



Be Our Guest, Be Our Guest ...

For the Millsaps Players, a Rotating Director's Chair

By John Webb

A play has only one plot, but it contains many potential stories," says Michael Bloom, author of the theatrical handbook *Thinking Like a Director*. "One of the most important functions a director fulfills is determining, with the actors and designers, which story to tell and how to tell it coherently."

Just as a play may contain many potential stories, the Millsaps Players are tapping many potential directors to fulfill that function of determining which tale to tell—and how to tell it in the thought-provoking, compelling, and entertaining tradition of Millsaps theatre. From Denise Halbach, president of the prestigious Southeastern Theatre Conference, to Kos Kostmayer, whose script *On the Money* was awarded 1983–84's Best Play of the Year by the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle, these artists have dramatically shifted the dynamics of the theatre department, bringing world-class perspectives to the director's chair at the Christian Center.

And thanks to the guest directors' diverse styles and techniques, students here are experiencing the kind of challenges they might face from Broadway to Hollywood, where the actor must adapt to a spectrum of visions and techniques. "That becomes a strength here," said Brent Lefavor, associate professor of performing arts. "It makes us competitive with universities that have much larger faculties, because students can get that same type of experience working with different directors that normally you couldn't have at a smaller liberal arts college."

"Directing, like acting, is all about choices," said James Anderson, B.A. 1969, who directed *The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr (Abridged)* in the fall. "I think it's great that the guest directing program allows the students to experience the range of choices made by different directors and, within the parameters of each director's style, to make their own choices as actors or technical artists."



"Once the students leave and step onto new stages, they will have to face new directors all the time," said Peter Zapletal, the Emmy-winning puppeteer who staged *Hansel & Gretel* during the Players' 2003–04 season. "The guest-directing program prepares them well for the future."

The program also adds breadth and scope to the students' training. "Students get a broader range of experience in the types of roles that they play because they are seen and perceived by different directors as having different capabilities," Lefavor said. "It's important for students to have experience working under assorted directorial styles. Each of us has been trained

differently and brings certain strengths and ways of working to the rehearsal process. If actors are going to work professionally, they're going to be working under a lot of directors for whom they will have to learn to adapt their technique."

Sam Sparks, B.A. 2003, has seen this program work as both a student and a director. "The beneficial essence of the guest director program is variety," he said. "Both the students and the audience are exposed to different styles, different methods, and different backgrounds."

Sarah Wilkinson, B.A. 2005, said she was grateful for the opportunity to be directed by Denise Halbach in the comedy *Lend Me a Tenor*. "It was fabulous," she said. "An extremely gifted and experienced individual who can bring a brand-new and innovative perspective to a production is invaluable. Not only did we have a blast getting to know someone different, but we also formed new relationships that remained after the last show."

Indeed, the program helps enlarge each student's universe of professional associates. "Each guest director brings his or her own network of business contacts into the fold, which being a collaborative art is essential to survival in this industry," Sparks said. "The students really have to learn to adapt to new people, which will help them in a business where directors, designers, and actors often fly



in to work on one particular show and then move on to another project.”

Plus, students in a close-knit campus community benefit from outside viewpoints. “Millsaps leadership is very much aware of this—to wit, all the programs including those that offer the students to step out into the ‘real world,’” Zapletal said.

Furthermore, visiting directors level the playing field, helping subvert the cliquishness that can emerge when one director works repeatedly with favored students while others wait in the wings for parts that never come. “Directors have certain visions for the way they want a show to look, and directors have their favorites, actors they bond with and communicate with,” Lefavor said. “One director can determine a specific casting pool for a long time without varying it a lot. Outside directors may see qualities and potentials in certain students that another director might not see.”

Likewise, Halbach said the process brings professionalism to the students’ experiences. “As a guest director, I cast a production from what I see in the audition, not what I’ve seen a student-actor do in classes and other productions,” said Halbach. “It removes personality from the choices and puts the students on a more professional level.”

Ironically, perhaps, what has become a particular strength of the performing arts department emerged from loss. For 45 years, the late Lance Goss was a revered but lone directorial voice at Millsaps. It was a reign only twice interrupted: Lefavor stepped in to direct during the 1986 season, when Goss twisted a knee during the production of Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, and again in 1995, when Goss’s health began failing during a production of *Who’s Happy Now?* “I was taking on Lance’s teaching load as well as my own, and I knew I couldn’t build sets and direct the plays that semester,” Lefavor said.

So the department transcended Millsaps’ own fourth wall by looking to the broader community, and in 1995 Anne Sullivan, who had taught theatre at Mississippi College, became both the Players’ first guest director and first woman director with that season’s production of *Jake’s Women*.

As Goss eased toward retirement in 1996, the College brought in theatre professor Morgan Gadd, and Lefavor continued to direct. “At that time I talked to Dr. Tim Coker, chair of the Department of Performing Arts, and proposed this idea of giving students a broader experience,” Lefavor said.

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Richard A. Smith, now senior vice president and dean of the College, endorsed the idea, Lefavor said, opting to alternate between hiring guest directors and scenic designers every year. “That way, because we were a small department, we would each have some relief,” Lefavor said. “It was decided that the dean would pay out of his funds for one of these guest positions each year, and that’s been true since 1996.”

When Gadd departed in 2002, he was not replaced. Thus, what has emerged is a system in which each season features three to four directors: Lefavor, a guest director funded by the dean, and one or two guest directors underwritten by the Players. This season, for instance, Anderson directed *The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr (Abridged)*, Sullivan directed *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, Halbach directed *Lend Me a Tenor*, and Lefavor directed *Nonsense*.

