

# THEATER AT MASON NEWSLETTER



*Published By*



**November 2014**

## **A PAGE FROM OUR PROGRAM MANAGER**



Have you ever wondered where our incoming freshmen come from? How do we find them? More importantly, how do they find us?

Many high school juniors and seniors research colleges and universities across the country, looking for that (hopefully) perfect match. Secondary school theater students in Virginia can streamline the search process through the Virginia Theatre Association (VTA), the largest state theater association in the country, and the central resource for connecting, creating, cultivating and advocating for practitioners of theater in the Commonwealth.

The annual VTA conference moved to a larger facility in Norfolk this year, after several years holding the event in nearby Reston. The expanded conference included one-act play competitions, awards ceremonies, workshops, professional and grad school auditions, and pre-screening auditions for high school seniors looking for university theater programs. That's why I was there.

The three-day conference opened on Oct 23. Over the next several days, I viewed 200 auditions. Actors were given 60 seconds to present a prepared monologue. Musical theater candidates were allowed an additional 30 seconds to incorporate a vocal audition. The level of talent was high, and over half were invited to seek me out for further conversation about our program. By the end of the conference, I had talked personally to over 90 high school seniors who were considering Theater at Mason.

Helping me throughout the weekend was one of our current students, freshman Nathan McGraw, whom we first met at last year's VTA conference. Nathan manned our info table while I attended auditions, and when I emerged, he was able to attend several of the conference

shows and workshops. His high school friends were attending the conference and were excited to see him, and learn of his experiences with our program in this, his first semester with us.

So, what gets the attention of these Virginia high school seniors that Theater at Mason has to offer? Several things, when compared to our competition in Virginia:

- We all offer in-state tuition costs, but Mason's is among the lowest;
- Our proximity to the vibrant DC Theater scene (2<sup>nd</sup> only to NYC);
- Our faculty of working professionals who constantly strive to connect our students to professional artists and organizations;
- Our five (count 'em, five!) performance venues on the Fairfax and Prince William campuses;
- Our concentrations in Performance, Design or Playwriting, and especially our certificates in Musical Theater and Theater Education;
- And, perhaps the most exciting aspect of our program, freshmen are not only allowed, but encouraged to audition for our productions, and often get cast as leads or in other significant roles. Perhaps you caught our own Nathan McGraw in our recent production of *The Blue Room*. Our most prominent example of this opportunity was in our recent production, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, featuring freshman Dylan Toms as John Jasper, playing opposite Alexandra Bunger-Pool as Edwin. Many freshmen populated the *Drood* cast. For those who remember *Into the Woods* two seasons back, that is where you first saw Alexandra, in her freshman year, as Little Red Riding Hood. Not all theater schools allow this.

We continue to grow under the robust leadership of the Director of the School of Theater, Ken Elston. We now offer an Accelerated Masters in Arts Management in partnership with that graduate program, offering an undergraduate BA in Theater and an MA in Arts Management that can be attained in only 5 years, and we are currently working with the Schools of Music and Dance to create a fully realized BFA in Musical Theater. We are hoping to have this new program on the books by Fall 2015

Currently, I am working closely with our College and our Admissions program to keep in touch with the students I met in Norfolk, as well as those theater students who have contacted Mason from across the US, to encourage them to consider Mason.

We have a lot to offer.

Kevin Murray

## **DIDO, QUEEN OF CARTHAGE**

***Between the destruction of Troy and the founding of Rome, Queen Dido built the magnificent city of Carthage. One of Marlowe's most fascinating plays, inspired by Virgil's "Aeneid," this retelling of the tragic love of Dido for the Trojan hero Aeneas unfolds in verse written by one of the great playwrights of the Elizabethan Age.***

The School of Theater and the Mason Players Present

Cities are built with blood and fire...

