

SEGUE

Visiting Playwright prepares SIUE students for performances

Medley talks process, upcoming one-act plays

By Madelaine Deardeuff
For the Intelligencer

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Department of Theater and Dance within the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) offers students unique experiences that help them harness their craft and learn about the human experience.

On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show, co-host Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, interviews playwright Cassandra Medley. This episode will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, March 24, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.

Medley was recently on campus to present a portion of her play, "Noon Day Sun," during the Second Annual Playwright Festival, sponsored

by SIUE's Black Theater Workshop, the Department of Theater and Dance, and the Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion.

From April 9-14, SIUE University Theater will present two of Medley's one-act plays, "Daughter" and "Son," along with the new play, "The War Within," in the Metcalf Student Experiential Theater on campus.

"Playwrights and writers produce such value for our society," Budzban says. "What was your journey that brought you to becoming a playwright?"

"Since I was a small child, I always loved the theater," Medley says. "As janitors in Detroit, my parents were rather mystified by that. However, they supported my interests and allowed me to join children's theater, take classes at the museum.

"At the time, Detroit was a thriving city and the

automobile industry supported everything—theater, museums and dance studios—and the bubble was so big, it could not burst."

Medley took classes at the University of Michigan with dreams of becoming an actor. In 1971, she moved to New York City to join the industry. The pressure, steady rejection and lack of opportunities for a person of color, such as herself, steered her away from acting. From there, she became a literary manager, a position similar to that of an editor.

In this position, she analyzed and wrote script reviews each day, which led her to rub elbows with some of the most prolific American playwrights, including Arthur Miller and Sam Shepard. With other aspiring writers, she learned how to create works for the stage with passion through workshops.

"I found myself and

roped my way into writing my first play," she said. "My first play was produced, and my career just went from there."

The playwright drew from the experiences she witnessed around her, including neighborhood gossip, untold stories that are often swept under the rug, and moments she personally treasured.

"You have been on campus as a visiting artist, helping students understand the current immigration crisis through your commissioned play, 'The War Within,'" Budzban leads. "What has that experience involved?"

"I've been working with the students to understand their opinions, observations, learn what they have heard from family or other students, and work with a communal group," Medley explained. "All students are in a chorus, and roles come out of that chorus. It involves a lot of improvisation.

"They are inventing new ways to tell a story. We took news stories and transformed them into lines from fictional voices. It allows students to research their own opinions, the issues and see the complications involved with each issue."

Medley hopes to help aspiring actors, playwrights and directors develop the skills she hoped to have learned during her young adulthood, while learning about complex issues like immigration.

"Speaking of complex issues, 'Daughter' and 'Son,' are all about the issue of war and the veteran experience," Budzban says. "How is that preparation coming along?"

"The students have truly astonished me when we began working on these plays," she exclaims.

"Seeing students, with an average age of about 20, who did not remember the major issues of the

Iraq War, witness experiences like the threat of weapons of mass destruction for the first time, is remarkable," she says. "They also learned about the experiences of Vietnam veterans, who came back from war and struggled with mental health issues."

In "Daughter," a mother tries to reckon with injuries suffered by her daughter, while serving in the military during the Iraq War. "Son" features a man's struggles with haunting flashbacks from war during his sister's wedding.

The one-act plays, written by Medley and directed by Kathryn Bentley, will be presented April 9-14 in the Metcalf Student Experiential Theater.

To hear the entire conversation between Budzban and Medley, tune in to Segue at 9 a.m. this Sunday, March 24 on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.