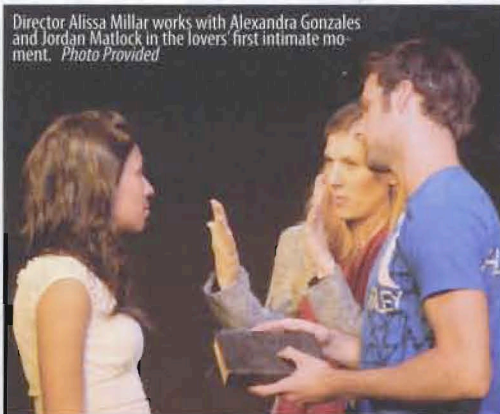




Pictured: Jonathan Contreras and Alexandra Gonzales in the recently completed *Anna in the Tropics*. Photo Provided



Director Alissa Millar works with Alexandra Gonzales and Jordan Matlock in the lovers' first intimate moment. Photo Provided



Pictured: Matlock and Gonzales in the recently completed *Anna in the Tropics*. Photo Provided



Jordan Matlock and Alexandra Gonzales rehearse their passionate moment. Photo Provided

HELLO DRAMA



Pictured: Marek Lara and Monica Gonzalez in the recently completed *Anna in the Tropics*. Photo Provided

THE OU SCHOOL OF DRAMA RECENTLY SET A RECORD IN ANNUAL TICKET SALES FOR A UNIVERSITY THEATRE PROGRAM. WITH THEIR BUZZWORTHY SPRING LINEUP SET IN STONE, IT MIGHT BE TIME TO CHECK OUT WHAT THEY HAVE TO OFFER.

by Sarah Hill

I'm sure most of you have entertained the idea of being an actor. Maybe not. Maybe that's just me. It's an alluring profession nonetheless. Who wouldn't want to be famous? But I feel what the general public, me included, forgets is that these people on the screen and stage didn't just pop up there. When the camera turns off and the crowd has gone home, these actors are real people. They have lives. They aren't just characters. Although it looks effortless, they actually work hard for months on the performances that take us two hours to watch and decide if we like or not. We may just tilt our heads to the side and say, "I don't get it," then go home. The general public, man...we're ruthless.

Have you ever stayed late after a show, or seen a television studio? It's ridiculous. When the curtains close in a theatre people begin to trickle out of the woodwork like ants out of

their hill. In television, for every one person you see on your TV screen, there are probably ten people behind the scenes. How did these people get there?

Like in every other profession, they've practiced, worked, and trained to get there. Coincidentally enough, some of them may have actually started right on the path to "there" in Norman.

I don't know if you know this, but the University of Oklahoma does indeed have a drama school. It's the second oldest drama school in the country. There's no other way to say this: Oklahoma's drama school is a BIG deal.

"There's a lot of exciting stuff this year," said Matt Byrd, Assistant to Audience Development and a dramaturgy junior. A dramaturge is responsible for the entire essence of a show. They must do their research. They must be accurately creative people.

For starters, the Fall '08 production *Anatomy of Gray* by Jim Leonard just won best in state at the prestigious Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF). In the last week of February, those involved traveled to San Marcus, Texas, to compete for region six. Winning the region means they are then offered the opportunity to perform in the famous Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

"Coming out of somewhere like Oklahoma, that's cool," said Byrd.

Last year's play *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* by Tomson Highway won our region and was performed on the Kennedy Center stage - a true accomplishment.

In a nutshell, *Anatomy of Gray* is about a 15-year-old girl named June whose father passes away. She prays for the world to end. A doctor arrives in the town and starts to cure little sicknesses. The plot thickens when the people

of the town start to develop unexplained marks on their bodies and begin to get sick with diseases. It turns out that the town's water supply is to blame for the spreading sickness. June and a boy (who doesn't drink water-only soda) remain unscathed from the town's apparent curse.

The story ultimately ends with them leaving the town. In the author's note, Miller reveals his intentions behind the play.

"It's really kind of like an allegory about AIDS," said Byrd.

After Miller's friend, who was also happened to be a minister, died from AIDS, Miller wrote *Anatomy of Gray* as a response. In the author's note, Miller writes, "I thought, 'what would happen if I was the only Christian who got AIDS?'"

Although I didn't get to see the play when it was showing in September, Dusty Somers reviewed it for the Oklahoma Daily saying, "*Anatomy of Gray* is a highly entertaining and fairly thoughtful play, and the excellent production by University Theatre makes it worthwhile."

It was received well by the public.

"It was one of the best things they've seen in a long time," said sophomore theatre major Jessie Downs. Downs is in the play, and along with the rest of the cast, has spent countless hours working and practicing for

has set the bar high for the spring. This semester's line-up is stacked with highly-anticipated performances. Main stage productions will be The Oklahoma Festival of Ballet in the Rupel J. Jones Theatre which begins in March, *Baby the Musical* beginning in April in the Weitzenhoffer Theatre and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opening in May in the Rupel J. Jones Theatre.