# DIDO.

QUEEN OF CARTHAGE

BY CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

DIRECTED BY REBECCA WAHLS

TheaterSpace

November 20th at 8pm

November 21st at 8pm

November 22 at 2pm & 8pm

November 23rd at 2pm

\$15 for Adults

\$10 for Students, faculty, staff,  
seniors, and groups

Box office: 888.945.2468

Or visit our website:

[Theater@gmu.edu](mailto:Theater@gmu.edu)

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY'S  
SCHOOL  
OF  
THEATER

GEORGE  
MASON  
UNIVERSITY

## DIRECTOR'S THOUGHTS

The question I asked myself when I decided to propose *Dido, Queen of Carthage* for the Mason Players' Season of Innovation was this: is it possible to make an Elizabethan tragedy palatable and relatable for contemporary actors and audiences? The added challenge, of course, is that this is not a well-known Shakespeare play. It is the least produced work of Christopher Marlowe, whose body of work occurs earlier and is much shorter than the former's. It tells the tragic love story of Dido and Aeneas, inspired by Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid* (the *Aeneid* is to the *Odyssey* as Marlowe is to Shakespeare). It is most certainly a story worth telling, bursting with adventure, bloody battles, and, of course, romance.

Yes, all of those things are present in the text, which is written entirely in iambic pentameter. I have decided to bring them to life with a vivid movement based experience. Rather than simply having Aeneas recount the fall of Troy in words, we see the entire event reenacted by the fluid ensemble of actors. A character mentions a dream he has had midway through the text. Why not show that dream? Possibly even with some of the actual Latin text of the *Aeneid* thrown in? The possibilities are endless once you decide to allow them to be. The design elements, particularly lights and sound, will be instrumental in defining the world.

The other primary way I have adjusted the play for today's actors and audiences is by meticulously cutting the text itself over months of work, guided by my faculty mentor, Rick Davis. It was a difficult task, but it has caused the text to feel more alive to me than any other I have worked with as a director. In the end, this full-length verse play is going to run a tight 90 minutes with no intermission. This is very true to the theatrical experience an Elizabethan audience would have had—while their performance would have lasted much longer, they would not have had an intermission.

I believe that this process is engaging the actors in an exciting way and I hope that our audience will as well. Since this is a truly academic journey, I have been fortunate enough to work on the unanswered question I mentioned at the beginning with Mason's Office of Undergraduate Research. Ideally, this production will have a life beyond its performance dates thanks to them and I will be able to present this work at undergraduate research conferences. In keeping with this, we will be holding a post-performance discussion after the Saturday matinee that I encourage all to attend. The discussion, and that particular performance, will be filmed.

The cast, design team and I are thrilled to share this work with you. I invite you to help me answer the second part of my question by filling out a short survey offered after each performance!

Rebecca



Rebecca Wahls is a Senior BFA Theater major with a concentration in performance and directing. Her directing work has been seen at Mason in last season's *Woyzeck* and two Ten Minute Play Festivals (*Seeking Sincerity*, '13, and *The Ninja Play*, '14). She has also directed the *Goddess Diaries* at Mason ('13) and at the 2014 Capital Fringe Festival where it was named "Best of Fringe". She has been seen on stage at Mason in *The Life of Galileo*, *Medea*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *A Bad Year for Tomatoes*. Rebecca is a proud teaching artist with Acting for Young People. Upcoming: assistant director for Constellation Theatre Company's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*.

**Our first rehearsal...**



**And later, in motion....**



# ***DIDO, QUEEN OF CARTHAGE***

**November 20, 2014 - November 22, 2014 at 8:00 pm**  
**November 22, 2014 - November 23, 2014 at**  
**TheaterSpace**



*As Rebecca mentioned, Dido presents interesting technical challenges, especially in lighting. Here's a little more information.*

## **LIGHTING DESIGN**

Lighting design begins at the same point as every kind of story telling art should and must begin. It begins with a story. In the case of theater this comes in the form of a script. As much as any performer on stage, the design team should be aware of the script at all times so that they can best bring forth the story for the audience.

This begins with reading the script and then the first production meeting. At the meeting a lighting designer will meet with the director and other members of the design team to learn about the director's concept for the production. This is an initial understanding because at the time of the first production meeting there is no cast and rehearsals are still long away. The director will be working in detail with the cast to bring out and discover more about the story, however the over-arching themes concepts can and should be shared with designers very early in the process. These can be detailed opinions, historical references, understanding the story arch as the director sees it., or conceptual ideas such as film noir. Whatever the director feels will begin a stimulating collaborative discussion.

