

Dramatic Arts at A&M

Tragedy strikes Rudder Forum with performance of *Othello*



Derrick Nelson/ special to THE BATTALION
Rene Travino and Jennifer Jordan rehearse for *Othello*.

By Amy Collier
THE BATTALION

Students will soon be able to witness one of the most famous tragic plays in history. The Texas A&M Theater Arts Program and The Aggie Players are presenting William Shakespeare's *Othello*, starting tonight in Rudder Forum at 8 p.m.

Othello is a tragic play by Shakespeare in which the title character, a noble Moor, becomes insanely jealous by the villain Iago. He is finally driven to kill his faithful and loving wife Desdemona, and realizes he was wrong after she is gone.

Dr. Mike Greenwald, an associate professor of theater and director of the play, said he proposed the play to a season selection committee because he has never directed a Shakespearean tragedy and also because senior theater arts major Rapulana Seiphemo is graduating in May.

Seiphemo is a nationally-acclaimed actor who has been extremely active in the theater program during his four years at A&M. Greenwald said he wanted the role to be a tribute to Seiphemo's acting talent. "We specifically chose the show because Rapulana Seiphemo is graduating this year," Greenwald said. "We felt we owed it to him before he left."

When Seiphemo found out he was the main reason why the play was chosen, he said he felt honored and fortunate to star in the title role.

"It was an offer I couldn't refuse," he said. "What better way to go out. It's like I'm going out with a bang."

The performance will pay off for the rest of the 24 cast members as well, since they have been studying the play in a theater class the entire semester.

Greenwald said in addition to studying the theatrical sense to the play, the students have studied it with an academic approach as well.

"They've studied it from a lot of angles," Greenwald said. "We don't just do plays to do plays, but also as a learning experience."

Students started rehearsing the play four weeks ago, and Greenwald said it has been somewhat difficult for them to perform Shakespeare.

"In an age where art heroes are *Forrest Gump*, *Dumb and Dumber* and *Beavis and Butthead*," Shakespeare is going to be a little more challenging," Greenwald said. "At a university, we need to challenge ourselves."

The actors agree that *Othello* is a tough play, and Seiphemo said studying and rehearsing for his part has been quite a challenge.

"This is like the ultimate role for any actor to get because it is emotionally and physically demanding," he said. "I try to bring it to life on stage."

The last time a Shakespeare play was presented by the department was *The Merchant of Venice* in 1991.

Greenwald said their interpretation of the play was very different than the original, and had mixed reactions from audiences. Although *Othello* is also interpreted somewhat different, it is very similar to the original play, he said.

"This one is much more traditional," Greenwald said. "I'm trying to show our audience where Shakespeare got his inspirations."

Susan Kelly, coordinator of the theater program, said the play is inspirational.

"*Othello* is a real challenge for any college to do," she said. "It's one of Shakespeare's most difficult. People should come to see what our University's students are capable of doing."

Kelly said she attended the first dress rehearsal Monday night and was entranced by the play.

"There were some real moments of honesty and truth," Kelly said. "That's real hard to get with Shakespeare because you can get so carried away with just the language."

Greenwald said even though the language of the play is different, the play is still easy to understand.

"I think we're making sense of the play," Greenwald said. "It moves well and it's entertaining. People will go away understanding what the play is about."

Seiphemo said all should see the play to broaden their minds.

"Everyone has to be involved in theater for the cultural experience," he said. "This is one of the best productions the theater department has ever put on."

Theater Arts program functions with new-found freedoms

By Amy Collier
THE BATTALION

Among the numerous engineering and life sciences majors at Texas A&M, some majors may be forgotten. Many people do not even realize a theater arts major exists here at A&M.

Theater Arts currently has 65 aspiring actors in the program.

The Theater Arts Program was first created in 1977 under the Department of English.

In 1985, it made new strides and broke away from the English Department to become the Department of Speech Communications and Theater Arts.

Susan Kelly, coordinator of the Theater Arts Program, came to the department in 1987 primarily as a costume designer after four years of freelance designing in Oregon.

"I realized I missed teaching and so I came here," she said.

This past summer, the Theater Arts Program was granted the freedom to function separately from the speech communications department and Kelly took over as the coordinator of the program.

"We still are tied to the department, but we function independently," Kelly said. "It's given us independence and the ability to really develop our goals."

This new freedom has been beneficial to the development and exposure of the department.

"It's not so much freedom as it is a sense of recognition that theater arts is a separate unit," Kelly said. "We're in a period of rediscovering who we are and why we're here and I think we're going to come out of it much stronger."

I'm real optimistic."

The program has had so little exposure in the past, Kelly said that when they distributed their season brochure this year, many people called asking her if the program was new.

