

Devising Theatre

UNCSA Dean of Drama Scott Zigler began his presentation at the October Associates board meeting by apologizing for keeping a stopwatch in view, warning us that he can “talk too long.” None of us found that to be the case. In fact, as the minutes ticked by, we wished the watch would slow down.

Zigler said that he arrived at UNCSA with the understanding that it is already a great drama school, but cognizant that the environment in the arts is rapidly changing. When he was a drama student, thirty-some years ago, there were about ten major training programs in the country for actors, with an annual showcase on each coast to introduce new graduates to the industry. Now there are numerous training programs and over fifty showcases, so it's much more challenging for new talent to become noticed, at least by traditional means, especially with the entertainment industry now largely owned by just a half dozen huge corporate conglomerates.

The big game-changer, to which Zigler wants his program to adapt, is the Internet. Creators of a video or web series that goes viral on a platform like YouTube can bypass the former gatekeepers to kick-start a career. And, rather than sitting idle, waiting for a phone that may never ring, an actor can initiate projects while unemployed.

He then paused to assure us that the classical Stanislavski system of training actors still prevails at UNCSA. In fact, two new faculty members have been hired specifically to teach Shakespeare.

But, in addition to this solid, thorough, classical training, actors today need to learn how to create their own work. Zigler emphasized that the skills required for *making* theatre include entrepreneurship and management: as soon as you take that first step of signing with an agent you are a business manager, that agent is your first employee, and the product is your own talent.

To teach students this skill set UNCSCA has also added to the drama faculty Andy Paris, co-creator of *The Laramie Project* who, as a founding member of Tectonic Theater Project, helped develop *Moment Work*, a technique for theatrical exploration and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Zigler then announced that a central component of the Drama School's next five-year plan will be Interdisciplinary Work Collaboration. In terms of the nuts-and-bolts of the drama training program, on-camera work will now begin with the first year at UNCSCA. The goal for the program is to produce “employable working actors,” by providing as many tools as necessary to overcome traditional obstacles to employment.

Zigler explained further that Devised Theatre, the fastest-growing part of the theatrical environment today, is meant to be shared with the community. It is often environmental, and may be designed for a specific non-theatrical space. He described a scenario of “twenty people, including designers,” in a room together for the purpose of creating a new piece. The result may well be unconventional, an example being a recent mash-up of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe* and a primer in quantum physics.

As part of an increasingly collaborative relationship between UNCSCA Drama and Film, Zigler cited a class that puts actors and film directors in the same room; a program to provide actors experience with motion-capture in the film school's Meta Lab; and an initiative to connect actors and the creators of animated characters who require a voice to be brought to life.

Asked where UNCSCA Drama currently stands vis-a-vis the Devised Theatre movement, Zigler says it's currently “not alone, but in the vanguard,” but the program will need to be “nimble” to remain in front. He then deferred to the irrefutable dictate of that darned stop watch, leaving us eager to experience the new forms of theatre that UNCSCA students will be striving to devise in our community and beyond in the years ahead.

Performance Place Update

Last month's report on Provost David English's summer overview of developments at UNCSCA included the school's projection that the renovation of Performance Place would be completed in time for the beginning of the 2019-20 academic year. That hope has been overtaken by subsequent events. Here are excerpts from the school's official update:

[W]e have recently learned that the bids came in significantly higher than expected, far exceeding the originally projected construction budget. This is due to a number of factors beyond our control, including the rising cost of materials.

[T]his setback will delay the renovation of Performance Place a full year. While we are sorely disappointed and know that you are, also, we continue to make the renovation a priority, in order to give our students the best possible learning experience in a facility that meets current industry standards.

Now, we anticipate that construction will occur during the 2019-20 fiscal/school year. Because equipment and staff have already been relocated and reallocated, Performance Place will remain closed this school year.

There will be limited use by the School of Drama... In addition, two of the shows planned for Hanesbrands will be in the Catawba Theatre: "Balm in Gilead" and "The Hairy Ape."

We appreciate your patience, understanding and cooperation as we continue to move forward with the Performance Place renovation.

*Sincerely,
David English
Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost*

*Michael Smith
Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration*

Behind the Scenes with UNCSA Drama

Given recent uncertainty over the status of Performance Place, squadron leader Dave Valentino had an Associates Helpmate stationed every few feet both outside and in on the evening of October 17th to assure we would be able to find the rehearsal venue - a black box theatre space in the basement of the otherwise-closed facility.

One wall was dressed with pages of the costume designer's notes. There were a couple of tables at the front of the room for the choreographer, stage manager, the designers for sound and lighting, and for this show's distinguished guest Music Director, Jeff Saver. Scott Zigler had no lofty director's chair or other conspicuous symbol of authority. The set's floor plan was precisely indicated on the space's tile floor with red and yellow tape and labels for various points of reference. The cast of players already seemed to know this layout well.

Anne Sessions and Nola Miller welcomed attendees and introduced UNCSA Dean of Theatre and Director of this production Scott Zigler, who explained that the evening's schedule would permit a run-through of the show's opening scene, an opportunity for us to witness some directorial adjustments during a second run through of some of the scene's more challenging maneuvers, and some Q & A, before we all reconvened across the traffic circle to the library for delicious deserts and a chance to mingle.

In his prefatory remarks Zigler pointed out that *Next to Normal* received three Tony Awards a decade ago, as well as a Pulitzer Prize the following year – an unheard-of honor for a rock musical; was path-breaking in dealing with subject matter (in this case, mental illness) that had never been touched upon in the American musical theatre tradition; that it has an intricate score, and places heavier acting demands upon the players than do most musicals. He also emphasized that we should be mindful of the fact that every staged theatre show is as much a product of the efforts and talent of the Design and Production school as of the Drama School.

We were next introduced to six UNCSA Drama students, cast as a suburban family, a school classmate, and an actor who actually plays *two* psychiatrists – a telling indication of where this drama is headed.

For this production Saver will conduct a seven-piece ensemble. For rehearsal his band consisted of accompanist Damon Carmona (UNCSA Music class of '83) at an electric keyboard – a job that requires a near-telepathic sense of where in the score the rehearsal will need to pick up in the next moment. When the run-through began it was immediately apparent that this is a show of extraordinary complexity. The rock score, which also incorporates elements of classical music and jazz, runs simultaneously with dialogue, choreography, elaborate blocking, even the physical juggling of prescription pill bottles during one sequence. The prospect of refining and modulating details of all of these complex elements simultaneously was difficult to apprehend. Zigler and Saver seamlessly shared responsibility for addressing details in need of adjustment though, of course, in performance Zigler's task will be done and Saver will preside with his conductor's baton.

Zigler pointed out that the actual set, representing the interior of a suburban home, will be on two levels, which is difficult to simulate, rehearsing in two dimensions. In his directions after the first run-through he suggested that the actor playing the character of the mother modulate the tone of her troubled mental state by emphasizing the coping mechanism of her “dark sense of humor.” Other adjustments were simply expressed as notes that “don't need to run right now,” time being of the essence.

During Q&A Zigler explained that to put together a show of this sort the music must be managed first, then choreography added, before the actual acting can be addressed. He emphasized that the Drama students are taught that characters are “trying to get things done,” and that inhabiting a character and then figuring out how that person would try to achieve those goals informs how to act the part.

Over refreshments Zigler was asked if he begins to visualize blocking as he first reads a show. He said that some directors actually do, but that he must first learn a show, do his research, then see the set, before the stage movement begins to come together in his mind's eye.

Those of us privileged to get Behind the Scenes for this show will have a bit deeper insight into the many painstaking elements that combine to create the magic of theatre.

Next to Normal will be staged November 8 – 17 in Agnes de Mille Theatre on the UNCSA campus.

Fall Semester Associates Calendar

Thursday, October 25, 11-1 Pickle Pantry Drop-off, Welcome Center

Tuesday, November 6, 11:30 Associates Board Meeting. Fourth Floor
Conference Room, Library

Thursday, November 29, 11-1 Pickle Pantry Drop-off, Welcome Center

Tuesday, December 4, 11:30 Associates Board Meeting. Fourth Floor
Conference Room, Library

General Information—Important Links

The Associates Website: <http://www.uncsa.edu/Associates> At our website, you will find the Board members listed, the calendar of Associates events and Associates-sponsored events, and other general information. You will also find the form to renew your membership.

Email Address: uncsaassociates@gmail.com

The Performance Calendar Website:

<http://www.uncsa.edu/performances/>

Our Facebook page:

<http://www.facebook.com/uncsaassociates>

Newsletter: uncsaassociates.news@gmail.com