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**March 2016**

## PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Bravo to the cast and crew of *Cloud 9*! They put together an outstanding performance with a rehearsal schedule dramatically shortened by this winter's snow storm. And a big thank you to actor Dale Stein who taught us how to bring a character to life in her Master Class, entertained us with her one-woman play *A Fresh of Breath Air*, and graced us by attending a post-show reception with the Theater students and faculty.

At the end of this month, the Friends of Theater will visit *Middletown* and we will prepare for our trip with a reading and discussion on March 20th (invitations were sent separately). I read this unusual play over the winter holidays and after watching Director Heather McDonald, her designers, and the cast in the first rehearsal, I'm really anxious to see this play come to life on the stage. Don't miss it!



I hate to close on a somber note, but I want to share the bad news that the Friends of Theater financial position for the 2015-16 year is not as robust as it has been in previous years. Membership is down as are donations which the Friends direct into scholarships for incredibly deserving Theater students. We will undertake a robust membership campaign this summer and fall, but you don't have to wait until then to encourage your friends to join us. They can visit our website at [fotm@gmu.edu](mailto:fotm@gmu.edu) and become members in just a few minutes. And when it's time to renew your own membership, please consider making a generous donation to the best collegiate theater program in the Commonwealth, the #2 program in the South, and the #8 program in the US.

See you in the theater!

Mack Miller, President  
Friends of Theater at Mason

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**SUPPORT OUR STUDENTS! DONATE TODAY! CLICK HERE!**



## FROM THE DIRECTOR, SCHOOL OF THEATER

The School of Theater has announced our 2016-2017 Season of Traditions and Transitions, and what an exciting, splendid, opportunity filled season it is. Theater at Mason has been incorporating more musical theater into the repertoire, and this transition into new traditions really gets cooking next year. In addition, we will be taking a fresh look at some classic works and braving some highly theatrical terrain.

The School of Theater presents at least one special event each semester. We have welcomed some amazing artists and their one-person shows. This year, our guest artists will be more behind the scenes, as Mason students will take the stage for these concert readings. We workshop a brand new musical in the fall that has been many years in the making. Then, early in

the spring term, we brighten February with a performance that is part of the College of Visual and Performing Arts' year-long celebration of the works of Gilbert and Sullivan.

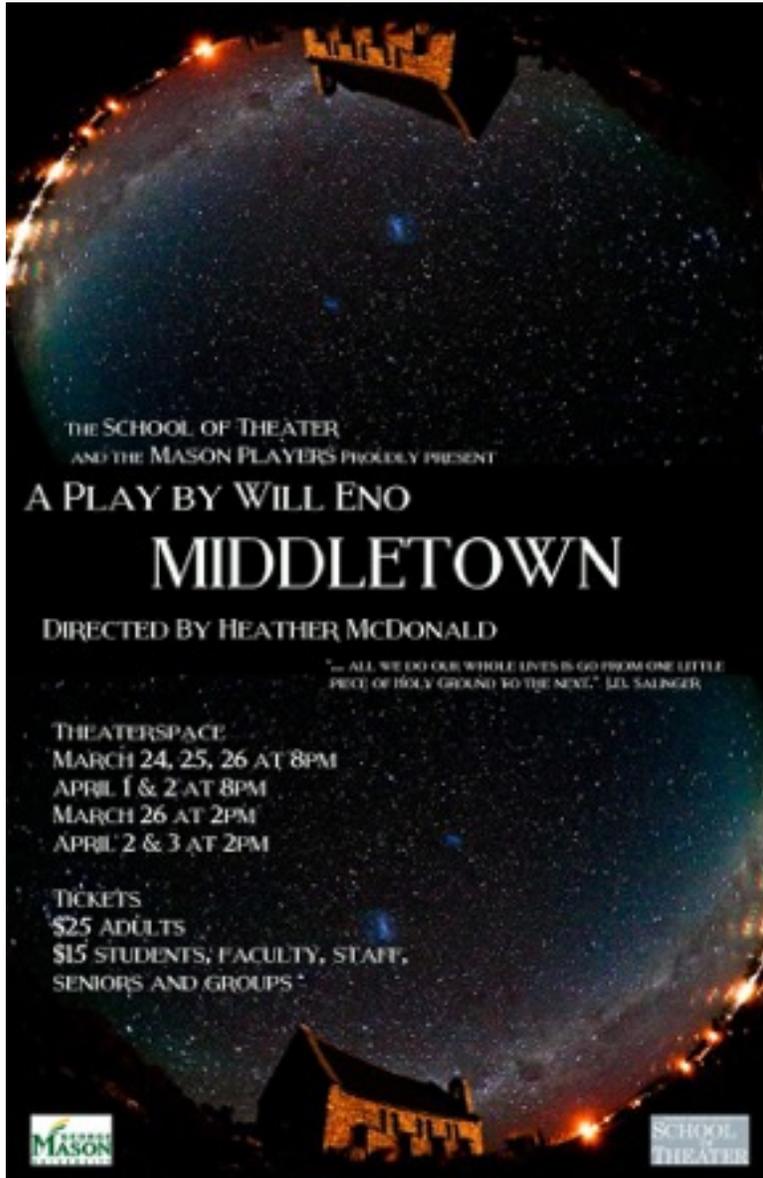
Our student directed studio season will feature a broad range of work. First, our minimally designed "Studio Fringe" will be the powerful work, *The Laramie Project*. Created by Moises Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project, this reaction to the 1998 murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard draws from hundreds of interviews with the inhabitants of the town and the personal journals of the company members creating the piece. This socially relevant work will move audiences and showcase a unique theatrical style.