About 20 percent of the program's students go on to become certified to teach theater in high schools and 50 percent go on to professional theater or graduate-acting school, Kelly said.

Students in the program gain valuable experience to go on to anything in the acting field, she said.

"I think one of the strengths of this program is that a high degree of responsibility is given to the students," Kelly said. "It gives them wonderful credentials, builds up their portfolios and makes them strong candidates for graduate school."

Many of the plays are student-directed and this past year, 75 percent of the shows have been student-designed, Kelly said.

Since the department's new-found freedom, Kelly said the program has become closer to music and art programs on campus.

"When you get independent, then you start looking for people who are similar in nature," Kelly said. "It's been really wonderful."

Performances have always been an important part of the Theater Arts Program and still continue to be.

Othello, opening tonight, will be the program's seventh and final play of the season.

Next year will bring changes, and Kelly said they will be presenting only three plays, two of which are *The Crucible* and *Of Mice and Men*. This will lend even more time to making high-quality productions, she said.

"I think we recognize that when we tend to do too many productions, we don't have enough time to really do them well," Kelly said. "A lot of what we're trying to stress is the process and to take the time to do it to the best standards."

The lighter production load will also give students involved in the program some much-needed time away from the theater.

"The problem with it is our students have to be students, as well as spend the time in the theater," Kelly said. "You can't ask them to work those 80-hour weeks on the productions and still maintain a high G.P.A."

The environment at Texas A&M has helped Kelly enjoy her years here immensely, she said. In her eight years here, Kelly said the Aggie spirit still overwhelms her.

"I still go over and watch the film in the MSC and I just get chills up my spine," she said. "I see that same spirit of being an Aggie in theater majors as any other major."



Roger Hsieh/THE BATTALION
Susan Kelly is the head of the Theater Arts department.

Former theater student captures major role in feature film

By Michael Landauer
THE BATTALION

The road to Hollywood generally bypasses A&M. Although a small theater arts program may not be expected to create tomorrow's stars, former A&M student Jennifer Kinard has found herself in a major role in a full-length feature film.

Kinard, a 22-year-old former A&M student, works as a professional actress in Houston. She is primarily a stage performer but said she couldn't pass up the opportunity to be in a movie.

"I think I was really lucky to do a full-length feature film," she said. "I've never had film experience and it was great. I learned a lot."

Big Back Yard, an independent film out of Austin, is still in the editing stage. About 150 actors were interviewed for the starring roles as six friends (three men and three women). They are reunited years after college at a wedding of mutual friends.

The friends find that they have grown apart and the characters struggle to realize that friendship is not forever. The film, which takes place in one night, explores the characters' relationships with each other.

Kinard plays Morgan, a character who is growing tired



Kinard

of being her friends' sounding board. Morgan realizes they are outgrowing their friendships, but she is not bothered by the fact.

Kinard said her experiences at A&M helped her prepare for a professional acting career.

"It was great at A&M because it was like we were running our own little black box theater," she said. "I got a lot of stage time because it was a small department."

My Children My Africa and *Dangerous Liasons* were among the plays she performed at A&M. She said Dr. Oscar Giner and Joanne Johnson, both of the theater arts program, taught her to follow her passion for the theater.

"There was a spirit they gave us — believing in the passion you have inside of you and going after it," she said.

She said her mentors helped create a good theater family when she performed at the Fallout Theater in the Blocker building.

"I feel we had a good group there," she said. "Everyone involved with Fallout Theater was really dedicated. You can't always find that drive and dedication in everyone." Creating the right atmosphere for theater has never been easy in Bryan-College Station. The Fallout Theater group was closer because their work was challenging, Kinard said.

"At A&M, it was like you were on a mission," she said. "There's so much culture to be had, and you feel like the people in that town only want to watch a football game. There was a challenge to getting peo-

ple out to watch a play."

Although her plays often had large audiences, Kinard said a lot of the people who came to see their plays had to be offered an incentive.

"Hopefully, some day, people won't have to get extra-credit points in English to come see a play," she said.

Working as a professional has spared Kinard of that kind of audience, but she said she enjoys her work in the theater for other reasons as well.

"When you're in the theater and in front of a live audience, they're giving you all this energy, and you form a relationship with them," she said.

Kinard said she never had a desire to do films and that theater is probably where she will do most of her work in the future.

"I'm very weary of seeing myself perform," she said. "That's why theater is great — you don't have to see yourself."

She said that she will probably audition for more film and television roles now that she has experience, but that theater is where her passion is.

"I'll always go back to theater," she said. "Theater always comes first. It's just not the same — theater is always better."

She may never make it to Hollywood, but she said that's not an immediate goal of hers.

"I love Texas and I don't know if I'll ever want to leave," she said. "There's a lot of good theater in Texas. I just want to find a good theater family, pay my bills and be happy."