The Lab Theatre, which is located on the second story of the newly renovated Old Science Hall, is also putting a buzz in the air. *Anna in the Tropics* just wrapped up its sold-out performances this Valentine's Day weekend, receiving standing ovations for every performance. *The Dada Play*, written by the school of drama's Playwright-in-Residence, Miekko Ouchi, has its world premiere in April.

Student directed plays like *How I Learned to Drive* and *The Good Doctor* will also be showing.

Two of the plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Dada Play*, are going to add a spark to the theatrical line-up.

The School of Drama's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been reimagined for the OU audience. It will have more of a New York underground, crazy night club kind of feeling, rather than sticking to Shakespeare's original premise.

"The fairies will be crazy young kids living wild, crazy lives," said Ashley Monroe, junior drama major. According to Monroe we can expect black and neon colors.

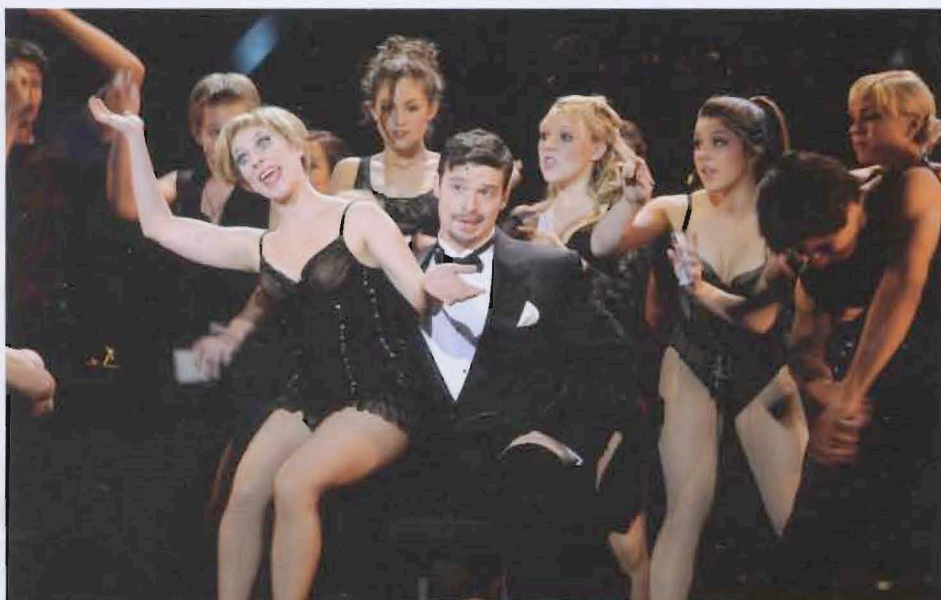
"It reminds me of the movie *Party Monster* with Macaulay Culkin," said Monroe. The department has a special guest director signed up to help direct the main stage production.

The Dada Play will also have an edge, which is to be expected, since the play is based off of the pacifist, bohemian Dada art movement that surfaced around World War I. The artsy movement was spawned in Switzerland by poets, artists, and writers of all kinds.

"It's very avant-garde," said Monroe. "We're recreating the world of Dada."

The provocative new shows are likely to turn some heads.

"Contemporary works are always somewhat risky," says Orr, Director of the School of Drama. "But I believe the edgy plays will be good for



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the KCACTE.

Cast and crew came back a week before school started again to begin rehearsals. Hours and hours and hours of time have been dedicated to perfecting the performance.

In regard to the competition, which will include schools from Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, Downs said, "People will give us a run for the money, but hopefully we win."

Anatomy of Gray is not the only theatre production turning heads this school year. Last semester every single show was sold-out and standing room only.

"We turned away people from every performance," said Tom Huston Orr, James Garner Chair/Director of the School of Drama/Artistic Director-Producer for University Theatre.

With such a successful first semester of shows, the drama department

the department. Traditional plays will pay the bills...even though there doesn't seem to be a problem retaining profit from performances. I guess what's more important is that the traditional plays will keep the patrons happy.

"Ultimately we're about entertainment, but along with that, we can be educational and challenging. I think that's important," he continued.

"We have an agreement with the community that the plays we put on the main stage, those will perhaps be more appropriate for a commercial audience."

Although the current audience consists of quite a diverse and wonderful spread, efforts are being made to attract younger, college-aged audiences.

Orr says about 1/3 of their audience is made up of students, but with our campus having 25,000 students, he feels more of them should be seeing the shows.

One of the main obstacles is that students are generally only on campus for four years, and by the time they figure out that the theatre department has a lot to offer, it's too late.

"We're having to continually re-educate them [students]," said Orr.

To help in the efforts, OU offers a plethora of ways for students to become involved in the theatrical process. All incoming freshmen are required a fine arts credit. Introduction to Theatre is a perfect option, and gives people an opportunity to learn more about the school's productions. There's also Acting for Non-majors and Gateway courses that are tapped into theatre department promotions.

Orr also mentioned the idea of breaking the mold of traditional 8 o'clock shows by adding later performances, say 10:30, on Saturday nights. What a great way for students to enjoy the productions while finding something new and exciting to do with their free time.

During these rough economic times, student tickets are fairly cheap, especially for two hours of live entertainment.

"I believe it is six dollars for a student ticket. That's cheaper than a movie," said Orr. "I'm interested to see how you're affected by it [the economy]."

Traditionally in bad economic times the entertainment business does well.

"We might have to increase the number of performances," Orr added.

Finding a ticket to a University Theatre production involves pre-planning. Maybe with more performances students won't have to plan more than a week ahead to snag a seat.

As it turns out, President David Boren and his wife Molly are season ticket holders and members of the Golden Circle - an elite group of art philanthropists. They go to almost every show.

"President Boren has put more resources into the arts than you can imagine, he and Molly both. You just don't see that," said Orr about the couple's unparalleled support.

As it says in the pamphlet I was given by Byrd, the 2007-2008 production season at the OU University Theatre broke all existing box office records.

According to the National Association of the Schools of Theatre, OU had the highest box office attendance for any university producing organization in the country. This is thanks in part to the 38,000 plus patrons who have made it a point to enjoy OU's productions. If attendance numbers continue on that trend, it would certainly be a good idea to add more shows to attract a wider audience.

So how does this "magic" happen? Who are these people? How did we get so good? Well, the magic isn't magic. It's the end result of a lot of people working hard all the time.

For starters, University Theatre is compiled of three different schools within OU: the School of Drama, the Weitzenhoffer Department of Musical Theatre, and the OU School of Dance. All three of these schools make up the 12-16 shows produced each year.

It's one of the largest university programs in the country. The schools have developed a very important and bonded relationship between them.

"We are operating at peak efficiency," said Orr. "I'm continually impressed by the quality of work."

The dedication from the students and staff in the School of Drama is overwhelming.

"Many people don't understand, we're far more like the athletics department," said Orr. "It's a lifestyle. It takes a bit of an obsessive need to be immersed in the art form."

The students agree.

"The most common thing people say to me when I tell them I'm an acting major is, 'You want to act for me?' And I'm like, 'No, I'm not going to bust out a monologue at this restaurant.' Some people think it's a fake major because we have a different structure, but we're there all the time. We're on our feet all day."

"There are some serious misconceptions. People think it's a walk in the park, but we work really hard," says Byrd.

However, the audiences who have attended any of these performances

know that the work the cast and crew put in is definitely not a joke.

Theatre curriculum is rough. It's unique because the students must take classes in all fields of theatre, whether those courses apply to what they want to do or not. When you watch Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, you should note that not only can she act, but she can probably design and play the roles of the dramaturge, the stage manager, and/or the production technician.

"We leave here being, 'well rounded theatre artists,'" said Monroe.

The success of the department is due in part to their selectivity during the recruiting process. The department only admits between 44 and 48 freshmen or transfer students into the school. With recruiters in 17 locations auditioning over 2,200 kids, this makes for ridiculous odds.

If a student is from the Southwest or Midwest and they're serious about training, OU will be at least within the top three on their list.

"We can't take everyone," said Orr. "Selectivity works for us."

The process is intense, but if accepted, it is considered a complement to your potential as a professional in the real world.

"If they can survive us, then we have faith in their ability to survive in the industry," said Orr.

So what goes into the selection process?

"When we invite recruits to on-campus auditions, they think it's about a two-minute monologue, but how they act with our community is what matters. It's our time to see how they work in the environment," said Orr. "As director, it's my job to run the company. Our greatest resource is our alumni body. Who we choose to be in the family is the most important thing."

It's possible that their selectivity isn't what has propelled the OU Theatre program. Each person that was interviewed referred to those involved with the intimate program as family.

"The dedication of our faculty and staff, they're the heart of the family. They bring people in, nurture them, give them opportunities, and do a tremendous job," said Orr.

"Since I've gotten here I've been really close to the faculty. They teach, talk and help. I can call them on their cell phone or at home. It really is like a big family. It's like having that cool aunt," said Monroe.

"This year before classes started the freshmen did a ropes course. We have to be bonded to do the work we do. We spend all day together in the same building," said Byrd.

In an attempt to find out if the drama department was full of, well, drama, it was surprising to find out that what everyone says remained true - they're clean.

"There are no huge dislikes that I know of. We work together so much. Everyone is professional enough," said Downs.

A unique aspect to the OU School of Drama is that they require faculty to remain in the professional world. They must stay active with their careers, which most likely keeps the curriculum and techniques fresh.

So what is it that's making the Old Science Hall and the theatres on this campus glow? There are so many wonderful things going on in the School of Drama and they're all happening for so many different reasons. Mainly, their success is because of the enormous amount of passion and dedication the people involved have for what they're doing. •

SCHOOL OF DRAMA SPRING SLATE

>>>Upcoming Main Stage Productions:

• *Baby* - musical
April 3-5; April 8-11, 2009
Weitzenhoffer Theatre

• *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
May 1-3, 7-10, 2009
Rupel J. Jones Theatre

>>>Upcoming Lab Theatre Productions:

• *The Dada Play*
April 15-19, 2009
Old Science Hall, 2nd Floor