



Arian Moayed in the 1999 IU Theatre production of *The Servant of Two Masters*. Moayed is co-founder of Waterwell Theatre in New York. Courtesy photo

By Tracy Bee

BREAK A LEG!

THESE ARE THE GLORY DAYS OF BLOOMINGTON THEATER

Pick any weekend, any week of the year, and there's bound to be a theater production somewhere in Bloomington. From large national touring shows at IU Auditorium to small first-time productions in The Irish Lion pub, Bloomington is a town saturated with theater. "For a city our size, we've got some great theater," says Jonathan Michaelsen, chair of the Department of Theatre and Drama at IU. In Bloomington's theatrical *mélange* there are three major players. IU's Lee Norvelle Theatre and Drama Center mixes comedy, drama, and musicals, providing a practicum for theater students and a taste of theater through the ages for the broader campus and community. The Bloomington Playwrights Project focuses exclusively on showcasing new plays and new playwrights. Relatively new in town, the professional Cardinal Stage Company has quickly established a strong presence with its quality productions. ¶ The three companies have much in common. All are nonprofit organizations and draw on some of the same talent. All have an educational mission and a commitment to the community. While each has its devoted fans, the three share an overlapping—if not identical—audience. But for all their similarities, no one would confuse them. Each company has its own history, method, and mission.

IU THEATRE

THE LEE NORVELLE THEATRE AND DRAMA CENTER

Dead Man Walking
October 10-18

Andrew Lippa's
The Wild Party
October 24-Nov 1

Hamlet
November 14-22

Marisol
December 5-13

Stop Kiss
February 6-14

An Ideal Husband
February 27-28,
March 3-7

The America Play
March 27-April 4

Oklahoma!
April 17-25



INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT of Theatre and Drama, celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, is the center of theater life in Bloomington. While the community boasts a number of talented permanent residents, theater would be very different without IU's program feeding the stages and back stages of local companies. "We bring a significant renewable resource to Bloomington every year," says John Kinzer, director of audience development.

IU Theatre and Drama offers everything from the crowd-pleasing *Seussical the Musical* to new cutting-edge work, but there is a method to the scheduling. The number one priority is to serve students, both those in the theater program and others on campus. Because of this

educational mission, there is a need to include classic plays—those of Molière and Shakespeare, for example—as well as new works that challenge the audience. While this year's *Hamlet* will provide the classic education, last season's *American Ma(u)l* falls into the latter category.

"Some of our audience members were shocked" by the language in that contemporary play, Michaelsen says, while others "fully embraced it."

A faculty committee headed by Michaelsen and acting and directing professor Dale McFadden selects the plays that make up a season. In choosing plays, IU Dramaturg Thomas Shafer explained, the committee

Academy Award-winner Kevin Kline is standing on the left with his right leg up in this 1966 variety show photo. Courtesy photo

members ask a number of questions. What will students, not just acting students but also designers and

technicians, learn from producing the play? How will the plays inform students who are being introduced to the theater process or studying theater? How does the play support the educational mission of other departments on campus? Finally, Shafer says, the committee asks, "Will our plays stimulate our audience, take them to new places, and expose them to new situations or experiences?"

Elements of costume, set, lights, sound, and theater technology also must be considered.



University Theatre's inaugural season (1933) opened with this "slightly daring" production of *The First Mrs. Fraser*.
Courtesy photo

“Will our plays STIMULATE OUR AUDIENCE, TAKE THEM TO NEW PLACES, AND EXPOSE THEM TO NEW SITUATIONS OR EXPERIENCES?”
— IU DRAMATURG THOMAS SHAFER

“Eight massive musicals in a row would be almost impossible to produce with any artistic merit, given our production calendar,” Shafer says. This design work must be spread throughout the year. The season opener, the intimate drama *Dead Man Walking*, balances *Okla-homa!*, the large-scale musical that will end the season. *Dead Man Walking*, *Marisol*, and *Stop Kiss* will challenge audiences with modern themes, while *Hamlet* and *An Ideal Husband* represent the canon of drama and comedy.

IU serves its students not just with opportunities for practice, but with opportunities to learn from professionals. Over the course of the academic year, IU Theatre brings in professional playwrights and performers to work with students and present to the public. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks was on campus last year, and her work, *The America Play*, will open in March.

