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## Friday in America, Play Written by IWU Professor; Production Features an All-IWU Alumni Cast

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*World Premiere at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater . . .*  
***Friday in America*, Play Written by IWU Professor;  
Production Features an All-IWU Alumni Cast**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater will be the site of the world premiere next month of *Friday in America*, a play written by an Illinois Wesleyan University theatre professor and featuring a 10-member cast of IWU alumni—all theatre professionals. The play also is produced and directed by IWU theatre graduates.

*Friday in America*—a story about generational clashes in a 1950s Italian-American family living in West Virginia's industrial peninsula—was written by John Ficca, professor of theatre arts, former head of IWU's theatre program, and the university's senior faculty member. IWU alumni involved in the production on- and off-stage are former students of Ficca's.

### **Play's Theme**

Ficca explained that *Friday in America*, which has evolved in various versions over a quarter-century, deals with a universal subject: family—relationships among parents and children. The play's core theme is ethnic transition.

"*Friday in America*," Ficca said, "deals with old-world views held by first generation Italian-Americans versus a new-world view held by the second generation—their children."

### **Producers, Director Are IWU Alumni**

The play is produced by Elizabeth K. Auman, a 1991 IWU theatre graduate originally from Galena, Ill., who is general manager of Victory

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Gardens Theater, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and Chris Thunker, a 1997 IWU theatre graduate. Auman, who took an acting course with Ficca and worked with him on summer theatre productions as an IWU student, said: "He had great respect for students and their work. He treated them as adults. Now, it's great to have a relationship with him on the professional level."

*Friday in America* is directed by Nic Dimond, a 1993 IWU theatre graduate who grew up in the Chicago suburb of Park Forest. Dimond is coartistic director of Chicago's Strawdog Theatre Co., a dozen-year-old group that stages three-to-five productions yearly.

Dimond, who took four courses with Ficca as an IWU student, said directing a play written by his former teacher is "fantastic," adding that Ficca—who he refers to as "coach"—is a "solid artistic comrade open to a younger man's stylization and comments about his play."

### **IWU Alumni Are Cast Members**

IWU alumni who are cast in the play are:

- Trudy Geisel, a 1968 theatre graduate from Bloomingdale, Ill.
- Carmine Grisolia, a 1991 theatre graduate from Berwyn, Ill.
- Tim Sullens, a 1987 theatre graduate from Evanston, Ill.
- T.J. Cimfel, a 1996 theatre graduate from Gurnee, Ill.
- Wendi Weber, a 1991 theater graduate from Chicago.
- Bil Ingraham, a 1995 music theatre graduate from Chicago.
- Sarah Jenkins, a 1997 theatre graduate from Chicago.
- Heather Siemsen, a 1993 theatre graduate from Chicago.
- Sarah Morello, a 1995 theatre graduate from Chicago.

Other IWU alumni working on the production crew are:

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- Leigh Kuyper, a 1996 theatre graduate from Chicago, who is the set designer.
- Karen LaShelle, a 1998 theatre graduate from Chicago, who is the costume designer.
- Matthew Ellenwood, a 1995 music graduate from Chicago, who is the composer.
- Brendan Komala, a 1996 theatre graduate from Forest Park, Ill., who is the technical director.

Kenneth Johnson, technical director in IWU's School of Theatre Arts, is the lighting designer.

"It's really a delight to work with former students," Ficca said. "For them, it's an opportunity to get together again with colleagues, who have almost 10 year's of experience in Chicago theatre."

#### Play's Theme

Central to the story of *Friday in America*, according to Ficca, is the concept of ethnic unity, which gives the older generation strength. Tensions develop when the younger generation fails to embrace the old ways that have worked in the past. Children struggle to assimilate into the mainstream of American life, while their parents want to keep them in the safety of the ethnic womb.

"So many plays and movies have this theme," Ficca said. "In this case, parents accept their children's decisions in order to keep together as much of the family as they can. The alternative is to break away from the family. Reluctantly, the parents accept change and the children compromise, too."

*Friday in America* takes place against the backdrop of the Korean War, resulting in various family traumas.

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Another subplot of *Friday in America* is social tensions and how they relate to various ethnic groups. For example, prejudice against Italian-Americans is viewed against the context of America's love affair with entertainers like Perry Como and Frank Sinatra, the popularity of pizza, and the sophisticated culture of opera.

### Director Dimond

Dimond's relationship with Ficca began on a weekend when he auditioned with the IWU professor as part of the admission process to the university's theatre program. Dimond recalled that "Ficca was supportive" and the audition resulted in admission to Illinois Wesleyan and a scholarship.

Now, Dimond welcomes working with Ficca as a professional colleague. "He calls me at all hours of the day and night," Dimond said, referring to Ficca.

As director of *Friday in America*, Dimond is responsible for casting, rehearsals, and other artistic and interpretive aspects of the play.

Those elements of the production are guided by Dimond's philosophy that theatre "is the most constructive and honest platform to say what you think.

