



Spring 5-15-2003

## Illinois Wesleyan Students Producing Documentary Theatre on Nuclear Testing

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### Recommended Citation

Hanna, Jeffery, "Illinois Wesleyan Students Producing Documentary Theatre on Nuclear Testing" (2003). *News and Events*. 4767.  
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May 15, 2003

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### *Illinois Wesleyan Students Producing Documentary Theatre on Nuclear Testing*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Testimony of nuclear test victims from the 1950s will be brought to life by Illinois Wesleyan students who will create a documentary theatre production as part of a course taught during the university's May Term this month.

Alison Sainsbury, associate professor of English, intends for her students to turn the testimony into compelling theatre, but she also wants them to learn about the social and political issues surrounding the above ground nuclear testing, which was conducted by the U.S. government in the deserts of Nevada, and affected the lives and health of residents "downwind" of the explosions.

To create their theatre production, students will rely primarily on interviews published in *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War* by photojournalist Carole Gallagher. Her 1993 book is based on several years of interviewing and photographing people whose lives were crossed by radioactive fallout from the Nevada tests: civilian workers at the Test Site, soldiers who were ordered into the "hot zone" to study military readiness in nuclear battlefields, and those who simply lived in the path of the fallout.

The students will examine several examples of recent documentary theatre such as *The Laramie Project*, which uses interviews to tell the story of the hate-inspired murder of a gay University of Wyoming student. "Documentary theatre has come into its own," says Sainsbury. "The past six months alone has seen the staging of *The Exonerated*, based on the testimony of death row inmates who were exonerated, and of *The Children of War*, Ping Chong's collaboration with children who are the survivors of war. These examples will allow us to study such structural attributes as pacing and dramatic tension."

For Sainsbury, the subject of nuclear testing is not just academic. Her father was an Alaskan geologist who worked on Project Chariot, a plan to use an atomic bomb to create a harbor in northwest Alaska. During the summer of 1957, Sainsbury and her family lived near the test site in Nevada. "We were downwind for at least a half dozen of the series of tests known as Operation Plumbbob, including Shot Hood, a thermonuclear device that was the largest bomb ever exploded above ground in the Americas," she says. "As you can imagine, finding out what happened to the residents in the area later was quite eye-opening."

The course is part of Illinois Wesleyan's May Term, a three-week session during which faculty are encouraged to develop innovative courses which emphasize immersion in learning.