

SIUE stage production touches real life

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Peter Cocuzza.

This week on Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Dean Greg Budzban, PhD, hosts Peter Cocuzza, SIUE professor in theater performance.

As Budzban is a mathematician and Cocuzza a theatre director, the primary focus of discussion is a topic which fuses the interests of both scholars – SIUE’s upcoming stage production of *Proof*. A play that takes place near a university campus in Chicago, *Proof* revolves around the lives of a renowned mathematician who suffers from mental illness, and the daughter who cares for him. An extraordinary mathematical proof has been discovered, but the creator remains a mystery throughout the course of the production. As the play unfolds, the daughter becomes increasingly concerned that, along with her father’s mathematical gifts, she may have inherited his mental illness as well. A stage production and piece of literature that has won both a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize, *Proof* is not to be missed.

Both Budzban and Cocuzza find the play to be especially powerful because it addresses fundamental questions about life. How do we provide “proof” for the important things in our lives? How can we determine if someone is telling the truth about professed love? How can we

know that we can trust our family members when they say they have “our best interests” in mind? How can we prove to others that what we say is true is, in fact, true?

The men also discuss the similarities in the aesthetics of mathematics and artistic works, with Cocuzza explaining, “You have a set of numbers, and they just look like numbers, but there is deep structure. It’s like taking a set of notes in music. It’s just notes, but the way you put them together, you get a song.”

Joining the SIUE faculty in 1995, Cocuzza was appointed as a generalist professor in theater and dance studies and has since fulfilled a distinguished career of nearly 21 years with the University. Previously serving as outreach director for weekend programs at Point Park University, Cocuzza performed as a director and actor for theatrical companies for many years prior to joining academia.

Now having been a part of more than 30 stage performances at SIUE, Cocuzza cites the joy he finds in working with new students. “I’ve been involved with a lot of musicals and a lot of big casts,” he says. “I love helping new freshmen get involved right away. At the time, every production that you do is the best one you do.”

Just as SIUE students enjoy small class sizes and individualized interactions with their faculty, Cocuzza confirms that faculty also benefit from the opportunities of working with smaller groups. He shares, “A smaller cast allows me to work with students in a way that I can’t in a bigger classroom, just like it presents the students a new learning opportunity.”

Cocuzza explains that theatrical productions provide more than an entertainment value to viewing audiences – they allow opportunities for community involvement, enhancement of the University’s reputation and potential recruitment of future students by piquing their interests in the arts.

The gentlemen discuss future plans for stage productions as Cocuzza reveals the department’s summer lineup of Pump Boys and Dinettes followed by Hairspray. Auditions for these shows begin Saturday, Feb. 20. Members of the public, who wish to be involved, are encouraged to call the SIUE theater office (618-650-2774) for further details.

Proof will take the stage at SIUE’s Dunham Hall from Wednesday-Sunday, Feb. 17-21. Performances will be held at 7:30 each evening followed by a Sunday matinee at 2 p.m. Tickets are free to SIUE students and can be purchased by the public by calling the SIUE Box Office at 618-650-2774, or by visiting the Box Office Monday through Friday from 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

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