Continuing the theme of unique theatrical styles, it has been some time since Theater at Mason produced a Shakespeare. Our second studio will bring fresh eyes to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And, in the spring ---another fantastic musical: *The Fantasticks*. All our student directors express their passion for and scholarly approach to the challenges of these pieces. As you might imagine, these directors are already at work on the play with their faculty mentors.

Our Mainstage Musical will be a sizzling social satire based on the popular Beggar's Opera. Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Three Penny Opera*, translated by Michael Feingold, is their most popular piece. Echoing with the spirits of the German Music Hall style, this perennial Broadway favorite offers so much more than the popular "Mack the Knife". The camaraderie and the sacrifices of war provide context for this humorous examination of class warfare sexual politics. And, transitioning into the spring and keeping to a tradition of theatrical innovation, Kristin Johnsen-Neshati will tackle her own translation and adaptation of Nickolai Gogol's *Petersburg Tales*. This collection will be titled, *Gogol's Nose and Other Strange Tales from the City*. Nothing to sneeze at, this will be a winning production (winning by a nose, of course). Of course, our season ends with a grand tradition of celebrating the original contemporary work of our students in our annual Ten Minute Play Festival.

Another aspect of the season featuring transitions- these productions will highlight all of our amazing theater venues. *Three Penny Opera* will travel to the Hylton Performing Arts Center, and so, for the first time, will other pieces of the season. Five stages, eight shows. One amazing School of Theater.

Ken Elston  
Director, School of Theater



## The School of Theater and Mason Players

### proudly present **MIDDLETOWN**

**A Mainstage Performance**

**Written by Will Eno**

**Directed by Heather McDonald**

Premiering in 2010, this award-winning play is both deeply moving and charmingly quirky as it explores the universe of a small American town. As a friendship develops between longtime resident John and new arrival Mary, the lives of the inhabitants of Middletown intersect in strange and poignant ways in a journey that takes them from the local library to outer space. A powerful and poignant meditation on birth, death and points between.

#### **PERFORMANCES**

**March 24, 25, 26, 31, April 1 & 2 at 8:00 pm**  
**March 26, April 2 & 3 at 2:00 pm**  
**TheaterSpace**

#### **TICKETS**

\$25 adults  
\$15 students, faculty, staff, seniors and groups

Pay What You Can  
March 23, 8:00 pm

performance

Preview



## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Playwright Will Eno has been called the "Samuel Beckett for the Jon Stewart generation" by Christopher Isherwood in the New York Times. His plays show a preoccupation with the grand questions of the Cosmos and the ordinary ways our lives proceed in daily life. I was drawn to *Middletown* because of the ache and humor in the people and the way the play is an uncanny mix of Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Thornton Wilder, Anton Chekhov and Dr. Seuss. I like that the play is kind and holds moments of despair and miracle.

*Middletown* contains echoes of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* with its exploration of the way our lives are both ordinary and utterly unique in the Universe. The play looks at the accumulation and effect of the tiny moments, hidden hopes, niggling anxieties, and genial pleasantries that make up our days and nights. The people of Middletown feel both the smallness of their lives in the great vastness of time and that they are intimately known in the Universe.

The play explores birth and death and the lives burning bright in between. The Middle part. That's where Eno places his play, in the great unexamined middle, where most of our lives take place, and he finds much that is holy waiting there.

