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A New Stage

UWM dropped its professional theater conservatory in favor of a more populist program. Is that good for the community?

by Paul Kosidowski



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It's been a fine year for alumni of the UW-Milwaukee Theatre Department.

Mark Corkins and Torrey Hanson have continued their long association with the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. Hanson played key roles in *Translations* and *The Voyage Inheritance* (a production directed by former UWM professor Sanford Robbins), and Corkins performed in *Translations* and *Tartuffe*. Corkins even took a break from The Rep to play Macbeth for Milwaukee Shakespeare, quite a feat after tackling the title role in *King Lear* only months before.

James DeVita, after his original show about Charles Dickens was staged at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, is back at Spring Green preparing to play several roles at American Players Theatre. Brian Mani, too, is returning to Spring Green (to play the title role in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*), but not before appearing in Chamber Theatre's *A Lesson From Aloes*. Chris Flieller, artistic director for In Tandem, directed *Equus* for his theater as a joint production with his alma mater. Laurie Birmingham showed

her chops by playing Wisconsin's first Native American female physician in *Honor Song! The Dr. Rosa Minoka-Hill Story* at In Tandem. She also played several characters in Renaissance Theaterworks' *String of Pearls*. Chike Johnson performed with both Renaissance and The Rep, and Norman Moses with both Milwaukee Shakespeare and Skylight Opera Theatre.

But what's wrong with this picture? The roster here overwhelmingly represents Milwaukee's veteran actors. In fact, Johnson (who graduated in 2000) is the only sign that UWM's program existed after 1990. In truth, its Professional Theater Training Program, once one of the nation's leaders, has never really recovered since Robbins, its founder and director, took the PTTP to Delaware in 1988. After years of gradual decline, the program was put on hiatus in 2002.

The apparent death of the PTTP, though there are hopes of someday relaunching a graduate program, has had an unmistakable impact on Milwaukee's theater community, leaving many questions unan-

swered. Just what happened to UWM? And where is its program going?

When Robbins arrived at UWM in the mid-'70s, pitching his ideas for a professional training program, the idea was pretty radical. The program would admit one group of actors and theater technicians every three years, and they would get the exclusive attention of the faculty. This would be a self-contained, classics-oriented conservatory plopped in the midst of a public university: Production work and courses were exclusively for its students. It was a unique step in American theater training, as Robbins assembled an impressive faculty and recruited top-notch actors from around the U.S. For years, the PTTP was an unqualified success.

The university touted the program's success, says longtime UWM theater professor Corliss Phillabaum, but "never really responded to the success of the program with any infusion of funds." For student fellowships, for example, Robbins was forced to go outside UWM, securing support from the Bradley Foundation.

Eventually, the scramble for money helped drive Robbins away: the University of Delaware made a generous offer to buy out the entire program. Robbins and the PTTP moved there in 1988, and to this day it's ranked among the country's finest actor training programs.

Robbins' replacement, Malcolm Morrison, brought in a new group of faculty and kept the UWM program going with nearly the same success and prestige. But, according to Phillabaum, Morrison also became increasingly frustrated at the lack of support from UWM, the final straw coming when the university pulled the plug on what many considered a very successful Lake Park summer theater season.

When James DePaul took over in 1996, there was optimism anew, with talk of taking ambitious UWM productions to international theater festivals. People also anticipated DePaul using his

The new members of UWIM's acting faculty have displayed a keen interest in the broader theater community here. Bill Watson, head of the B.F.A. acting program, has performed with local companies since his arrival and has brought in other faculty interested in new, cutting-edge work. That's a welcome development, given the recent loss of Theatre X and Bialystock & Bloom, which were perhaps the city's most adventurous companies. Voice specialist Michelle Lopez has acted and taught in Los Angeles and Houston, and she's interested in connecting to Milwaukee's Hispanic community. Next year, she'll direct an evening of student-written monologues about local Latino life.

Rebecca Holderness is a director and choreographer previously based in New York whose work has a strong visual and physical bent. Her recent production of *Mr. Melancholy*, a new play by Australian Matt Cameron, was a startlingly fresh production, a heady mix of Harold Pinter power games, Looney Tunes absurdity and Beckett-like ennui. In May, she'll direct a new hip-hop play about life in Milwaukee, one the department commissioned from New York playwright Zakiyyah Alexander.

"I was drawn to Milwaukee based on the reputation of Theater X," Holderness explains. "That's more my kind of theater. If UWM is a research university, then part of that research should be the development of new artistic work."

That might not fit Chancellor Carlos Santiago's idea of research, but it certainly fits Bucker's vision for the Peck School as a place of collaboration between departments and genres, as well as his desire to free the program from the shadow of its past. It remains to be seen if the graduate program will be resurrected, but one thing is clear: The new UWM Theatre Department is already beginning to fill the vacuum left by the town's most daring companies. It just might provide the shot of innovation this community needs. ■

Paul Kosidowski is a frequent contributor to Milwaukee Magazine.

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