IU Theatre has grown and evolved over the years since the University Players, the first theater group sanctioned by the university, was established in 1928 by English faculty member Lee Norvelle. University Players brought together talented students from disparate and competing campus theater groups that can be

traced back to the late 1800s. It soon transitioned into the University Theatre and presented its first season 75 years ago this fall.

That inaugural season opened with the largely forgotten *The First Mrs. Fraser*, a then-popular romantic comedy revolving around the slightly daring—for the 1930s—subject of divorce. Other plays, Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, would be just as welcomed by today’s audiences as they were in 1933.

To honor the man who created the theater program and guided it through its first years, the University Theatre was renamed the Lee Norvelle Theatre and Drama Center in 2002 when a new facility opened adjacent to the Theatre Building. At the Norvelle Center, IU gained two new performance spaces: the proscenium stage of the Ruth N. Halls Theatre and the flexible space of the Wells-Metz.

“With two spaces we are able to place a play in a theater where it fits,” Shafer says. “While it’s possible to have an effective production of a two-character play in the Halls, it is likely that such a piece would be more effective in an intimate configuration in the Wells-Metz,” where seating can be

moved according to the needs of the play.

A majority of IU Theatre students use the skills they gain to work as artists, administrators, and educators, says Kinzer, but IU has produced some “stars” in the acting world. Patricia Kalember, best known for her role on the television show *thirtysomething*, graduated in 1978. Claude Akins, remembered for his early film roles as a tough guy and later as the star of the 1970s television show *The Misadventures of Sheriff Lobo*, attended IU in 1944. The most famous alumnus is the Academy Award-winning actor Kevin Kline, class of 1970. More recently, 2002 graduates Arian Moayed and Tom Ridgely, class of 2001, were co-founders of New York’s Waterwell Theatre, a critically acclaimed ensemble company that specializes in producing new work.

While the primary mission of IU Theatre is educational, Michaelsen says, its second mission is to serve the community. “Live theater needs an audience to make the circle complete. We can rehearse and rehearse, but without an audience we don’t complete our task.”

BLOOMINGTON PLAYWRIGHTS PROJECT



(from left) Joanne Dubach (seated), Hillary Hittner, Sarah Feldman, Kate Braun in *The Housewives of Mannheim*, by Alan Brody, which won the 2005 Reva Shiner National Playwriting Contest. *Courtesy photo*

BLOOMINGTON PLAYWRIGHTS PROJECT (BPP) knows the importance of an audience. While IU presents the plays of Shakespeare and prominent contemporary playwrights, the BPP takes on the challenge of developing and producing new plays. Despite some lean times and the artistic highs and lows that come with producing untested works with largely volunteer artists and technicians, the BPP thrives.

“We’ve had some really generous people who believe in what we do,” says Artistic Director Rich Perez. “We’ve proven that we aren’t a fly-by-night operation. The BPP struggles but is in a good place.”

The BPP began almost 30 years ago with a friendship. Jim Leonard and Tom Moseman were recent college graduates and coworkers at

“Good work BEGETS MORE GOOD WORK.”
— CO-FOUNDER JIM LEONARD.

the Gables pub. “I was washing dishes and Tom was a grill cook,” Leonard recalls. They started the BPP in 1979 to showcase the plays that they and their friends wrote. The two applied for and won a grant from the Indiana Arts Commission, and the Bloomington Playwrights Project was born.

“Tom and I were simply trying to find a way to put new plays on their feet so we could both do what we loved and live in the town that we loved,” Leonard says. The first play produced was Jim Poyser’s *Hand on Mirror*. BPP recruited an IU visiting professor to direct and thus began the theater’s long collaboration with IU. Leonard believes the association with

the university lent credibility to their project. “We didn’t want the BPP to be perceived as a vanity project, and we wanted to establish a creative relationship with the theater department for obvious reasons.”

The BPP placed a notice in the *Dramatists Guild* magazine and drew a surprising number of national submissions. “Good work begets more good work,” Leonard says. A year or two later, Leonard’s plays were produced off-Broadway, and the contacts from those experiences benefitted the BPP, which incorporated as a nonprofit in 1981.

Leonard and Moseman eventually left Bloomington, but Poyser and Reva Shiner,

BLOOMINGTON
PLAYWRIGHTS PROJECT

Sans Merci
October 23-November 8

Nocturnal
January 9-February 14

Chicks with Dicks II
April 9-25, 8:00 pm

BloomingPlays Festival
May 14-30, 8:00 pm



The cast of *Hand on Mirror* rehearses for the Bloomington Playwrights Project's first production, a play by Jim Poyser, in 1979. *Courtesy photo*

playwrights from the theater's early days, are still involved. Poyser, the managing editor of *NUVO*, an arts, politics, and culture magazine in Indianapolis, writes and directs. Shiner is a patron and benefactor and the original funder of the Reva Shiner National Playwriting Contest, which annually rewards a full-length play with its first production.

Today, the BPP is an established theater with an extensive educational program that reaches into area schools. Perez credits development director and current board president Sonja Johnson and generous patrons for helping the theater out of a financial crisis that jeopardized its existence a few years ago. In 2005 it moved from a small black box with an infamous pole in the middle of the performance space to its current expanded location on 9th Street between College and Walnut. "It's a bigger black box," Perez says with a laugh. Rarely empty, the building is home to a season of five main stage shows, numerous shorter productions and readings, workshops, children's classes and performances, and other special events.

In choosing the plays that make up a season, Perez says he feels a responsibility to provide balance. He tries to create a season that varies thematically and in terms of voice and, when possible, present the work of under-represented writers, especially women and people of color.

One play that pleased both Perez and his audience was Alan Brody's *Housewives of Mannheim*, a 2005 Reva winner set during World War II in the kitchen of a young American housewife who faces issues of anti-Semitism, sexuality, and gender roles. One of the most popular plays the BPP has produced, *Housewives* underscored the collaborative art that is theater. "All the pieces came together," Perez says. "Technically it was a great play with a superior set, costumes, and lighting as well as great writing, directing, and acting." Audiences grew with word-of-mouth, and the final performances played to packed houses.

Perez and Johnson committed to stay with the theater for five years. This season they both start their seventh year. "I still feel like there is so much we can still accomplish in terms of growth," Perez says. The challenge for the BPP is to present its brand of theater in a small community. "It's easier when people are familiar with a play," Perez says. "New work is risky for people, but the rewards are great."

CARDINAL STAGE COMPANY



Frog (Mike Price, left) and Toad (Chris Arruffo) eat and sing "Cookies" in Cardinal Stage Company's 2006 *A Year with Frog and Toad*. Photo by Jared Landberg

FEW COMMUNITIES CAN SUPPORT a professional theater such as Actors Theatre of Louisville or Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis, but Cardinal Stage Artistic Director Randy White dreams of just that sort of house, a theater that draws professional actors, serves the educational needs of local theater students, and stimulates arts-based economic activity in downtown Bloomington. Unlike IU Theatre and BPP, Cardinal pays almost everyone in the company some stipend and, says White, is "building a professional regional theater in Bloomington."

Cardinal Stage Company has only been around since 2005, but already it has established a valued presence in the Bloomington entertainment scene with offerings as diverse as the

family-friendly musical *Oliver!*, the intimate drama *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and biting political satire by Czech playwright Vaclav Havel.

With its 2008-2009 season, Cardinal is "trying to tell stories that appeal to a wide range of interests," White says. The plays were chosen with a view toward finding work that was both challenging and entertaining. White moved to Bloomington in 2002 when his wife joined the IU faculty, and he is still getting to know the tastes of the local audience. In selecting the plays for this season, he worked with Cardinal's board of directors and had many informal conversations with friends and acquaintances, asking them, "What would you think of this play?"

The strategy seems to be working. "People are responding incredibly well to the season, but they are all looking at different things," White says. Those with children might be drawn to *Treasure Island* while followers of contemporary American theater will be more interested in *Doubt*, the Pulitzer-prize winning play by John Patrick Shanley.

"The play we get asked about the most is *Frog and Toad*," White says. "People ask when we're going to do it again. You couldn't help but smile when you saw the show."

(from left) Alex Shotts, Anjanette Hall, and Henry Woronicz in *Our Town*. Photo by Jared Landberg

Cardinal's first production, *Our Town*,



Cardinal Stage Company
debuted with Thornton
Wilder's *Our Town* in
January 2006. At the
altar, (from left) Anjanette
Hall, Henry Woronicz,
and Alex Shotts. Photo by
Jared Landberg



“RANDY [WHITE] TAKES THE IDEA OF PROFESSIONAL *theater in Bloomington* VERY SERIOUSLY AND USES EVERYTHING AT HIS DISPOSAL TO MAKE THAT A REALITY.” —ACTOR DIANE KONDRAT





(This page and opposite)
The cast of *Oliver!*, featuring Robert Hay Smith as Fagin and Cameron Butler as Artful Dodger (in top hat). Photos by Mike Price.

however, stands out for White. Though he has worked in professional theater for 20 years in the United States and Canada, he says it was one of the top three shows of his life. “There’s a magic that happens in some shows—a rush of excitement from the house. The audience responded viscerally and there was a charge between the house and the stage.”

This is a year of growth for the stage company. Its full-time staff has expanded from one to three. While it currently uses a donated downtown office and the stages of the The Waldron and the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, the company is seeking a permanent home.

Mike Price, who recently joined the company as production manager, has starred in many of Cardinal’s productions. A local actor with a devoted following, he most notably played Mozart in *Amadeus* and Frog in *A Year with Frog and Toad*. Price says Bloomington audiences are “intelligent, responsive, supportive—an exciting mix of people of different backgrounds.” Price and another well-regarded local talent, Diane Kondrat, have already been cast for this season’s *Doubt*.

“What I like about working with Cardinal,” says Kondrat, “is that Randy takes the idea of professional theater in Bloomington very seriously and uses everything at his disposal to make that a reality.” Professional actors—members of Actors’ Equity Association—have been a part of Cardinal’s casts from the first production. Veteran actor Henry Woronicz played the Stage Manager in *Our Town* and several roles in *Oh Lovely Glowworm*. An

experienced theater and film actor, Woronicz has frequently appeared on popular television shows such as *Seinfeld* and *Law & Order*.

“The idea is to use extraordinary local talent as well as bringing in guest artists,” White says. Out-of-town guest artists are not limited to actors. White has called on his national theater contacts to provide professional-quality design elements for Cardinal’s productions.

The visiting professionals help set a standard, but White says Bloomington provides fertile ground for theater. “This company wouldn’t exist without IU,” he says. “IU is an essential component to Bloomington’s theater scene. We draw on them for talent, especially backstage talent.” White sees a nearby professional theater as an eventual draw to students considering IU’s Department of Theatre and Drama. “They make us better,” White says. “At some point we’ll make them better.”

CARDINAL STAGE
Santaland Diaries
Nov 21-Dec 7, 2008
Waldron Auditorium

Treasure Island
Dec 12-21, 2008
Buskirk-Chumley Theater

Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters’ First 100 Years
Jan 23-Feb 1, 2009
Waldron Auditorium

Doubt: a parable
Apr 24-May 10, 2009
Waldron Auditorium

A Theater Town

“There’s a lot going on here. I think we’re lucky,” says Patricia Anderson, who has been a playwright, director, script reader, and workshop facilitator at the BPP for more than 20 years.

Within the theater community, some companies seek to entertain; others to educate and provoke. Monroe County Civic Theater presents Shakespeare in the Park every summer while Jewish Theatre of Bloomington presents issues-oriented work. Starrynight Productions offers a mix of classic American theater, such as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, interspersed with original work by local playwrights. The city’s newest theater group, Theatre of the People, aims to educate the public about humanitarian issues. Even IU Law School has a theater troupe.

With so much theater to choose from, competition might arise, but the people most involved agree that collaboration and coexistence, rather than competition, define the Bloomington theater scene.

“The other organizations in town provide opportunities for our students to work on their craft,” IU’s Michaelsen says. “In almost every show in town, you can see one of our students.”

“The collaborative aspect of theater is what drew me to theater in the first place,” says local playwright and director Russ McGee. One of the winners of the 2007 Indiana Theatre Association Basile Award for emerging playwrights, McGee is director of Starrynight Productions, works with the Bloomington Playwrights Project and Monroe County Civic Theater, and will be assistant director on Cardinal’s *Treasure Island*.

“The one thing that surprises me is that people ask if Cardinal is competing with other theater organizations in Bloomington,” White says. White worked with the BPP to produce *Early Stages*, a series of readings from the work of local and national playwrights, and with the IU Theatre as a guest director during the 2004 season.

“Theater leads to more theater,” he says. “I don’t see us as dividing the pie. We’re building a bigger pie.” ❖