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A Bold Approach: Tim Dunn



Dunn (above) says he grew as an actor at Illinois Wesleyan, in part, because he was given a chance to learn from his mistakes. (Marc Featherly)

the guardians he is to persuade.

Dunn shouldered a heavy weight in tackling the role: not only was he a sophomore at the time, but the play was presented as a mainstage production in McPherson Theatre, seen by dozens of people each night.

Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts Sara Freeman, the play's director, remembers her decision to cast Dunn was itself a bit of a bold stroke. "It was a tall order for a sophomore, but Tim carried it off, once he stopped doing 3,000 other things at once and not sleeping," Freeman says. "When he finally did it, he really delighted me as Fainwell."

Dunn says the experience was just one of many "incredible opportunities onstage — whether I was ready for them or not." Such opportunities were exactly what attracted him to IWU's School of Theatre Arts. In comparison to other theatre programs that frequently cut students a year after they've been admitted, Dunn felt like "this was a place I could fail — and then learn from it," he says.

At Illinois Wesleyan, Dunn learned much in pursuit of his true love, improvisational acting. Active in improv since his junior year of high school, Dunn says he and fellow senior Nolan Kennedy started up a theatre troupe called Shenanigans his first year here. "We had our successes and our failures," he says. But by the end of his sophomore year, he and Kennedy were leading the improv troupe JM*7 that is still going strong.

Theatre major Tim Dunn estimates he's played about 25 different roles during his time at Illinois Wesleyan.

No wonder he was considered perfect for the lead role in the satiric 18th-century English comedy *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, written by Susanna Centlivre, one of the first professional female playwrights. To gain a young woman's hand in marriage, Colonel Fainwell — played by Dunn — must convince her four guardians that he will make an ideal husband. He takes the bold stroke of wearing elaborate disguises which mimic the varying personalities and occupations of

“Improv is commonly seen as a silly art form,” Dunn says. “But we take it very seriously,” with rehearsals twice every week.

JM*7 “provided a major growth opportunity,” he adds. “I’ve realized you need other people. It’s about community.” The troupe will also be “the toughest thing to leave behind. We’ve created a real family here on campus.”

While founding an improv group and mastering theatrical roles proved challenging, Dunn remembers his greatest academic hurdle was a May Term course called “Chemistry of the Kitchen” that introduces basic chemical concepts through an examination of food. Dunn says he only took the class to fulfill a general education requirement, but added that he wished in hindsight he’d taken more classes outside his major.

Asked if he’s ready for the post-graduate “real world,” Dunn responds, “Absolutely.”

“Faculty here have trained me to do what I want to do,” he says. “I’m in a place where I’m confident to go out there.” Right now, he’s auditioning for roles in Shakespeare festivals, but says that he “will spend time in the Chicago improv community.

That’s what I’d really like to do.” Down the road, he sees himself as an actor in Chicago or as a graduate student studying theatre arts.

Freeman has watched Dunn progress since his audition to enter the theatre program. “Seeing Tim and members of his class this year often makes me reflect on just how much students actually do grow and progress and expand during their time here,” she says. “Then it’s time for them go on beyond us in the School of Theatre Arts, but I hope always with us.”



Dunn tackled a challenging role in the 18th-century English comedy *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*.