After this will come more meetings. Some will be formal production meetings with the full team and some will be informal tete-a-tetes with the director, other designers, and even your master electrician to begin finding out where light design can fit into the greater story you have to tell. During this time it is vital that you connect with the other designers. If lighting,

scenery, and costuming all decide separately on conflicting design concepts, come show week the lack of collaboration will be apparent with design elements that do not work together.

Designers are often asked to present their designs at the first rehearsal, which is typically a read through of the script. For lighting design this usually means pictures that you have taken, made, or found from other sources that visually describes the mood you are trying to create or lighting choices for specific moments in the play. Most designers attend multiple rehearsals to gain an understanding of the style and blocking of the show. The next important rehearsal is called designer run. It is a designated rehearsal that is a full run of the show. This rehearsal is very important for a light designer because it is an opportunity to understand the blocking/ choreography, but also get a feel for the pacing of the play.

At this point a lighting designer needs to wrap up the last details of their lighting plot so that it can be given to the master electrician in time for light hang and focus. The week before technical rehearsals begin includes light hang and focus, but also load-in for all the other design elements. Designers also meet with the stage manager for paper tech, where all lighting, sound, projections, and other cues are written into the stage manager's prompt book. Technical rehearsals are an opportunity for all of the players and elements of the production to integrate and bring the show to life. During these few rehearsals the director works with the actors to incorporate the environment they have now been given and the design team works to help flesh out the final details of the world. All of this is being done in as quick and efficient a manner as possible so that everything can be ready for the curtain.

When we give you our world it is in the hopes of your learning more about your own.

*Written by Mary Grant, edited by Autum Casey*

## **LIGHTING *DIDO, QUEEN OF CARTHAGE***

Hello. I'm the Lighting Designer for the Mason Player's production of *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. This has been the first full-scale show that I have designed, so it has been a tough but fun experience. From my first readings of the script, through speaking with our talented Director, Rebecca Wahls, it became clear that our production of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* was about contrast and conflict, and so that became the highest priority of my designs.



*Dido* is a woman in conflict with herself. She is both a powerful, glorious leader and a desperate, haunted lover. I sought to contrast both of these *Didos* on the stage, bringing gold and amber light for our great queen, but also lavender and pink for our hopeless romantic. Our Director also spoke passionately about the play's use of water and fire; of

mighty storms, and raging pyres. For these elements, I brought deeper colors. The storms would flood the stage with saturated blues and greens, while the fires would sear with vibrant oranges and reds. Power and love. Water and fire. *Dido, Queen of Carthage*.

I hope you will come out to see the show, and that you enjoy watching it as much as I've enjoyed working on it.

*Written by Nicholas Barry*

### **FOR FURTHER READING AND TO PREPARE FOR THE PLAY:**

Check out the [Marlowe Society](#) website.

## **GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING THEATER LAB**



School of Theater professor Howard Kurtz passes a large bag around the classroom. "Take two pieces of fabric," he instructs each student, "Now, I want you to imagine what kind of character would use this fabric and how." The students use their fabrics to transform themselves into Indian rajahs, Japanese housewives – even Cinderella. The room is filled with the laughter of discovery. This could be any theater class, except that these students are not theater majors. They are international students studying English to prepare for admission to

Mason. They are Saudis, Koreans, Chinese and Japanese. For most of them, this is their first experience with theater. Along with theater skills, they're learning about culture and language in a unique new course, THR 490: Global Understanding Theater Lab, co-taught by Heather McDonald of the School of Theater, and Michael Smith of Academic Language Programs, INTO George Mason University.

