

SIUE's radio drama nears season's end



Friday, December 15, 2017

For 47 years, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premier radio station, WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound, has served as a powerful mode of education and artistic expression for students within the College of Arts and Sciences.

During radio's rise to popularity from the 1920s to 1950s, families around the world would gather around their radios and tune in to listen to concerts, the news and episodic radio dramas.

Relying entirely on dialogue, music and sound effects to help listeners imagine the characters and story, writers, radio producers and actors used these auditory soap operas as a way to share stories across programs of many different genres.

Steve Jankowski, WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound general manager and SIUE alum, and Peter Cocuzza, professor of theater and dance, joined together to bring their fresh take on serial radio dramas to life with their production of "Academia Underground."

On this week's episode of Segue, CAS Dean Greg Budzban, PhD, welcomes Cocuzza, Jankowski, and the cast of "Academia Underground," to the studio to discuss how WSIE and its new radio drama came to be, and for a performance of three scenes straight from the show.

"WSIE was part of the Department of Mass Communications from the beginning," Jankowski says. "John Rider, the department chair, was instrumental in getting the station licensed and on the air."

"When you think about the history of radio, dramas played a pivotal role in the medium's popularity," Budzban mentions.

"Radio was a part of every household in America," Cocuzza comments. "Families would literally gather around the radio and tune in to their favorite stations. Sometimes, they'd get a concert, an opera singer, a radio drama and then the news."

“It was certainly a central part of the entertainment experience in our country,” Budzban says.

With the advent of television, however, radio’s popularity was drastically reduced, and with the creation of episodic television dramas, radio soap operas fell into obscurity.

“It’s a lost art, but one of the things Steve and I found so interesting was that we could bring back the spirit of an old, radio-style drama,” Cocuzza said. “It’s been a learning experience, but it’s also been a teaching tool.”

After Jankowski and Cocuzza received the go-ahead for their production, the professor recruited his own students to outline and cast the new show, entitled “Academia Underground.” Edited by students studying radio production in the Department of Mass Communications, the show dives into the lives of students and faculty members at the fictitious Aurum University.

During the first season, the main four characters, Rita, Delilah, Simon, Devan and Professor Niazoff, have tackled issues such as drinking and plagiarism. The show airs on Wednesdays at 10 p.m. on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

The show features performances from students within the Department of Theater and Dance, including freshmen Jenna Heng and Clara Parker, sophomore Oliver Bacus, and junior Hannah Warntjes, who also serves as the production’s assistant director.

“Without giving too much of the plot away, Delilah, performed by Clara Parker, has come to this fictitious university with the belief that she would find her mother there, since she was adopted,” Cocuzza said.

“Academia Underground” will air its season finale at 10 p.m. on Wednesday, Dec. 27. Although the season has come to an end, Jankowski and Cocuzza share that this is not the last time listeners have a chance to hear about the drama unfolding at Aurum University.

“Peter and I have talked about the possibility of rebroadcasting all eight episodes this spring and pulling lifts, or sound-bites, from each episode to promote each episode,” Jankowski says. “We’ve also had some conversations with Chuck Harper about possibly doing a live performance at Dunham Hall Theater this summer.

“It’s been a wonderful experience and experiment for us and our students,” he continues. “Whatever happens in the future will just be a bonus for us!”

“‘Academia Underground’ has been a wonderful use of WSIE as a laboratory for our students,” Budzban says. “It has been quite creative, and I’ve enjoyed it! I look forward to episode eight and can’t wait to see what’s going on with these characters.

To hear the entire interview with Budzban, Cocuzza and Jankowski, as well as scenes from “Academia Underground,” tune in to Segue this Sunday, Dec. 17 on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound. Missed the show the first time around? Log on to siue.edu/wsie to listen to the entire season in the show’s archives.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications