's not like you at all, the effort to find that character is what turns you into a character actor. You never see that kind of miscasting in film and television. Everybody is always playing according to their type."

Despite their tremendous amount of work, the graduate students seem thankful for the opportunity they've been given. They could have easily spent their Saturdays chowing down on cold lo mein and watching "Dawson's Creek" reruns while waiting for a callback for a local commercial. But instead they opted to work their asses off in hopes that they will be better prepared for whatever it is the acting world throws in their way.

And while the MFA students have certainly developed their talent in the last three years, it seems the totality of the experience won't be wholly realized in the immediate future.

"You're an actor and then five years, 10 years later I know I'll understand that line", fellow MFA student Carolyn Zeller said. "That's going to happen with a lot of things we learn in this program. And when your system actually processes it, it's like an ice box joke - you don't get it until years from now."

"If you don't buy this, then take it from Andy Robinson, a man who had the invaluable firsthand experience of performing in the rotating repertory style as a young man."

"By working this hard and working to the extent of abilities is the only way we find out who we are and how good we are and what power we have as performers. If it's easy then I don't think it's worth much."