The Global Understanding Theater Lab is designed to provide a forum in which traditional Theater students and international students can explore together the interaction of theater and culture as a path to global understanding, richer artistry, and deeper appreciation of cultural difference. The goal of the course is for students to work in mixed groups to write, direct, and perform pieces incorporating both theater skills and the knowledge they've acquired through their interactions with each other. INTO George Mason has successfully pioneered a course with a similar model, CONF 325: Dialogue and Difference, which Smith has co-taught for the past seven years. "Theater is an ideal medium in which to facilitate cultural understanding," Smith says, "Through the use of acting, character, and story, students from varied backgrounds can share and understand differences of race, religion, gender, class, and culture on a profound level." on a profound level. "



To prepare the course, McDonald and Smith interviewed a dozen Mason Theater students, who told them that they would love to understand characters from different backgrounds on more than a superficial level. The course was piloted this semester with international INTO Mason students only in order to gauge the level of language and background knowledge international students needed for the course to be successful. "The students have responded enthusiastically," McDonald says, "I'm inspired by how creative and engaged they are." McDonald encouraged one of the students, Yang Tien from China, to audition for the Mason musical, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Director Ken Elston, chair of the School of Theater, ended up casting Yang in the chorus. "Ken Elston deserves special praise for allowing the course to run this semester," says Smith. "He saw the value of

investing in the course. Ken also deserves credit for casting Yang in Drood. Traditionally, international students have been interested in theater but have felt that they were either unqualified to participate or unwelcome. By casting Yang, Ken has opened the door for Mason to recruit international students as theater majors."



McDonald and Smith believe that THR 490 can serve as a cross-cultural model throughout the campus, building on the unique interactive nature of theater to enhance the global citizenship skills of Mason students in many majors, such as business, nursing, anthropology, and global affairs. It can also introduce students from varied academic backgrounds to the joy of theater. "I have so many favorite moments from the course," says McDonald. "Watching these students from different countries explore story and culture and character has provided many moving moments, sudden insights and a whole lot of laughter."

Amos Zhang's delightful turn as Cinderella will stay with me for a long time." McDonald doesn't have time to reflect on this further, however. A student from Japan has recruited her and Smith to play a quarreling Japanese married couple in a scene she's written. It seems that everyone in this course is given the opportunity to learn some global understanding.

Written by Heather McDonald and Michael Smith



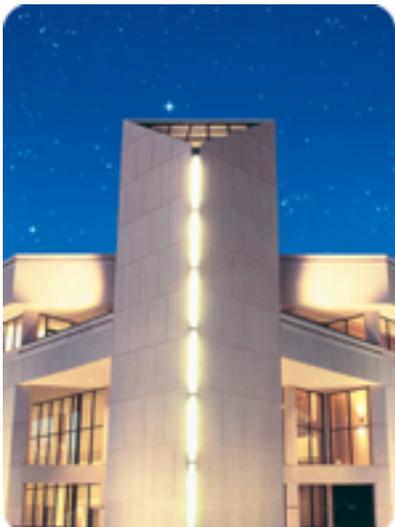
*We hope from time to time to introduce new, interesting and innovative courses offered by the School of Theater. Thank you to Heather and Michael for inviting us to visit!*

## WRAPPING UP DROOD

Congratulations to all involved with the production of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*! It was a terrific show, greatly enjoyed by all who saw it and turned on their electronic devices. We can't wait for the next musical!



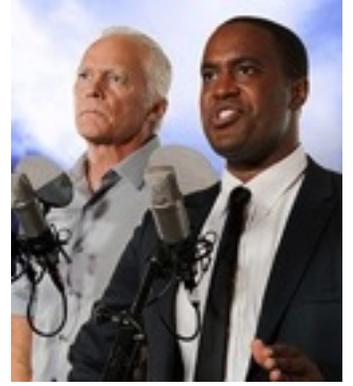
## IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT



**L.A. Theatre Works**  
**November 16, 2014**  
**7:00**  
**Concert Hall**

This gripping detective murder mystery is a vivid portrayal of the black experience in the deep South during the 60s. This powerful

story, brought to our stage by America's premier radio theater company, begins on a steamy August night in a small Southern town, where the body of a wealthy white man is discovered. Police arrest a black stranger passing through town for the murder, only to learn that he is a respected homicide detective. The detective reluctantly finds himself working with the chief of police to solve the murder, while wrestling with the fear, hatred, and prejudices prevalent at the time. John Ball's timely novel became an Academy Award-winning film and an Emmy Award-winning television show, as well as a series of subsequent novels. This stunning stage adaptation is written by acclaimed playwright Matt Pelfrey.



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