



2-14-2024

Chris Connelly and Students Discuss Play 'The Wolves' at IWU

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WGLT Interview with Chris Connelly on February 14, 2024

Announcer: Sarah DeLappe's, Pulitzer Prize nominated play *The Wolves* opens next week at Illinois Wesleyan University. The coming-of-age story centers on a group of high school girls whose experiences are revealed at soccer practice each Saturday. It was soccer that first drew director Christopher Connelly to the script. He attended college on a soccer scholarship and has coached youth teams. At Wesleyan, he's more known for coaching Shakespeare, but kindly tells WGLT's Lauren Warnecke soccer is not the only reason he picked "*The Wolves*" for his students.

Chris Connelly: It's a play in which none of the women are dependent upon males for their relationships or their identity.

Lauren Warnecke: '*The Wolves*' premiered off Broadway at the Duke on 42nd Street in 2016 that followed a workshop at Playwrights Horizons the year before. It tied with Clare Barron's "*Dance Nation*" in the inaugural American playwriting Foundation's Relentless awards. "*Dance Nation*" similarly to "*The Wolves*" is a coming-of-age story about teens in competition dance, where "*Dance Nation*" and "*The Wolves*" differ, however, is how the grownups factor into the story.

Connelly: None of these women are defined by boyfriends' husbands' coaches, in fact, the coach is viewed as totally inept and drunk, and they function completely without his any kind of guidance on his part.

Warnecke: The soccer is secondary to the story, but these theater majors found themselves doing more cardio than usual and getting "*The Wolves*" ready for the stage. Kamryn Elise Roane is a senior in the BFA Acting Program at IWU. She wasn't especially athletic growing up.

Kamryn Roane: I never played soccer at my playground, I did softball for a while and realized I hated being outside. My biggest memories with soccer would be PE and elementary school. Getting kicked a lot by the boys that were like really great at soccer, like I remember one time the ball got caught between my legs and people just started kicking.

Warnecke: Ecaterina Cuznetova is an international student from Moldova. "*The Wolves*" is her first mainstage production at IWU.

Ecaterina Cuznetova: I never ever played soccer before. I was in competitive sport for 10 years it was horse riding, so I know about like the sport in general, but not the ball, and with the ball, it's a bit different. You know, it's uncontrollable.

Warnecke: To get these soccer novices ready. Connelly started with the basics.

Connelly: One of the first things is like you don't kick a soccer ball with your toes, which most Americans want to do, but if you do it barefoot, you learn really fast not to do that.

Warnecke: They did some stretching drills and workshops with a coach from the women's soccer team at IWU. The show includes wind sprints and passing Drills and all sorts of soccer stuff.

Connelly: And we talked about the idea of having a net across the front of the stage, a small net. And every once in a while, I think maybe we don't need that they're getting better, and then last night, two balls went into the audience.

Warnecke: The net is still TBD.

Connelly: Overall, I think that they've, they've learned a lot I don't know if they're ever going to next World Cup if they're going to be glued to their television sets the way I am, but at least they understand the game. I think now.

Warnecke: Each character in the woods is identified only by her number, sophomore BFA actor Cuznetova plays the goalkeeper. That's double zero.

Cuznetova: She's high achiever. She's a perfectionist, so she feels all the time the pressure and responsibility. She's so afraid of failing of losing the game, but when she comes up to play last the last game of this season, she has been mindset. I want to win. I will win.

Warnecke: Senior Kamryn Roane plays number 46. That's the new girl.

Roane: I've been that girl before. And she makes a lot of mistakes. And she says a lot of things she really should not say because she doesn't understand social cues in this high school environment, but I think by the end of the play, she starts to really see these girls and they start to see her.

Warnecke: Sarah DeLappe began riding the wolves in 2014 after seeing an art exhibit in New York City depicting scenes from Middle East and North African conflict zones. Leaving the museum DeLappe noticed how detached people were from what they've just seen, feeling horror and pity in one moment, and headed to brunch in the next. In "The Wolves" opening scene, petty teenage gossip is layered over discussion about someone just sentenced for crimes against humanity for their participation in the Cambodian genocide. Cuznetova, double zero.

Cuznetova: I also think displays about listening and caring. Like when is that moment when any human being is really starts to care about the other one. At the beginning of a play. No one pays attention as it's supposed to be one is a listener and one is a talker. And right now, in conversation what happens is two persons tries to be like the talkers. So, what is supposed to happen? So, we can listen, this aspect of loss is what gets people actually to care, to be genuine and to listen. And this is I think, the deeper meaning of a play.

Connelly: First striking in the last scene, they actually say how are you? I missed you.

Warnecke: Director Chris Connelly.

Connelly: A lot of the stereotypes of soccer that actually ring true or the goalie's anxiety, the player who wants to score all the goals, and you know talking to them I certainly remember like one game where from high school where the loss still really sticks with me, and I remember a win that really sticks with me, but the thing that really sticks with me is losing a teammate. That's what ultimately in a weird way makes them a team where they become the wolves instead of just a name. They become an actual team.

Warnecke: I'm Lauren Warnecke.

Announcer: Wolves runs February 21 through the 25th at Illinois Wesleyan University. WGLT's Lauren Warnecke spoke with Kamryn Roane, Ecaterina Cuznetova, and Christopher Connelly.