"I'm not into principally seeing [theatre] as entertainment," he explained. "It's about using people's time constructively" and making productions "thought provoking" and "provocative."

Dimond, who was interviewed when about 80 percent of the play was cast, was confident that *Friday in America* would feature an all-IWU alumni ensemble, spanning the classes of 1967 to 1996.

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"I can safely say," according to Dimond, "this is the first time this has happened in Chicago."

### **Production History**

Ficca sent a *Friday in America* script to Auman and Dimond in 1997.

Dimond organized a reading of the play in August, 1998, involving eight IWU graduates, some of them reprising their original roles from a 1991 production of an earlier version of the play at Illinois Wesleyan. A second reading was organized in October, 1998, at Victory Gardens Theater with Ficca attending.

Subsequently, IWU began to pursue the goal of a four-week production in Chicago and performances of the play at IWU's McPherson Theatre in connection with Homecoming '99.

### **Ficca's Background**

Ficca—a native of Follansbee, W.Va., located in the state's panhandle north of Wheeling—has been a member of the IWU's theatre faculty since 1956. Over the years, he estimates that he has directed about 150 plays. Ficca also has written a half-dozen plays—including three versions of *Friday in America*.

"I came from a background, treated in the play," Ficca said, "where the expectation of ethnics was to finish high school, if you could, and then get a job usually in the steel mills."

Ficca, however, went to college, courtesy of Korean War U.S. Army service and the G.I. Bill. He is a graduate of West Liberty State College and received a master's degree and doctorate from the University of Iowa.

Although Ficca did some acting as a college student, it held little appeal for him. "I was never into reinventing myself," he explained, "and I wasn't

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into looking for a new job every five weeks. The life of an actor is precarious—though wonderful while it's happening.

"My ambition," Ficca said, "was not so much to work in theatre but to be a college professor, which I thought was hot stuff."

Ficca was profiled in a 1994 *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine* article. The piece included reminiscences from some of Ficca's former students, who are successful actors, including James Sutorius, a 1967 IWU graduate (*On Wings of Eagles*, *James A. Michener's Space*) and Frankie Faison, a 1971 IWU graduate (*Silence of the Lambs*, *Coming to America*).

"I have great love and affection for John Ficca," Sutorius said in the article. "He was very instrumental in getting me started off in the business on the right foot and with the right values. He is so passionate about and committed to his work, it made me passionate and committed also."

"I have wonderful memories of John Ficca as a teacher, director, and friend," Faison recalled in the *IWU Magazine* article. "He is a fantastic human being and a very talented individual. He was my first major exposure to the business of acting. He was an authority figure as a teacher—just tough enough, but with kindness and caring . . ."

### **Ficca on Good Theatre, Playwrights, Acting, Teaching**

A trademark of good theatre, according to Ficca, is audience involvement, which is difficult to achieve since in a theatre you're dealing with the reactions of hundreds of people at the same time. "So, it's not like a novel," he explained, "where you're dealing with one person, the reader."

Ficca counts among his favorite playwrights Shakespeare, Sophocles, George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde. Wilde's classic, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, according to Ficca, is the just about the best comedy ever

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written. On the more contemporary scene, Ficca is a fan of playwrights David Mamet, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Neil Simon.

After teaching theatre in five decades, Ficca doesn't see many changes in the art.

"When it comes to acting, Stanislavsky is still the major influence," he said, referring to the legendary Russian actor, theatre director, and teacher, whose system remains the basis of much Western actor-training and practice. "Everything done since, has been a variation of Stanislavsky."

The teaching challenge for Ficca is to stay current with what's happening in the world in terms of how subject matter is treated.

The key to successful playwrighting for Ficca is to have an idea that you want to share and develop characters who express that idea. Rather than starting out with the concept of a play as drama or comedy, Ficca believes "you put these people [characters] into a situation and they will tell you if it's a comedy or a serious play. The best plays are a mixture of those things."

### **IWU and Chicago Theatre**

Ficca hopes the Victory Gardens Theater production of *Friday in America* will spur other IWU productions in Chicagoland. Auman agrees, adding: "Every week I learn of another Illinois Wesleyan graduate on stage. The quality of IWU's graduates is outstanding, but, more importantly, it's their work ethic. I learned how to work hard at IWU."

As producer of *Friday in America*, Auman is responsible for finances, budgets, contracts, setting schedules, acquisition of space, and coordination of activities with IWU.

### **Victory Gardens Theater**

Auman is excited about the staging of *Friday in America* during the silver anniversary of Victory Gardens Theater, a mid-size facility dedicated to

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producing new plays by Chicago playwrights.

Victory Gardens stages about five plays a year, and rents its three stages for 12-18 other shows annually.

"*Friday in America*," Auman said, "is a new play by a living writer, so it's appropriate that it's being staged at Victory Gardens Theater, which is dedicated to the living playwright."

The world premiere of *Winter* by Claudia Allen, starring five-time Tony Award winner Julie Harris, is running June 16-July 18 at Victory Gardens.

### **About IWU**

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. The university's theatre program—then known as the School of Drama—began in 1947. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium.