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June 30, 2009

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Play Director Gets Help From Fellow Alums

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan School of Theatre Arts graduate Marti Lyons will direct a challenging play this summer, but she won't be alone. Plenty of IWU alumni and faculty have filled the ranks of the production's cast and crew.

Tooth and Nail Ensemble will present Maria Irene Fornes' *The Conduct of Life*, its debut production, beginning July 11 at Chicago's Viaduct Theater in cooperation with Two Lights Theatre Company.

"It is incredible to work with everyone again," Lyons said. "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. "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 Wesleyan graduates again."

The former classmates had studied *The Conduct of Life* in Lindberg's Introduction to Dramatic Literature class. "Tim and I were both very moved by the play 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 violence to destroy others — both at work and at home.

"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.”

In addition to Lyons, Langrall and Martin, other Illinois Wesleyan alumni involved with the production include actor 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. Participating IWU faculty members are Lindberg, who will play the role of Olimpia, and Associate Theatre Arts Professor Jean Kerr, the play's fight choreographer and Butoh choreographer.

Such collaborations are not unusual, Lindberg said.

“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 said. “I think it's one of our strengths that faculty, students and alums continue to support each other's 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.

Her latest project — which concludes just before *The Conduct of Life* opens — is assistant directing *Oedipus*, produced by The Hypocrites. *Oedipus* runs through July 12 at The Building Stage, 412 N. Carpenter St., Chicago. Ticket information is available at www.the-hypocrites.com.

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.”

Although she isn't exactly sure of where her path will take her, Lyons said she would 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.”

The Conduct of Life by Maria Irene Fornes
Viaduct Theater, 3111 N. Western Ave., Chicago
July 11, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25 at 7:30 p.m.
July 12, 19, 26 at 3 p.m.
Tickets are \$15, or \$10 for students/seniors

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