The arrangement not only enhances students’ theatrical education, but it also creates a dialogue within Jackson’s theatre community. “The beauty of true learning is that it never ends,” Anderson said. “I’ve gained many insights from the students themselves and, in separate venues, from many of my fellow guest directors.”

Sullivan calls her own opportunity to direct the Players the role of a lifetime. “In the early ’70s, I was an undergraduate student at Mississippi College and was seriously interested in theatre,” she said. “It didn’t take long to learn that *the* place for college theatre at the time was our cross-town rival, Millsaps. I began attending plays in the



Christian Center to check out the competition and fell in love with the collaborative art itself and the opportunity to tell a story with universal significance. Above all, I fell in love with the direction of Lance Goss.”

Sullivan’s artistic journey took her back to Mississippi College in 1986, where she was an instructor and director for eight years, but all that time, she says, she continued to learn from and be inspired by the Millsaps Players. She also forged a lifelong friendship with Lefavor as colleagues in the graduate program at the University of Southern Mississippi. “Brent is one of those rare individuals who can do any job connected with theatrical productions,” Sullivan said. “He has my utmost respect in the areas of direction, set design and construction, all technical aspects of the theatre—he may be one of the best lighting designers in the field today—and acting.



Having directed him as C. S. Lewis in *Shadowlands* (2000) at Gallo-way United Methodist Church and then seeing him in *Fiddler on the Roof* (2003), I am in awe of his onstage presence and skill.”

Sullivan said she was “humbled and amazed” when she was invited to guest direct in 1995. “I remember walking out on the stage in the Christian Center before our first rehearsal,” she said. “I knew I was standing on holy ground. The students were bright and enthusiastic, and Brent was everything one would dream of as a producer—seeing to it that every detail was done, and done well.”

“I really did okay until I walked in and saw Lance’s rocking chair sitting in one corner of our arena stage before one of the performances. When I saw it, I knew Mr. Goss was coming and I was extremely intimidated. I was in *his* house—on *his* stage. I knew that not only was I the first guest director at Millsaps, but I was also the first female director. There are no words to tell you how insecure I felt when the curtain went up that night. After the play, however, Mr. Goss complimented the show, the students, and even my direction. Nothing could have been more satisfying”

In 1997, Sullivan returned to Millsaps to direct *A Man for All Seasons*, a tribute to Goss. Sullivan’s most recent production, in November 2004, was *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*. “With only two cots on stage—in an arena setting, we were able to share with the audience an account of the civil disobedience of Henry David Thoreau and his unconventional friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson,” Sullivan said. “This play spoke to issues we face today and it spoke in a solid academic setting.”

The theatre program at Millsaps is facing issues, too. With the department down by one full-time faculty member, Lefavor said that adjunct faculty had been brought in to help handle the course load—for instance, Patrick Benton, artistic director of Jackson’s New Stage Theatre, teaches the fundamentals course “From Page to Stage.” But Lefavor pointed out that those instructors were not involved in actual productions.

Halbach agrees that the guest directors program could be augmented by more full-time teachers. “The student-actors are intelligent, hardworking, and talented,” she said. “I would just like to see the theatre program at Millsaps expand so that the actors have more variety of classroom training. There are classes that the students need before they go out into the professional world, and they need the mentoring and networking that more on-site, full-time theatre professors could provide.”

Nevertheless, by bringing new levels of professionalism to the Christian Center, the guest directors program is putting excellence in the spotlight, a standard born of relentlessly fresh voices and demands. “My experiences as a student and then as a guest director were not easy,” Sparks said. “As artists, students, as well as directors, are constantly being challenged, which is good. If producing a show is easy, then something hasn’t been fully thought out or nothing is being learned. Either way, the Millsaps audience doesn’t accept mediocrity. We know that as directors, and while to some this may be intimidating, it also serves as a pressure cooker in which grand things are born.”

Veteran Player Wins OBIE For Off-Broadway Triumph

Playwright Lisa D’Amour, B.A. 1990, recently accepted a Village Voice Off-Broadway Theater Award (OBIE) for her dramatic production *Nita and Zita*. D’Amour wrote and directed *Nita and Zita* (pictured below), a play about Hungarian sisters who came to this country in 1922 and became burlesque performers. The OBIE Award recognizes the collaborative, grassroots effort that fueled the production. *Nita and Zita* played to packed houses and rave reviews in New Orleans, Minneapolis, and New York in January of this year.

D’Amour is a veteran of the Millsaps Players and is quick to credit the success of *Nita and Zita* to the well-rounded theatre education she received at Millsaps under the tutelage of Lance Goss and Brent Lefavor: “I often refer back to my Millsaps training as being absolutely integral to the artist I am today,” she said. “I had to act, direct, design lights, build sets, and make production calendars. My theatre career has really been a do-it-yourself effort!” D’Amour has used this extensive knowledge to create several site-specific performances in nontraditional locations such as parking garages, bridges, and vacant boutiques.

After graduating from Millsaps, D’Amour received a master of fine arts from the University of Texas–Austin. Although D’Amour speaks well of the Austin campus, she also sings the praises of Millsaps. “I feel blessed to have gone to a college with small class sizes and accessible teachers who made me write, write, and write.”

D’Amour lives in Brooklyn but spends a lot of time in Minneapolis and New Orleans. She looks forward to beginning her residency at Infernal Bridegroom Productions in Houston, Texas. D’Amour’s next project will include taking road trips to various Texas ghost towns and then writing a play about her experience. Despite her status as a globetrotter, D’Amour maintains affection for Mississippi. “I have such fond memories of Jackson,” she said. “It is one of several reasons that I hope to move back to the South sometime in the future.”

—C. K.

