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Taylor Kuzniar
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Alison Daigle (right) used the Phoenix Theatre for her senior honors project, "Arabian Nights: The Framing of Sherazade."

Phoenix Theatre Offers Students Opportunities, Involvement April 24, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Although the workload for an Illinois Wesleyan student can be heavy even without extracurricular activities, some opportunities are too good to pass up. For members of the School of Theatre Arts, the Phoenix Theatre offers this kind of opportunity, which allows the students to put on plays of every genre or style, to work independently of IWU professors and to put to practical use their abilities in acting, directing, design and stage management.

Founded over 20 years ago, the Phoenix Theatre houses about 20 productions each school year, about four or five times the amount of productions that took place five years ago.

Located in the "Underground" next to the coffee shop in the Memorial Center, the Phoenix Theatre is a small "black-box" theatre which seats only 50 people at the maximum, equipped with lighting instruments, a lightboard, furniture and prop pieces. Every semester, students are allowed to put in an application to the Phoenix committee, a group of eight students and faculty led by Phoenix Coordinator Charles Haugland, a senior theatre arts and English major from Aurora, Colo. If the proposal is accepted, the student will be allowed to use the theatre space for rehearsals and performances as needed and will also be provided with a small stipend upon request.

Each semester, students put on a wide variety of plays and performance pieces ranging from light-hearted musicals as in *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* to classical drama as in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Different clubs and groups have also used the Phoenix as a place to perform including the Musical Theatre Society that put on a full-length musical, *Zombie Prom* in the fall of 2006 and the Shenanigans theatre group who performed *Death... or Something* in the fall of 2003. Approximately 20 productions take place every school year, about four or five times the amount that took place just 5 years ago.

Since first-year theatre students do not perform in department plays or musicals and instead focus on production aspects of a performance, the Phoenix offers these students an outlet to act during their first year on campus. Also, the theatre gives all students the opportunity to be exposed to a large number of plays of a variety of genres at no cost.



Actress Amanda Clayton, '10 kneels on the stage Charles Haugland's production of Naomi Wallace's play, "One Flea Spare" in the Phoenix Theatre.

Although mostly theatre students use the space, the Phoenix is open to students of all disciplines and has hosted events by students of other majors as well. In the 2002-2003 academic school year, a group of English majors produced a performance piece called *ink*². In addition, the theatre has housed such events as dance concerts, open mics and classes.

Besides being used for extracurricular performances, the Phoenix Theatre also has been used for academic endeavors. Senior degree projects use the theatre as a place for rehearsals and performances of their project. Warwick Johnson, a senior theatre arts major and history minor from Park Forest, Ill. recently used the Phoenix for his senior degree project: a production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Johnson spent five weeks in rehearsals to produce his play, though he began the research for the project at the beginning of his senior year.

Set in present day Iraq, the production addressed many of the issues that plague our society today. Since many theatres would be weary to produce such a politically-charged Shakespeare production, Johnson says he used the Phoenix Theatre to really stretch his creative legs. "The Phoenix is such a great resource for producing new and edgy things. This might be the only chance I would get to produce a show that speaks to a modern audience, and so I really wanted to use that aspect of the theatre to my advantage."

Haugland also used the Phoenix this semester to produce his senior honors project, Naomi Wallace's *One Flea Spare*. This play was his last of six plays he directed during his time at IWU. Haugland said, "The Phoenix is exceptional in the latitude provided to students. Productions in the Phoenix have addressed social and political issues and opened campus-wide discussions."

Students continue to comment on the rise in quantity and quality of Phoenix Theatre productions and the theatre's popularity persistently increases. And as for Haugland, "Though we do have limited budgets, ultimately our work is limited only by our imaginations."