

SEGUE: SIUE students as cast of Xtigone

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On this week's episode of Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's weekly radio program exploring the lives and work of the people on campus and beyond, College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Dean Greg Budzban, PhD, interviews theater students Kiara Ulmer, of St. Louis, Jenna Heng, of Overland Park, KS, and Avalon Palmer, of Chicago Heights

The three students will be performing in Nambi Kelley's Xtigone, an upcoming production by the Department of Theater and Dance. Based off of Sophocles' Antigone, the show utilizes hip hop poetry, dance and dialogue that speaks with an urban voice to tell the story of a woman's quest for her community's truth.

This episode of Segue airs at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 9. Listeners can tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound or siue.edu/wsie.

Photo: Left to right, Joseph King, Kayla Bush and Garron Orozco

The play follows Xtigone, also known as Tigs, after her brothers are killed due to gang violence. Instead of revealing the harsh reality of their deaths, Marcellus, Tigs' uncle and mayor of the city, decides to cover it up by burying the bodies. Throughout the show, Tigs must decide if she wants to fight against her uncle to uncover the truth about the violence that claimed her brothers.

"Although Xtigone is based on the famous play by Sophocles, it brings an interesting twist to things," says Budzban. "Can you talk about the characters and roles you play in the show?"

"I play Le Roi, and he's working for Marcellus only because he has kids to feed and care for," says Ulmer. "He has to make sure certain things are brushed under the rug, and his coping mechanism is through humor, as he's very silly."

"I play the character Fay, and she is the wife of Marcellus," says Heng. "Throughout the play, she supports her husband and is wholly in favor of the law he proposes to cover up the violence happening in the community. She presents as the dutiful and perfect politician's wife."

"I'm playing Izzy, Tigs' sister," says Palmer. "After losing two brothers, Izzy is struggling to protect Tigs, her only living close relative. She's a strong black woman who reminds Tigs to look out for herself."

"How do you connect these issues to yourself and find the motivation for the struggle your character is experiencing?" asks Budzban.

"I have to think of what it would be like if I lost my siblings," responds Palmer. "Even now in rehearsal, we're trying to find those points where Tigs and I are having those emotional connections while thinking about our brothers. Tigs still has bright eyes. They're only teenagers."

“It sounds fascinating,” says Budzban. “The emotions involved seem extremely powerful. Has it been difficult to capture that in rehearsals?”

“At times, it’s been difficult,” responds Ulmer. “There are a few scenes that are heavy on me, especially the funeral scene, because these things happen in real life. People die due to their skin tone and being racially profiled. The people who go through it don’t deserve it, and I try to connect what’s happened in the real world when I’m in those scenes.”

“Talk to me about the struggle between being open about the violence and keeping it undercover,” says Budzban.

“My character does everything she can with her power and money to cover up all of the violence,” responds Heng. “There’s an idea running throughout her storyline that no matter how far you go to cover up the truth, it will come out eventually. She gets hit very hard by the consequences of that.”

“Being from Chicago, I definitely think that voices need to be expressed when it comes to violence and what’s going on,” adds Palmer. “There’s a point where I open my brothers’ caskets in the play, and I like that because it’s a sincere moment. We have to see them and see why they died, and there’s many references throughout the play about the dead children of the streets.

“Many of them were poor children. The rich get richer, and the poor stay poor. Those are the dynamics that we’ve been trying to channel throughout the show.”

Xtigone will be playing in Dunham Hall Theater from Feb. 19 to Feb. 22 at 7:30 p.m. and Feb. 23 at 2 p.m. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit siue.edu/theater or call 618-650-2774.

Tune in at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 9, to WSIE 88.7 The Sound to hear the entire conversation.