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## PRODUCTIONS AND ACADEMICS COME TOGETHER WITH PROPS FOR MIDDLETOWN

Sitting in the house, the audience enjoys the production in its entirety as performed by the actors. During the course of the story, the audience cannot devote much time or focus on a single aspect of the technical work. However, each piece of furniture, paint color, and even jewelry is meticulously researched, designed, and sometimes even custom built to transport the audience into the production. Of those design elements, one of the most common and often overlooked is the humble prop.

Props come in many forms: specialty items directly connected to specific characters, hand props used by the actors to aid their performance, and props that sit in the background enhancing the setting. Often these items do not draw attention to themselves, but they would be noticeably missed if they weren't present.

Marlee Laws, a junior theater major at Mason, designed the props for the forthcoming production of *Middletown*. Among her many duties, she carefully combed the script for any props that might be needed for the production. This process includes looking for props mentioned directly in stage directions but also small clues in the dialogue; if a character offers a cigarette, she most likely has the pack and lighter in her hand. In addition to this initial props list, the organic process of rehearsal can often lead to more props being requested. Currently the props list includes 112 individual items. All of these props have to be either purchased, borrowed, or built from scratch.

Marlee has managed this eclectic list of items by prioritizing props based on their difficulty of acquisition. Some of the specialty items include a tree sapling, a house of cards, and a space capsule. Throughout the process Marlee is guided by Tim Cooke, Props Adviser and alumna of Mason, who is currently teaching a course in props design. Ultimately props are about telling a story. Whether it is to enhance an actor's performance or to move the plot along, each prop is carefully analyzed and specifically chosen. The next time you see a unique item onstage, take a moment to consider its role in the production process.

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# REMEMBER OUR TOWN?

## From The Play's Dramaturg

### **Our Middletown: Stylistic and Thematic Echoes between Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, and Will Eno's *Middletown***

To stress the functional and minute analogies between *Our Town* and *Middletown* would seem, to me, to belabor the point. It suffices to note that the latter draws influence from the structure of the former and that thematically they echo and resonate with one another while bearing structural and linguistic hallmarks particular to their own times and playwrights. That said, the worlds of these plays are decidedly liminal and the audience, as well as the players on stage, occupy the spaces in between realities just as we all do the spaces between life and death.

I think the key relation to bear in mind when viewing these plays, is the struggle between a happy life (and the act of defining a life as such) and an extraordinary one. Middle America, the site of *Middletown*, is quintessentially mediocre both geographically and in the broader statistical sense. The play's preoccupation is fundamentally with the relationships between people locked in the stasis of small town life, whose lives are only ever, and only briefly, touched by the grand or the divine. *Our Town*, by contrast, is set in New England, a community with the same cultural homogeneity of the American Midwest, but with the greater weight of 20th century expectation and promise lingering outside the bounds of its bucolic confines. The Ivy League universities which in the 20th century were coming well into their own, exist rather monolithically on the outskirts of Wilder's narrative, serving as an overarching metaphor for the promise of the new century in the lives of its characters whose struggle is between the uncertain embrace of that promise and the comfortable, even sacred, allure of home. Think only of George's decision in Act II to remain at home and marry rather than go off to agricultural college. The stress of that decision, the reality of the black hole of small town life and its consumptive energy is contrasted with the frontier promise of education in budding 20th century America, and yet the decision, and its ramifications, for Wilder, has a kind of nobility all its own.

Wilder's characters, like Eno's, rectify themselves with the infinitesimal nature of their relationship with the universe. In Eno's narrative, laying underneath that very conflict is the broader conflict between happiness and intelligence and the presumed incompatibility of the two. In Act I, Miss Webb responds to Wally's reading a book at the table with the pronouncement: "I'd rather have my children healthy, than bright.". The foreshadowing of that moment aside, the conflict is perhaps the play's most enduring. That the end moral of the play, to simplify, perhaps unduly, is that life's moments are to be treasured, is a sober reminder of the transient nature of sublimity both in the play and in our own lives.

*Middletown* presents a darker reflection on this same theme, as Eno's characters ricochet off of one another and the bounds of their town, circuitously navigating their relationships to one another and with the towering canopy of stars which looms above them, a symbol of promise and also of the smallness of their own lives. *Middletown* takes place, not at the beginning of a century, nor at the conclusion of one, but at the perfect median, and is a snapshot of 1950s and 60s America at the exact moment that the American dream began to stagnate. Absent is the promise of a life beyond the bounds of the town. The only chance any member of the town has to escape its orbit, is to, literally, ascend to space. Eno's characters thus face a challenge of greater complexity than Wilder's as they attempt to rectify their relationship to the universe without the promise of a greater life. They, like Americans in the early days of the space program, face the reality that the final frontier of mankind is one of infinite expanse, and impossible loneliness.

