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Shared Beginnings

Sarah Zeller Julian '07
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Nicole Travis '11

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Shared Beginnings

To direct her first major theatre production, Marti Lyons '08 called upon the talents of some old Illinois Wesleyan friends.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07 & NICOLE TRAVIS '11

School of Theatre Arts graduate Marti Lyons '08 directed a challenging play this summer, but she wasn't alone — plenty of Illinois Wesleyan alumni and faculty filled the ranks of the production's cast and crew.

Tooth and Nail Ensemble presented *The Conduct of Life*, the group's debut production, for three weeks in July at Chicago's Viaduct Theater in cooperation with Two Lights Theatre Company.

"It is incredible to work with everyone again," Lyons said prior to the play's opening. "We are so far ahead in the process because we have a shared vocabulary from which to work."

She and fellow Class of '08 alumnus Tim Martin were inspired to form Tooth and Nail Ensemble after returning to Illinois Wesleyan last fall to view a production by Associate Theatre Arts Professor Sandra Lindberg.



Tooth and Nail Ensemble was co-founded by Marti Lyons '08 and classmate Tim Martin.

when we read it in school, so when I mentioned it he got very excited, and then when Sandra agreed to be in it, we knew we had a show," Lyons said.

The pair recruited Martin Langrall '08 as their production manager and formed their own ensemble.

The play follows Orlando, a Latin American army lieutenant who uses torture to destroy and break down others — both at work and at home.

"We started talking about how we were not satisfied with the work we were doing [in Chicago]," Lyons said. "We talked about how we had a real ensemble feel in our Wesleyan training and how much we would want to work with Sandra and a lot of other IWU graduates again."

The former classmates had studied *The Conduct of Life* — written in 1985 by Cuban-American playwright Maria Irene Fornes — in Lindberg's "Introduction to Dramatic Literature" class.

"Tim and I were both very moved by the play

“This play looks at a darker side of the human condition,” Lyons said. “It is always challenging to bring work like that to life ... but the play is a beautiful piece of art, and it asks difficult ethical questions in a way that I think can be useful and healing.”

The play’s themes of destruction during war and political unrest are relevant to America’s involvement in Middle East conflicts today, Lyons added. “The soldiers coming home are bringing a lot of baggage with them,” she said. “I wonder how they will receive support for physical and psychological issues in the current economic climate.

“Artistically addressing these issues is difficult and takes a toll on all of us,” she added. “But we have very brave and talented performers and designers, and we are very proud of addressing such issues in our work.”

After two weeks of successful productions, Lyons called the show “a great success. We knew that self-producing would be a struggle, but with the support from our donors, the commitment from our performers and our designers, the success of the production exceeded our expectations.”

In addition to Lyons, Langrall and Martin, other Illinois Wesleyan alumni involved with the production included actress Elizabeth Olson ’05; prop designer Dan Andruss ’08; sound designer Rob Carroll ’07; artistic consultant Tony Lopez ’08; and band members Steve Gonabe ’09, Tom Duncan ’09 and Chris Olmstead ’09.

Chicago Stage Review called the ensemble “talented” and “terrific,” adding that “much of the emotional tone of the production is fed by the haunted score” supplied by Carroll and the band members. The article went on to say that Lyons used “superlative control and restraint” in steering clear of “melodrama and cliché.”

Participating Illinois Wesleyan faculty members were Lindberg, who played the role of Olimpia, and Associate Theatre Arts Professor Jean Kerr, the play’s fight and Butoh choreographer.

Kerr’s knowledge of Butoh, a Japanese dance form with slow and exaggerated movement, was recruited in an attempt to “stylize and temper some of the violence” inherent to the play, Lyons explained. “Butoh, often referenced as ‘the dance of darkness,’ was utilized as a way to see the insides of [the play’s] very complex characters, who often hide their true nature from each other and themselves.” The *Chicago Stage Review* praised Kerr for “an exceptional job of translating unwatchable acts into grotesque art without losing the power or significance of those atrocities.”



***The Conduct of Life* cast (clockwise from left): Liz Olson ’05, Kevin V. Smith, Tim Martin ’08, IWU Theatre Arts Professor Sandra Lindberg, and Meghan Reardon.**

Whatever the purpose of tapping into the resources that fellow Illinois Wesleyan students and faculty offer, Lindberg said such collaborations are not unusual.

“Since I’ve been at IWU, there have been several productions like this where alums, faculty, and/or students collaborated on a production that rehearsed and/or performed off campus,” Lindberg wrote via e-mail. “I think it’s one of our strengths that faculty, students and alums continue to support each others’ development even after students graduate.”

Although this is her ensemble’s debut production, Lyons has plenty of theater experience, both on the stage and behind the scenes. “I had a lot of opportunities at Wesleyan,” Lyons said, including spending a semester in London at the British American Dramatic Academy, writing a senior honors thesis on Sarah Kane’s production of *Woyzeck*, and directing that play at IWU’s lab theater in May 2008.



School of Theatre Arts alumni Elizabeth Olson and Tim Martin rehearse a tense scene with fellow Chicago actor Kevin V. Smith.

Her latest project — which concluded just before *The Conduct of Life* opened — was assistant directing *Oedipus Rex*, produced by The Hypocrites. The position gave Lyons the opportunity to work with Hypocrites’ Artistic Director and founder Sean Graney, who *Chicago Magazine* called Chicago’s Best Avant-Garde Director and the *Chicago Tribune* named as theatre’s Chicagoan of the Year.

Currently, Lyons is working as the casting assistant at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, and this fall she will move to Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company as a literary apprentice. In the field of directing, such a path is uncommon, Lindberg said.

“Theater students who wish to become directors usually have a slower development path than Marti seems to be enjoying,” she said. “Marti works very hard and is intent on creating opportunities for herself.”

Tooth and Nail Ensemble plans to work on another play next summer before visiting Edinburgh, Scotland, for the Festival Fringe, the largest arts festival in the world.

Beyond these plans, Lyons isn’t exactly sure where her

path will take her next, but she said she will continue to pursue her passions in the future.

“I want to direct, and I also want to continue to work with the amazing people we have united through *The Conduct of Life*,” Lyons said. “Tim Martin and I don’t know exactly what that means yet, but we are excited to have a Chicago audience for our work.”