



SETTING THE STAGE FOR TOMORROW'S THEATRE INNOVATORS:

The University College Drama Program

BY KATHLEEN SANDUSKY

The University College Drama Program (UCDP) is one of the College's flagship programs, offering students the opportunity to combine high-standard practical, professional theatre training with a rich and rigorous academic program. Graduates go on to pursue careers in theatre and academia, as well as in associated professions such as arts administration, teaching and media. Now launching a three-year curriculum renewal

process, UCDP is seeking enhanced funding in order to improve facilities, and to bolster scholarship offerings and international study opportunities.

Onstage at the Helen Gardiner Phelan Playhouse, a man and woman are racing wildly about, parrying with wooden swords in a battle of the sexes. They're giving the creaking stage a workout as they rehearse for a production in Toronto's Fringe Festival, which has been renting the Playhouse through this hot July week.



opposite page:
UCDP students
perform in Friedrich
Schiller's *The
Robbers*, adapted
and directed by
Johanna Schall, 2008.

left: UCDP students
perform in *The
Orphan Muses*,
written by Michel
Marc Bouchard and
directed by Katka
Schroth, 2006

bottom left: UCDP
students work on
movement skills in the
performance studio

Quietly observing them is Ken Gass, an influential figure in Canadian theatre, the founder and artistic director of Toronto's Factory Theatre and a long-time instructor in the University College Drama Program. "This space is well-suited to experimental theatre as it is flexible and rather nice in terms of its ceiling height and dimension," says Gass, voice hushed. "This equipment is adequate, we can cope with it, but theatre technologies—lighting and sound and multimedia equipment for instance—are always changing. To stay ahead of the game we'll need to keep updating the Playhouse and the other rehearsal and performance spaces, as they do get a fair bit of use."

This is an understatement. Spaces are heavily used at UCDP, where students manage to fit in many hours of extracurricular preparation and rehearsals on top of their course loads. The three primary rehearsal/production spaces are in high demand from dawn to very late at night, every day, year round. Yet the spaces require improvement, some simple and some more financially challenging, in order to remain viable and safe sites for tomorrow's theatrical innovators. The exquisitely proportioned neo-Grecian Performance Studio requires a sprung wooden floor, for instance, to protect actors' knees from

slamming against linoleum-on-concrete during a fight rehearsal. The doors that separate this space from the room where the costumes are sewn must be soundproofed. In the Leonard Common Room, simple improvements such as curtains for the enormous windows and a rudimentary sound system would go a long way toward making the most of the space.

As Gass makes a heartfelt pitch for these and other improvements, his affection for UCDP shines through. Since longtime program Professor Pia Kleber departed in 2007, Gass has been filling in while the new director Professor Tamara Trojanowska, completed her term as Graduate Director in the Slavik Studies Department. Trojanowska, head of the Polish Language and Literature Program at the University of Toronto, and a contemporary theatre instructor with 20 years experience in universities across North America and Europe, assumed the post in July 2008. Gass has been working double-duty, stewarding UCDP while continuing as artistic director at the Factory Theatre. Why take on such a heavy load? "I believe in the program and have a deep respect for how hard the students work," he explains. "The legacy that Pia Kleber has left us is very strong, and very important."

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Ken Gass

FEATURE

Entry to UCDP is highly competitive, with the program accepting only 30 students each year out of the approximately 200 who audition. Students must audition annually in order to remain in the program. Unlike many other theatre schools where students are streamed into a particular discipline or type of theatre (as an actor in musicals for instance), UCDP requires that its students explore all aspects of theatre-making, through a demanding mix of practical subjects combined with highly challenging academics. One of the comments that movement instructor Sallie Lyons often hears from professional colleagues who hire UCDP grads is that these young artists are not only trained practically, but that they also bring with them a superb grasp of theatre as a subject matter. "Our graduates leave with an understanding of the wider context of theatre as an art form and this enriches their professional work," says Lyons.

Part of that breadth of knowledge includes a foundation in world theatre, a point of pride at UCDP vigorously cultivated by Pia Kleber. Peter Freund has been technical director of the program for more than a decade. "Over the years we've had very strong interaction with theatre artists from around Canada and the world," he notes, citing visits from such international luminaries as Théâtre du Soleil's Jean-Jaques Lemêtre, renowned German director Peter Stein, and long-time Peter Brook collaborator Yoshi Oida. "That international broadening of perspective has been vital for our students." UCDP students can travel in their final year throughout North America and Europe. Most recently, a small group of students studied at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan accompanied by Johanna Schall, the granddaughter of Bertolt Brecht, who taught directing and performance at UCDP for the 2007-2008 year. Such extraordinary access to the wider theatrical world is a precious experience for which the students work very hard.

But the program's gruelling pace is difficult to maintain, particularly in fourth year, which brings the additional challenge of a professional production. Add to that the burden of part-time work to cover rent and tuition, and the students' success may be in jeopardy. "Scholarships are terribly important to our students," says Gass, noting that the pressures of paying back significant student loans upon graduation make it even more difficult for recent alumni to move into the professional field for which they have trained so hard.

Still, students drive themselves to achieve. In her final year of the program Natasha McEwen (UC '08) opted to take on the volunteer role of student administrator, meeting weekly with faculty and staff. This commitment required significant sacrifice. "I was very grateful that the program was able to organize a scholarship for me," says McEwen. "This degree is so time-consuming. It's a collaborative discipline so you practically live in the building, which is great, it's very collegial and stimulating, but the prospect of being able to succeed and still hold down a part-time job is very unlikely. We all find ways to cope because we have to, but it's very



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did it for the love of this program and because of my belief in the good creative and academic work that goes on here."

The most critical UCDP funding goal is that of curriculum renewal. Incoming program director Tamara Trojanowska explains that one of the objectives is to expand and formalize the program's longtime collaborations with associated University of Toronto programs. "This cooperation must include the amazingly vibrant and international nature of the program's profile fostered under Pia Kleber's leadership," says Trojanowska, noting that the curriculum renewal will feature additional studies of Canadian theatrical history, as well as new international courses that will explore the rich theatrical experiences of Latin America, Asia and Africa. She adds: "I'm looking forward to working with this group of extraordinary people whose experience, expertise, devotion and generosity impress and inspire me."

top: Back: (l-r) UCDP student Mike Conley, Technical Director Peter Freund, UCDP students Alaine Hutton and Natasha McEwen. Seat: (l-r) UCDP student Chelsea Mayne and UCDP Program Administrator Colleen Osbourne.