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12 Ophelias Provocative Twist on Classic Tale

Feb. 6, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The Illinois Wesleyan School of Theatre Arts will present *12 Ophelias (a play with broken songs)* by Obie Award-winning playwright Caridad Svich, an atypical piece involving music, choreographed pieces, fights and even actual pools of water onstage. ***The play is recommended for mature audiences.***

The production, directed by Dani Snyder-Young, assistant professor of Theatre Arts/History and Theory and head of the Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts program, will open on Tuesday, Feb. 11 at 8 p.m. in McPherson with evening performances running through Feb. 15 and one matinee performance on Sunday, Feb. 16 at 2 p.m.



Actors dance and splash in a pool on the set.

The theatre department has also invited the campus community to take part in an open Q&A with Svich on Wednesday, Feb. 12 at 3:40 p.m. in McPherson Theatre (2 Ames Plaza East, Bloomington).

According to technical director Armie Thompson, no production has made a literal splash on the McPherson stage in nearly 15 years.

“We will definitely need to choreograph towels and dry sets of clothing into some moments during technical rehearsals. We are very psyched to find out how it will all work – it’s a continual work in progress,” said Snyder-Young.

Many of the actors profess that they were fully aware of what they would be getting into, however they have not allowed their reservations to keep them from rising up to the challenge.

“I have to admit that all of the elements overwhelmed me at the beginning of the process, but I knew it wouldn’t work if I held back,” said junior Sarah Menke, the actress who plays Ophelia. “I have to conquer my fears every night we run the show.”

Svich asks her audience to imagine a world where *Hamlet* is only “the before” – the beginning of another journey for Shakespeare’s characters. In Ophelia’s case, “To thine own self be true” is not merely a platitude in *12 Ophelias* – it will become her new way of life.

“In Svich’s play, the characters from *Hamlet* are as they were – and yet they are not,” said Snyder-Young. “Ophelia in *Hamlet* is the pawn of powerful men, and she is used by King Claudius and her father Polonius in their political maneuverings. Ultimately, that drives her mad. In this play, she is reborn. Ophelia’s journey involves becoming an agent of her own fate – to stop being an object, and start being a subject.”

The Hamlet character in *Ophelias* goes by the name “Rude Boy” – a title that Snyder-Young says many of her students have had no problem relating to.

"Many of us have had the experience of being in a bad relationship we couldn't see past at the time," said senior Kayla White, who plays Gertrude, Ophelia's mentor.

Snyder-Young's decision to direct *12 Ophelias* was a gradual one that was inspired by classroom discussions throughout nearly six years of teaching at Illinois Wesleyan. She observed that the majority of her students are females between the ages of 18 and 22, and conversations about sexuality and social expectations seem to surface often.

"My students are trying to find out who they are as opposed to who everyone else wants them to be, and part of that journey deals with sexuality and ownership of your body and how to have respect for yourself," said Snyder-Young.

Once she pinpointed the issues she wanted to address, Snyder-Young decided to use her strengths in applied theatre – theatre in service of community building, education or conflict negotiation – to bring *12 Ophelias* to Illinois Wesleyan.

"It is my hope that this show serves as an intervention in a set of discourses asking students to think critically about how they relate to their bodies, how they own their desires and take responsibility for their actions," said Snyder-Young.



12 Ophelias Set Designer Curtis Trout and his associate Sydney Achler '15 present their design model in front of the working set on the McPherson stage.

Svich's inseparable duo "R" and "G" – adapted versions of Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – serve as a bit of comic relief in *Ophelias*. Actors and Elaina Henderson (R) and Zach Wagner (G) said it was "nearly perfect casting" and an already rich personal relationship that formed their characterization.

"We first found R and G in a rehearsal when we did a movement exercise involving weight exchange, leaning and relying on each other. That's exactly how the chemistry between our characters works," said Wagner.

Some of the actors expressed ways in which they used Shakespeare's original characters to build their own new characters in this adaptation. Ben Mulgrew, who plays Rude Boy, said that there are moments where he can really draw a lot of material from Hamlet's seemingly numb exterior.

Like *Hamlet*, Svich's play is written in verse, but this type of meter breaks all the rules of the classics. Snyder-

Young describes moments working with her student actors on the modern verse text of the play where uncovering meaning can sometimes be challenging. When they discover what a situation from the text actually means in a context they can relate to, one of the students will inevitably comment, "Oh, that's real!"

Snyder-Young suggests that perhaps *12 Ophelias* feels so real because it reflects situations students play out in everyday life. As a professor, she sees things from a totally different perspective.

"I look at the relationships and moments in the play through the rearview mirror – I haven't known any 'Rude Boys' for at least the last decade – but these issues are impacting my student collaborators in a very immediate way," said Snyder-Young.

As the project comes full-circle, Snyder-Young couldn't be more pleased with the outcome, and the students could not be more eager to tell this story.

"The cast has been incredibly supportive in taking care of each other through difficult and challenging moments. I am very impressed with the students overall," said Snyder-Young.

Tickets for *12 Ophelias* are available for purchase at the McPherson Theatre Box Office. On Tuesday-Thursday and Sunday, General admission is \$10, and \$12 on Friday and Saturday. Student tickets are \$2 with a valid school ID, and seniors receive a \$1 discount.

For additional information or to reserve tickets, contact the McPherson Theatre Box Office at (309) 556-3232 or visit the website at www.iwu.edu/theatre.

Cast Members: Sarah Menke (Ophelia), Ben Mulgrew (Rude Boy), Joey Chu (H), Abigail Dryden (Mina), Elaina Henderson (R), Zach Wagner (G), Kayla White (Gertrude); Casey Cudmore, Mandi Corrao, Si'Mon Emmett, Priscilla Moy, Rosie Alspach (Chorus)

Production Team: Professor Dani Snyder-Young (Director), Tyler Stacey (Assistant Director), Chloe Bluml (Music Director), Amanda Vandermeer (Dramaturg), Ali Meek (Stage Manager), Katelyn VanPetten (Assistant Stage Manager), Alexa Weinzierl (Assistant Stage Manager), Mandi Corrao (Choreographer), Marcia McDonald (Costume Designer), Curtis Trout (Set Designer), Aimee Patterson (Lighting Designer), Ian Scarlato (Sound Designer)

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