

Award-winning Playwright to Premiere “The Great Divide” at SIUE



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Over the past month, Chuck Harper, chair of the Department of Theater and Dance, as well as several student actors from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, has been working diligently to finish, rehearse and premiere a new play by award-winning playwright and visiting artist-in-residence E.M. Lewis.

On this week's episode of Segue, the premier radio show that discusses the ideas and issues within the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) at SIUE, Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, interviews Lewis about her career, the upcoming performances of “The Great Divide,” and the real world themes that are often portrayed in her fictional works.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. this Sunday, April 15, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

“It's clear you found your passion. In terms of being a career artist, when did you realize that being a playwright or writer was what you wanted to do with your life?” Budzban inquires.

“It is a bit circuitous,” Lewis says. “For a lot of playwrights, there are less direct routes for artists rather than that of an accountant.

“I grew up in rural Oregon about an hour south of Portland, and I was a person who loved books, and was the daughter of teachers. I read and loved stories, but didn't know at the time that I could write stories of my own.”

In high school, Lewis was active in theater but didn't enjoy acting. She also joined the school's debate team and wrote for the student newspaper, and maintained her passion for the written word by drafting her own poetry and short stories.

After graduation, Lewis took a year off before enrolling at a community college.

“I circled back by the time I entered Willamette University and chose to major in English, and then I went to graduate school in Los Angeles for writing,” she says. “I took a playwriting class and all of a sudden, all the bells and whistles went off in my head. I knew this was the way I wanted to tell stories, and I've been writing plays ever since.”

The playwright believes she is a person who isn't afraid to ask big questions about the universe. In her mind, a play will come into her head and characters will begin to speak to her and embody the same questions she has as a human being. Topically, her plays tend to evolve around those larger issues, such as war, gun control, and politics.

“These issues are in the plays, but the human heart always comes first,” she says. “I always ask how these humans would wrestle with these larger ideas in their lives.”

“You say that these characters have a voice in your head?” Budzban asks.

“They speak to me, in a way,” Lewis replies. “Those first bits of dialogue, or a line, is imagined and I ask myself what kind of character would say that. Then, I start to reveal him or herself in the process of that dialogue.”

“That’s wonderful!” Budzban exclaims.

Set in 1986, the playwright’s five-and-a-half hour drama “Magellanica” follows a group of scientists and engineers who winters at the South Pole Research Center in Antarctica. At the time, Lewis explains, the hole in the ozone layer had just been discovered. The characters’ eight-month stay in one of the most remote parts of the earth allowed the playwright to explore ecological questions such as how the hole in the ozone layer formed and if humans had played any part in its formation, but tied it to the larger ecological issues, specifically climate change.

“I had to understand what these researchers were capable of knowing well enough to form the dialogue and make it realistic, soft and true,” she says. “Our audiences at the Portland Rep were wonderful. We invited them to get to know their seat neighbors or bring and eat food during the performance since they were going to be there for a while!”

On April 18-22, the Department of Theater and Dance will host the world premiere of Lewis’ newest play, “The Great Divide.”

“More than anything, the play speaks about ‘the great divide’ that is occurring in America right now,” she says. “This play was particularly inspired by an event that happened in my home state of Oregon. In January 2016, a group of people came to eastern Oregon and took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. For 41 days, they held on to that with guns. There was a massive police response and it was a huge protest event.

“Protests were happening on various issues then and even happen today. It observes how we protest, asking how we make our country become what we want it to be, and if we can find a common ground.”

“Clearly, the militia that were involved decided on that particular location, and just because their voices were heard doesn’t mean they used the best strategy,” Budzban says.

“We talk about all our country’s protests, from the Boston Tea Party, the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington, and most recently, the March for our Lives and Black Lives Matter demonstrations,” she says. “The play reaches farther and asks larger questions about protests in America, how we find our voice and what brings us together.”

Lewis mentions that it has been an amazing process to work with the students in the Department of Theater and Dance, and with the director, Chuck Harper. When she first arrived at SIUE, she only had about 30 pages of her play developed, and the department chair recognized the playwright’s burning desire to work on and finish the piece.

“I was grateful for his trust in me that I could come and we could do something together,” she says. “Just yesterday, hot off the presses, we received our 85-page scripts. The students, Chuck and I all discovered this play together.

“The Great Divide” will premiere at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, April 18, at the Dunham Hall Theater. There will be shows each night until the final performance at 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 22. Tickets can be purchased from the theater box office by calling 618-650-2774. SIUE students receive free admission.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications