

THE SHOW GOES ON

DRAMATIC COLLABORATIONS

BY MIRIAM SAULS



*Students on stage: cast members, clockwise from left, Zack Armfield '01, Charles Aitken '01, and Faran Krentcil '04 in a scene from *The Changeling**

If you come to campus in early April and stand outside Sheaffer Theater in the Bryan Center, you might think you've happened on a concert of Gregorian chants. Then you hear groans, squeals, thumps, and cackles interspersed with the chanting. No monks these—instead, it is a production of *The Changeling*, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's seventeenth-century classic, which explores the lines between love, obsession, and evil.

While the main plot of the play involves murder, blackmail, and virginity-testing among the aristocracy, the subplot takes place in an insane asylum and provides an element of dark comedy filled with sexual innuendo, for which the student actors chant their own quirky interpretations of mad characters ranting, raving, and writhing. "I can't believe they wrote plays so racy and sexy and violent that long ago," director Christine Morris' students told her as they reviewed the play in the fall for a spring production by Duke Players.

Duke Players, whose origins go back to 1931, is the principal student/faculty producing organization for dramatic art at Duke. Staging three productions and a new-plays

festival each academic year, the theater company is one of many vehicles for Duke students to gain experience in theater—in dramatic text interpretation, acting, directing, design, and all the other elements that go into producing drama.

Attending a rehearsal of *The Changeling* in the sparse trappings of Branson Theater is to see the talent and versatility of the Duke student—speaking lines like, "Why, 'tis impossible thou canst be so wicked" in excellent Elizabethan English one minute, and shooting the breeze about being an actor at Duke the next. "We put in more hours than athletes during these productions," they say. "But we don't see any perks coming to us."

"In fact, if we could just get [basketball's] Shane Battier to try out for a play, the school would probably start throwing some money our way to give us a *real* theater space on East Campus," says Charles Aitken, avid actor and senior history major, referring to a dearth

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of rehearsal and production facilities.

The Changeling provides a good opportunity to learn about more than play production, madness, and mayhem. Students will delve into science, technology, medicine, psychology, and social science, both on the stage and in a related symposium, "Medicine and Madness on the Renaissance English Stage: Exploring Middleton and Rowley's *Changeling*." The symposium will bring Duke faculty from the departments of psychiatry and behavioral science, history, drama, and English together with a noted literary scholar from the University of Illinois to examine the medical, psychiatric, and gender issues in the play.

"Drama is collaborative in nature and gives us great opportunities to cross disciplines. It makes good sense for it to be a part of the liberal-arts curriculum," says Morris, with an animation suggesting deep passion for her field. "Drama is the synthesis of many aspects of the world. It makes us access both sides of the brain and many fields of study."

"We are always trying to branch out and find more ways to interact with other disciplines in the liberal arts," says Zannie Giraud Voss, assistant professor of the practice of drama and producing director of Theater Previews at Duke. "We cross-list a lot of our course offerings with other departments. Aspects of theater arts cross over into public policy, marketing, management, business. In fact, entrepreneurs and artists have a lot in common: They are both constantly innovating and taking risks."

"Innovative" is a word that characterizes the drama program. New plays written by faculty, students, alumni, and professional playwrights occupy an important place in the program's mission. Outlets for this work might be in the new-plays festival each year, or a staged reading with a guest playwright-in-residence, or in a mainstage show in Reynolds Theater



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as part of Theater Previews at Duke, the professional arm of the drama program.

“We feel that presenting new work fits perfectly into the mission of a research university,” says Voss. “The real value of research is to add to the greater body of knowledge. With the creative acts of the writer or actor or designer, they too are adding to the greater body of knowledge.”

Establishing its place in the research-oriented liberal-arts university hasn’t always been easy for the drama program. In the fall of 1972, a Drama Planning Committee was formed in response to student interest. The committee, headed by John Clum, then associate professor of English, proposed the creation of a drama department that would include a chair, a director of undergraduate studies, one assistant professor, an actor-in-residence, and other visiting artists. The ambitious proposal was turned down.

But the dream lived on. The committee resubmitted a simpler proposal in 1974 for an Interdisciplinary Program in Drama, for which no additional personnel would be needed. That proposal was accepted and, in 1975, courses listed as “Drama” rather than “English” were first offered. The response to the first courses prompted a follow-up proposal for a drama major, which was approved in December 1975.

John Clum was director of the new program, and he and two other original faculty members, Scott Parker and Kenneth Rearson, were soon joined by additional faculty to help carry the growing load.

In 1985, the university brought in David Ball from Carnegie-Mellon University to be the director of the program, and Ball brought

with him a conservatory-style approach to drama education. “Actor training became the absolute heart and soul of the program,” says Clum. But the conservatory style left little time for drama students to explore outside their field. They were being prepared as if they were graduate students; the rigorous acting schedule, with classes, workshops, movement drills, and rehearsals, often ran seven full days a week.

In 1991, David Ball stepped down and, in 1992, Richard Riddell was hired to change the overemphasis on actor training and steer the program back to providing a well-rounded liberal-arts education. “I was asked to integrate the program more fully into the larger liberal-arts environment at Duke, to make the program more inclusive, and to provide stability by building up the faculty,” says Riddell, whose credentials include a doctorate from Stanford and a Tony Award for lighting design. He was also the first director of the American Repertory Theatre’s Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University.

Under Riddell’s leadership, the number of full-time, regular-rank faculty has grown from four to nine members who regularly write, design, produce, act, teach, and win awards. The curriculum has been revised, particularly strengthening the areas of dramatic literature and playwriting. Theater Previews at Duke has co-produced four professional shows, with a fifth, *A Thousand Clowns* by Herb Gardner, starring Tom Selleck, on tap for May 15 to June 3.

Riddell receives a lot of credit from his colleagues for the thriving state of the program. Dale Randall, professor emeritus of English



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and drama who was interim director of the program after Ball’s departure, compliments Riddell on his “democratic style of leadership.” “Richard is very positive, very inclusive,” says Randall. “There’s an extraordinary feeling of camaraderie in the program now, of everybody pulling together.”

Jeff Storer, associate professor of the practice of drama and co-founder and artistic director of Durham’s Manbites Dog Theater, points to “an amazingly varied and accomplished faculty. One of the greatest aspects of the program is that the faculty are all still deeply involved in creative activity. We are all working professionals. We practice what we preach,” he says. “We teach by example—our work and explorations and research and pieces of theater we make are there for our students.

“My struggles to keep my small theater company alive are happening parallel to my teaching. They see the real world. And I can give opportunities in my productions that can start careers. Maybe Manbites Dog is relatively low on the food chain, but we have a strong sense of professional integrity and standards, and these kids can be paid for the first time and go on to bigger opportunities after graduation.”

And those kids appreciate the opportunities afforded them by faculty. “It’s an incred-

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RICHARD RIDDELL
Director, Duke Drama Program

Broadway South: a workshop production, far left, of Little Women, The Musical, with Kerry O'Malley '91; producer Manny Azenberg teaches a class each spring semester; Tom Selleck, who premieres in May in a revival of A Thousand Clowns; the cast from a 1986 production of Long Day's Journey Into Night, from left, Kevin Spacey, Bethel Leslie, Peter Gallagher, and Jack Lemmon



ibly strong faculty,” says junior drama major Jim Iseman, an actor in *The Changeling*. “I hope to get involved next year in some of the productions put on by my teachers in their own companies.”

Says Reggie Harris, another junior drama major, “Drama classes are my only classes at Duke where the teachers know you. And you get to meet interesting people. You don’t have the same opportunity to interact in other classes as you have in drama classes and plays.”

Making sure theater in all its forms and at all levels of development is available to students is a hallmark of the drama program. Theater Previews at Duke, in productions such as *A Thousand Clowns*, gives students the opportunity to intern with professional playwrights, composers, actors, directors, designers, managers, and technicians, learning



MARTHA SWOPE & ASSOCIATES

to assemble a show from the ground up. And the producers in partnership with Theater Previews at Duke have the opportunity to perfect their product on a regional stage: *A Thousand Clowns* will go on to play in Chicago, Boston, and New York.

“Our theater in Durham offers commercial producers a venue without the pressure of New York City,” explains Riddell. “We can nurse the embryonic piece here. We can be the place where the art is developed. And the financial scale is much smaller.”

Previewing plays at Duke was the brainchild of legendary Broadway producer Emanuel Azenberg. He came to Duke to visit his daughter, Lisa Azenberg Hayes '85, and fell in love with the campus. A Tony Award-winner with a tremendous track record, he was asked to guest lecture. “I was doing lots of plays at the time,” he says, “and I looked at Reynolds [Theater] and had this idea to preview shows at Duke. There was lots of cooperation; it all worked nicely. To me it’s always been pleasurable—and my phone doesn’t ring here.”

Many notable productions were staged at Duke during the Broadway Preview Series, precursor to Theater Previews, including Neil Simon’s *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, with Nathan Lane; *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, with Jack Lemmon and a young Kevin Spacey; and *A Walk in the Woods*, with Sam Waterston.

Azenberg still comes to Duke each spring semester to teach one course, “Leadership and the Broadway Theater.” He is well versed on the subject, having produced more than fifty Broadway shows, including twenty Neil Simon plays. “I read plays with the kids,” says Azenberg, with an affection in his voice surprising for a stereotypically fast-paced, crusty New

Yorker. “It’s a lot of preparation for me because kids here are smart, you know, and I have to keep up with them. But kids here are also ‘prived’ (as opposed to deprived)—many of them have missed the struggle in life, so we read the plays as metaphors to teach them about life. I encourage my students to strive to find real fulfillment in their lives instead of just trying to make a trillion dollars.”

Azenberg stays in touch with promising students, as do other professionals and playwrights-in-residence who bring their work through. “Our students don’t have to break into the ‘world out there,’” says the Theater Previews’ Voss. “The world comes here, and students get to know the professionals as real people.”

How do students who came from the theater world at Duke fare once they’re out in the professional world? “My years at Duke led me to where I am now,” says Charles Randolph-Wright '78, the absolute embodiment of enthusiasm and one of the first undergraduates to come out of the drama program. “I majored in John Clum. He was a great influence on me and helped me do what I’m now doing,” which is directing, writing, and producing for theater, television, and film. Among many other projects, he recently directed the smash hit revival of *Guys and Dolls* at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., which is now headed for a national tour. His own play, *Blue*, will have its New York premiere in June at the Roundabout Theatre after a successful run at the Arena.

“My friends are always asking me how I do it all, how I do so many things at once,” says

Randolph-Wright. "And I say, 'Didn't you go to college? Didn't you ever have six papers due the same day?' I didn't have to study in my high school in York, South Carolina, but once I got to Duke and after my first ten minutes in chemistry class, I knew I was in trouble. Duke taught me perseverance, flexibility, and maneuverability. And as a black student at the height of affirmative action at Duke, I learned all about crossing racial barriers, and I'm still doing that.

"It was important for me to have a liberal-arts background. This business encompasses the world; you need to know everything. It would be a mistake to just be in an arts curriculum."

Actress Kerry O'Malley '91, who double-majored in drama and history, was at Duke during the Ball years. "The conservatory-style training within a liberal-arts university was the best of both worlds for me," she says. "The intense acting, speech, voice, and movement training I got from the conservatory, and the ability to read, analyze, and do research I got from history, still help me become an expert in whatever 'mini-world' I'm preparing to step into with a new role."

O'Malley, whose credits include a number of Broadway musicals, plays, films, and television shows, recently played Jo March in *Little Women*, *The Musical*, a workshop production co-produced with Duke's Theater Previews. It played to sold-out audiences in Sheaffer Theater. O'Malley, tossing her auburn curls, had the audience in the palm of her hand, first luring them into laughter with a comic flair reminiscent of Lucille Ball, then bringing them to tears with the dramatic deftness of Greta Garbo. In fact, an audience survey participant suggested handing out boxes of tissues to audience members as they arrive.

One of the co-producers of *Little Women*, *The Musical*, was Dani Davis '88. After a busy career as an actor and choreographer, she started a theatrical production and music recording company. While obviously energetic, she says that for her business, she relies on management skills developed when she was president of Hoof 'n' Horn, the student musical-theater society at Duke. Davis says she was thrilled to be back on campus and to work with Theater Previews, to give students some of the same opportunities she had as a student. "I see young people coming out of conservatories now and they are quite skilled, but a great actor needs a great breadth of life experience. And I find students in a liberal-arts environment develop that breadth much better.

"It was wonderful to produce the work at Duke, not just with Duke as a host, but as a financial and artistic partner. To workshop *Little Women*, *The Musical* in New York would have cost three times more. We gave three

times more performances here and had one week more of rehearsals. We really put the producing interns and directing interns and others to good use and they got good experience."

"I was at Duke in 1986 when Manny Azzenberg introduced the Broadway Previews Series," Davis recalls. "Manny gave us a window on what the world of theater really is—a business. I still think about those days. They are still very immediate for me. I remember Sam Waterston coming to my public policy class when I was a student."

Because of the inclusiveness of the drama program at Duke, current students run the gamut—from those who are serious about their art and headed for a professional career in theater to those who take an elective course for fun or curiosity. Recently, the instructors of a performance course for non-majors designed a survey to see what their students were really after. Answers ranged from wanting to "learn more about myself" to wanting to "learn to get up in front of people" to a need for "more balance in my life" to a desire to "work another part of my brain."

"And that's okay," says Christine Morris, director of undergraduate studies. "The non-majors gain new respect for the serious drama students when they see how hard they work. My students sometimes say they feel their classmates don't understand how demanding their work is. But the word is getting out and recognition of the program is happening more and more."

Despite the awards and accolades and academic rigor, the drama program still struggles for facilities and recognition commensurate with its success. Program offices and production spaces are spread over East and West campuses, sometimes in substandard buildings, as senior Charles Aitken notes. And faculty long for the day when creative work successfully realized on the stage will be viewed through the same prism as scholarly work published in journals.

In 1999, the Program in Drama proposed that it become a Department of Theater Studies. Because of its program status, Duke Drama cannot offer tenure-track appointments. And in the fields of dramatic literature, theater history, and dramatic criticism and theory, the lack of tenure-track appointments has hindered Duke in its ability to hire faculty. Though tenure is not as expected among theater professionals, the program is interested in developing a tenure-track for faculty artists as well, holding that scholars and artists are equal within the study of drama and theater.

Other hopes outlined in the proposal include the possibility of a master's program in dramatic writing, to take advantage of Duke's reputation in developing new work for the professional theater, and maybe, eventually, a certificate program at the Ph.D. level.

After studying the proposal, the faculty's Academic Council convened a task force to assess the wisdom of combining the programs in Dance, Drama, and Film and Video before granting a separate departmental status to Drama. Among other things, the task force reported: "Though we would have hoped to find more of a legacy of strong university support over the years, our committee discovered that the lack of funding compared to other academic programs at Duke forced Dance, Drama, and Film and Video to be particularly creative in building their academic and performing programs. Our investigations confirmed that these programs, despite underfunding, offer impressive curricula, and have a fine record in producing successful graduates."

The task force further noted that a "lack of quality space for faculty, teaching, and performance is a major problem for each of these programs and for the arts in general at Duke." (Some \$1.6 million in fund raising has been committed to upgrading drama facilities.) Ultimately, the committee advised against the merger of the programs and recommended "that the Drama Program be upgraded to a Department of Theater Studies and its request for new and improved facilities be granted in the most suitable form." The Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences will bring the issue of departmental status for Theater Studies before the Academic Priorities Committee and the Academic Council in the spring, in the hope that a formal motion may go before the trustees in May.

In the meantime, the curriculum is being updated to better serve drama students, majors and nonmajors alike. For instance, in the future, students involved in productions like *The Changeling* will be able to earn academic credits for their endless hours of practicing to make perfect.

Over a long career as a theater critic, *The New York Times'* Frank Rich has joined the crowd in lamenting Broadway's rising costs and ticket prices, embrace of the spectacle and the revival, and readiness to provide a venue for individuals with greater luster as Hollywood stars than as talented actors. Acknowledging all of that in an essay some years ago, he noted that "however gravely ill the economic and physical health of the American theater," its art has been "thriving against all odds." And he celebrated the fact that "American theatrical production is now decentralized," just as "American theatrical writing and performance reflect a far less homogenous society than they once did." For creative risk-taking in the theater world, the college campus may be earning more applause than Broadway. ■

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