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Stew Salowitz
Illinois Wesleyan University

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CONTACT: Stew Salowitz, (309) 556-3206

John Ficca Retires After 46 Years at Illinois Wesleyan

To reach John Ficca directly, phone (309) 556-3012 or (309) 662-1053.

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. -- John Ficca came to Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington as a member of the drama faculty with the intention of staying two or three years, until he finished his doctorate work at the University of Iowa.

That was in 1956.

This summer, after 46 years as an educator at Illinois Wesleyan, John Ficca is retiring. He has been granted emeritus status and will remain connected with the University, helping connect with alumni to garner support for possible new theatre construction. He has also agreed to teach a class at IWU during May Term 2003.

A native of Folansbee, W.Va., Ficca did his undergraduate work in English, literature, and speech at West Liberty State College in West Virginia, graduating in 1954, then went to graduate school at the University of Iowa. "My ambition was more to be a college teacher, regardless of what area," he said. "When I was doing my graduate work at Iowa, I got pooled into theatre work, which I had done some of as an undergrad. One thing led to another and I ended up with a master's degree in theatre and halfway to a doctorate."

Through the placement office at Iowa, Ficca found a drama teaching job open at Illinois Wesleyan. "My wife and I wanted to go to a relatively small school and, even then, Illinois Wesleyan was formulating itself as a good college for fine arts. It looked like a really good opportunity," he said.

The School of Drama began at Illinois Wesleyan in 1947 and, when Ficca came, it was just he and Lawrence Tucker on the theatre staff. "We had semesters in those days and I taught four three-hour courses," Ficca remembered. "We had, more or less, a full curriculum and did the same number of major productions (four) we do now. So I was teaching, doing all the technical work, design, and directing one or two shows a year. It was total insanity. I was never at home."

Ficca says there were about 25 or 30 theatre majors in his early days, with studios and classrooms on the third floor of Old North and theatre productions staged in a variety of places, including Presser Hall and the Memorial Student Center. Smaller productions would be done in "Spotlight Alley," a small carriage house located in back of Blackstock Hall.

The move to the newly-built McPherson Theatre in 1962 solidified the theatre department's popularity and standing on campus. "Having a home base made a tremendous difference," Ficca admits. "We had gradually added some people to the staff, so we were up to four full-time people in addition to some talented part-time people. Having a permanent place in McPherson allowed us to expand into summer theatre and we went into a period of really strong growth, getting up to 75, 80, maybe 100 majors." [The School of Theatre Arts had 59 majors in the spring 2002 semester.]

In his years on campus, Ficca has seen many physical changes at Illinois Wesleyan. "It has gone from a quaint patchwork to a very sophisticated looking, well laid out campus with an atmosphere far superior to other campuses," Ficca said.

While Ficca admits there is a more cosmopolitan sense and feeling on campus, he feels certain things have stayed essentially the same — the basic nature of students. "On an emotional and maturing level, students really haven't changed that much over the years," Ficca said. "They have changed a lot in terms of their understanding of the world and sophistication as far as education is concerned."

Ficca sees the challenge in teaching college theatre is showing aspiring undergraduates if they belong and where they belong. "We get students with a range of innate talent, ambition, and fortitude. But a big part of it is luck, whether people make their own luck or whether it falls on them. Being in the right place at the right time plays a part in this business. And getting into a situation that promotes a person's particular abilities and talents, and then their ability to expand upon that luck. The people who are able to do this will be successful in regional or educational theatre or in the mainstream professional theatre."

So, how many hearts has he had to break, dashing the hopes of aspiring actors who were not good enough to succeed on stage? "Every time we post a cast list we break a few hearts, I suppose," he says. "But those who aren't cast can stay involved with scenery or design or something, but that doesn't minimize the fact that they were excluded. That's difficult, but it is a reflection of the real world. And that choice, of whether people are qualified or not for that particular endeavor, is a choice that must be made. We operate on a basis of selection and rejection.

"I can see students here having the same passion for wanting to be a professional actor that I had in wanting to be a professional college teacher, and I can sympathize with their desires. There's really no other area where say to certain people, 'Yes, you can do this,' and tell others, 'No, you will not do this, even though this is really what you want to do.' My one hope is that the bitterness of lack of experience for those who are not chosen doesn't cloud who they are and that, after a while, perspective allows them to find their own niche."

Ficca says the options for theatre graduates are wider, due to an increase in regional theatres and expansion in television and film. "In the broad spectrum, professional opportunity in theatre has increased and there are ways of making a decent living or at least an artistically satisfying living. But there is also a greater population and more people competing, so it is still a difficult business."

Among IWU drama school graduates who have attracted steady public attention are James Sutorius '67, Katherine James '73, Stephanie Faracy '74, Frankie Faison '71, Kevin Dunn '77, Richard Jenkins '69, and Alison LaPlaca '82.

Ficca fervently believes in the idea of combining theatre training with a liberal arts education, as opposed to conservatory. "Success in a career is a result of working in terms of performance and management, the student's dramatic training in addition to their diverse liberal arts classes."

Included in the list of the favorite or memorable stage projects he's directed at Illinois Wesleyan are "The Royal Hunt of the Sun" (March 1969), "Hamlet" (with Sutorius in the lead in December 1965), "Marat Sade" (March 1968), "You Can't Take It With You" (April 1972), "The Importance of Being Earnest" (in October 1967 and again in October 1991), "1940s Radio Hour" (October 1989), and "Raisin in the Sun" (December 1969), which featured students from across campus, many of whom were non-drama majors.

Among his nine playwriting credits are "For the Love of Haven," "Circles," "Safe, Like the Sparrowhawk," "Friday in America," "Casting Twelfth Night" and "Afraid of Frankenstein" (2001).

"Friday in America" had its world premiere in July 1999 at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theatre and featured a 10-member cast of IWU alumni, all theatre professionals.

Ficca, the son of Italian immigrants who worked in the Folsom region's steel mills, barely knew his father (both of Ficca's parents died before he was eight years old), yet credits him with instilling a love for books and reading.

"My father was a reader, which was really an accomplishment," he said. "He came from the Adriatic region of Italy, where people were basically uneducated. They worked in the tasks — not professions, but tasks — of fishing and agriculture. Then, when he came to America, adapting to reading in English was another accomplishment for him."

Ficca, who never met or saw even a picture of his grandparents, was raised by aunts and uncles (also Italian immigrants), and somehow got the notion to become a college teacher. "In the small town, industrial world I grew up in, I felt that being a college teacher embodied as much glamour and sophistication that I wanted," he said. "Maybe some of that incentive came from going to the movies on Saturday afternoons, which is possibly what awakened the instincts in theatre for me, too."

Given the background, going to college was an accomplishment for Ficca, but he says he took to it immediately. "When I went to college, I loved the diversity of life and the different people," he said. "I loved the library, the whole environment. I knew very quickly where I wanted my focus in life to be."

It was at West Liberty State that Ficca met his wife, Patricia. They are the parents of four grown children, all of whom attended Illinois Wesleyan and two of whom graduated from IWU.

Patricia Ficca is also an Illinois Wesleyan graduate, class of 1968, having returned to obtain her college degree after her own children were of school age.

In June 1992, nearly 70 former students gathered on campus for a drama alumni reunion, which Ficca called a "really touching affair." Alumni have also contributed money to establish a John Ficca Scholarship Fund, began in 1988.