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Staging his own success

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In a business class during his senior year, Lewendel (above) created an 80-page guidebook that detailed his dreams for his future, including the plan to start his own theatre company.

Staging his own success

Max Lewendel '03 is making a strong impression on London's theatre scene.

By Chelsey Iaquina '05

At 24 years old — the age when many college grads are still adapting to life in the 'real world' — Max Lewendel is confidently storming London's hip fringe theatre scene as founder, producer, and director of the Icarus Theatre Collective, a professional theatre company based in London.

Coyote Ugly (not related to the film of the same name) ran from June 29 – July 24 at the Finborough Theatre. The drama by U.S. playwright Lynn Siefert wowed audiences and critics in its first London revival in over 10 years. Most notably, the play was one of an elite group to be given the distinction "Critics' Choice" by *Time Out*, a leading London theatre magazine. Lewendel says he was honored to see his show listed among the five productions (out of almost 100 running in London) that were awarded Critics' Choice. "It's rare for a show in

a theatre as small as the Finborough to get nominated; it's even more rare for an American doing his second professional show to receive that distinction," he says.

By launching the Icarus Collective, Lewendel met an important part of a goal he first outlined while still a student at IWU. In a business class during his senior year, Lewendel created an 80-page guidebook that detailed his dreams for his future, including the plan to start his own theatre company. Since graduating in 2003 with a major in theatre arts and minors in French and business administration, he has been closely following the extensive blueprint.

Lewendel was captivated by British culture during an impromptu visit to England in the summer of his junior year. Accompanied by two suitcases, a laptop, and his portfolio, he ventured to London. Once he arrived, Lewendel found a job doing freelance technical crew work that included providing theatrical light and sound for groups and businesses. He was able to make connections into the theatre world with the help of Tim Hardy, a teacher at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London who was an IWU visiting professor during Lewendel's freshman year. Before long Lewendel was immersed in the city's prominent theatre scene.

Prompted by his experiences in England, Lewendel made a bold decision — London, not the U.S., would be the setting for his future. In anticipation of the move abroad, he began to sell his possessions and continued to set aside the money he was earning from selling electronics online. Upon graduating from Illinois Wesleyan, he returned to London and was rehired by the business for which he had worked during the previous summer. Three months later, relying on his personal savings for funding, Lewendel founded the Icarus Theatre Collective.

So far, the 18-member company has finished the performances of two plays on the fringe, London's equivalent of Off-Off-Broadway. Lewendel provides his actors and technical crew with small stipends but acknowledges that most join to gain exposure. The collective's first play — *The Lesson* by Eugene Ionesco — debuted in February 2004 at London's Etcetera Theatre. Set in the 1950s, it's an absurdist political play that comments on the incursion of Nazi fascism in Romania. In staging the play,

Lewendel created a modern interpretation that drew on his experience as an American in England and explored the global impact of capitalism. Positive reviews "helped us demonstrate to venues that we are a talented theatre company," says Lewendel, "so for our latest show, *Coyote Ugly*, we were able to secure the Finborough, one of London's top three fringe theatres."

Coyote Ugly is a high-strung family drama that deals with matters of sexual impropriety and profound betrayal. The American play was originally presented in 1985 by Chicago's renowned Steppenwolf Theatre Company, under the direction of actor John Malkovich. "It's just a demented story," Lewendel said of the play. Critics agreed, hailing it as "a shocking, disturbing, sexually perverse yet strangely comic drama." Also praised was Lewendel's elaborate set design. To reach their seats, audience members had to trek through the two tons of sand that Lewendel ambitiously scattered across the theatre. Casually positioned deck chairs and dismantled appliances added to the rural desert setting.



Family conflict and dysfunction are dramatically depicted in Lewendel's production of *Coyote Ugly*, which garnered rave reviews from London's hard-to-please theatre critics. (Photo provided by Max Lewendel)

'Coyote Ugly'

Finborough Theatre Fringe

If you fancy feeling the sand between your toes this week, Lynn Siefert's 'Coyote Ugly' (no relation to the film of the same name) may be just what you're looking for. To reach your seat, you have to cross a sand-covered stage on which are strewn deckchairs, a sofa bed, a fridge and a small stove with a pan of water bubbling away on it.

Twelve years after quitting his parents' home in deepest Arizona, Dowd returns in order to present his bride, Penny. Understandably, the latter has never met anyone quite like her husband's unconventional desert-dwelling folks before. There's a strong whiff of incest about their domestic arrangements: feral daughter Scarlet humps daddy Red's leg, while mom Andreas, on being told that Dowd is now impotent, states authoritatively that her son's pecker worked perfectly well when he lived with her. When Penny tries to befriend Scarlet, she ends up bound and blindfolded

Uncivilised entertainment.



and being dragged out into the midday sun by the 'little cannibal, little bonecrusher'.

In this elemental drama, the characters do real things like gut fish and wear dog's heads, and express themselves in a vivid, gritty, imagistic patois. It's one of the great strengths of Max Lewendel's production that, despite being up a flight of stairs over a pub in Earls Court, the meticulous stage design evokes the play's desert setting so powerfully. And the excellent cast certainly enter into the spirit of the script's exotic form of domestic madness – part Sam Shepard, part sexed-up Three Stooges, it makes for an intense and wittily uncivilised evening's entertainment. *Robert Shore*

While basking in the glowing reviews for *Coyote Ugly*, Lewendel is already considering his next project among several possibilities.

“Writers are now constantly sending me scripts,” he says. “I really want to do an original play but right now the front runners are tried and tested scripts.”

As for his long-term goal, Lewendel dreams of constructing his own theatre, the next step in his business plan. “I still have all the blueprints, the whole design of the theatre, the structure, the way it works, everything. Granted it was written by someone in their early 20's, but it's a template, a place to start.”

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