For Eno, too, the liminal conflict of Wilder's play, between the competing religious denominations, is reduced to its kernel. The question is not, which religion is right?, but rather, is God even out there? By the same token, if *Our Town* is a play about the competing pulls of domesticity and the promise of

a greater life, *Middletown* is a play about learning to acquiesce to the single pull of small town life and contented mediocrity. At the centre of *Middletown* is a black hole, beyond the event horizon of which lie the questions which every citizen wants to ask, but which, in Eno's pitch perfect dialogue, they cannot more than allude to. In this sense *Middletown* is both a rumination upon Wilder's play, and a pared down exploration of those same themes, asking broader questions through smaller interactions, and searching to find God, or anything, in the details.



*Dustin Prisley is a senior English and Government and International Politics Major at George Mason University, with a keen interest in theatre. He has dramaturged previously for Boleros For The Disenchanted, also put on by the Mason Players, for the 2015 Mason Fringe. He also directed a Ten-Minute Play for the 2014 TMP Festival, entitled Muff n' Stuff.*

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## FIRST REHEARSAL

First rehearsals have become much more interesting to sit in on now that there are good projection tools available. The designers do a great job of explaining their concepts and how they arrived at them. Here are a few scenes from *Middletown*'s first rehearsal.



## A FRESH OF BREATH AIR MASTER CLASS

Dale Stein came to Mason's School of Theater to present her one-woman show and to offer a Master Class in acting to some lucky theater students. The Friends of Theater who came to observe were all quite taken with the process. Ms. Stein emphasized that every experience in one's life contributes to to the actor's shoebox of a character's qualities.

Following some group work to warm up and get acquainted, four students very ably performed prepared monologues. Following each, Ms. Stein conversed, asked questions, pointed out things in the classroom, and in general, nudged these actors into stretching their roles. The results were astounding!



### MEET THE ARTIST, DALE STEIN

In the evening Ms. Stein performed her one-woman show, *A Fresh of Breath Air*, in TheaterSpace. The audience enjoyed meeting the characters inhabiting Fifi's Oui Cafe, where food walks and chairs and tables have minds of their own. Following the performance, the audience was invited to a reception sponsored by the Friends of Theater and returned to TheaterSpace for a Q&A with our guest artist.

## DESIGNING WOMAN



Senior theater major Mailey Shimon was recently featured in *Mason News*, reporting on her internship with Tony Award-winning New York costume designer William Ivey Long. Mailey spent two months in New York and was very comfortable there---her sister is a resident and she had been there many times before.

Her major responsibility was collecting fabric samples that might be used in various productions. Every day was different, filled with shopping, getting fabric and delivering it to various places. New York is full of fabric stores--- a spandex house for spandex and a store for anything one could want. Sometimes there were requirements, sometimes there were guidelines. The budget was large enough to buy without thinking about it. Mailey was the only intern, but others on Long's team were doing the same kinds of jobs.

Mailey has wanted to be a costume designer most of her life. Her goal after graduation is to move to New York and start working toward that goal.

Read the [Mason News article](#) here.

## COMING UP



### **Aquila Theatre**

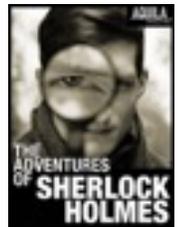
#### **The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes**

**March 26, 2016 at 8:00 pm**

Rescheduled from January 22, 2016.

#### **CONCERT HALL**

Literature's legendary sleuth, from the brilliant mind of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, takes our stage in this riveting tale of mystery, suspense, and intrigue that will leave you on the edge of your seat. Sherlock Holmes skillfully maneuvers through the twisted web of London's most fascinating cases, solving them with his sharp observations and quick deductions. Along for the wild ride are his trusty sidekick Dr. Watson, the red-headed mason Jabez Wilson, and Irene Adler, the woman who got away. A century and a half after this clever investigator first leapt off the page, Sherlock Holmes remains the most definitive and hallowed detective in all of fiction and has inspired generations of mystery writers. "Remarkably inventive and highly skilled." (Post and Courier)



DC Metro Theater Scene raves about Aquila Theatre's Sherlock Holmes, "Aquila succeeds by making something old very new again, and it is no mystery why the result is a heart-racing joy to behold." Read the whole review [here.](#)

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