

Regional

Theater can be a thinking, learning experience

An evening at the theater can be about having a laugh while seeing a comedy, or enjoying song and dance in a musical. It can also make you think about society and people different from yourself. Kathryn Bentley, a director and associate professor in the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, works with plays that educate and reach out to society.

Bentley teaches multicultural theater, beginning acting, voice and movement and has developed a class with a colleague in the art department on community arts collaboration.

"We're getting students out into the community and teaching them the landscape of community art," she explained. She has also led the department's black theater workshop for 10 years.

"Black theater workshop is an annual event that we do here on campus that is open to any and all students," she said. "I've seen it go through many different lives since I've been here. When I first started we did a major production for black theater workshop. Now I will decide on a theme, sometimes in conjunction with the student director, and then the students work together to devise pieces

or find pieces already in the African-American canon that speak to that theme. We often do poetry or songs or scenes." This year, Bentley said, the workshop is going in a different, what she called an exciting direction.

"We're taking black theater workshop on the road so to speak, kind of a street theater, theater with a social change type feel to it," she said. "Releasing the Past Tense" is the theme that the students have developed this year. Through it, they will be looking at issues of social justice. She said that issues that have happened in the local area, particularly the Michael Brown case, have inspired her students to ask important questions through their work.

"What is their voice? How are they feeling about all of these things that are happening? They're taking that theme and meeting a couple times a week and devising pieces around that theme," Bentley explained, adding that the productions will be offered to professors to use in their classrooms.

"It's a way to spark discussion about issues of social justice and issues that students on our campus feel are important," Bentley said. "Last year we went to several churches and community centers and we'll be doing that

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again this year."

Bentley is also directing the department's winter production of "Venus" by Suzan-Lori Parks, a Pulitzer and Tony Award winning playwright. The play highlights objectification, body image and man's inhumanity to man.

"I thought it is time to tackle one of her works," Bentley said. "And when I say tackle I mean that. Her work is not simple and it does not shy away from issues and it hits you hard and people get upset. It's like how dare she? How dare this be presented in this way?"

The play is about Saartjie 'Sarah' Baartman, a South African woman from the Khoikhoi tribe who was sold into the "freak" show world of London in the early 1800s.

"She had what it England would be considered a very large derriere and became this freak to the English," Bentley said. "They put her on display and exploited her for that."

This work is not intended to be historically accurate, but rather to use her

story as a social commentary, according to Bentley. Producing a play like this with difficult themes forces an audience to think about who they are and what their reactions to what they are seeing are.

"You have to dig deep in this show," she said. "It's been several times in rehearsal when my students have been moved by what they are doing and said that it didn't feel right, that it felt uncomfortable. I said exactly. You must not back down from that because it is uncomfortable the things that woman had to go through. And theater is about bringing that life to the stage. The light and the dark. We have to bring it all.

"It's about growth for our students that are involved," she added. "We have students that come from all different levels of training. Some of them have never been in a show. They initially have limited knowledge of the topics we tackle and our department tackles some meaty topics. So when we have those moments where something happens that can change a student's heart or their outlook on things, then I'm like ok we're on the right track."

Venus also features the work of two returning alumni of the theater and

dance department: Olivia Near and Curtis Lewis. Near, who plays Sarah in the show, was involved in some of the department's very first black theater workshop productions started by Lisa Colbert. She is now a professional actor and singer in the St. Louis area.

"Extremely talented," Bentley said of Near. "The leadership she had with the workshop was just phenomenal. I called her and asked her to come play this part because I felt I needed an anchor. All the parts are hard. Olivia came and once again showed that leadership and professionalism, which I think is important for our students to see.

"Curtis Lewis who is my assistant director was one of my first students," Bentley said. "He's been wonderful. It's been good to have him because he's quiet but quite brilliant and he's always observing so I appreciate the skills that he brings."

Bentley just returned from a sabbatical in New York City where she was working on a solo performance and playwrighting.

"I'm working on a solo performance piece that started off focusing on women's perception of their bodies," she said. "It's segueing a little from that into looking at this idea of

a strong black woman and what does that mean. What's underneath that, and it has to do with body image and mental health."

She returned to a company she worked with when she lived in New York that does community focused theater in Harlem. Bentley assistant directed one of their pieces and performed with them a couple of times.

"I did a weekend theater workshop and performed with a group of women from the League of Professional Theater Women in New York," she said. "I worked with the Colombian artist-activist Patricia Ariza. She was phenomenal. It was great working with her and creating this devised piece about violence against women."

While in New York Bentley also found time to appear briefly in the Fox TV series Gotham. She spent a day playing "Singing Bible Woman Number 2." She appeared with Robin Lord Taylor, who plays Penguin in the series.

"It was so much fun," she said. "I had a great time. It was a full day of fun and singing and three seconds on screen. If you blinked you missed it."

James Wulfsong is chair of the department of theater and dance at SIUE.