

Hampton U. theater students produce 'books with legs'

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By Nyaa Ferary

The Hampton University Department of Fine and Performing Arts offers creative outlets such as drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, design, debate and music. They are known for presenting some of the best plays available for Hampton students to enjoy. The Hampton Players perform a couple of plays per semester in the Little Theater of Armstrong Hall.

The director of the theater department is **Karen Ward**. She has more than 30 years' experience with writing, directing, acting and producing theater. She has published and written her own plays. As well as performed in shows for both local and national arenas such as the Theatre Virginia in Richmond and Heritage Repertory Company at the University of Virginia for her role as Billie Holiday in "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill." She makes sure each production for the Hampton Players is original and has its own spin so that it is interesting and unique to the viewers. "There is always a shelf to put every book on," said Ward. "And for plays, there is always a stage to put plays on."

Students are welcome to write and produce their own work. Every other year there is a production called "New Voices" and it is basically "a book with legs" said Ward, in that student playwrights are offered the opportunity to submit their own works to be produced in a reader's theater format and later if the comments and reactions are good, to be presented on the main stage, which will then be ran in the next season. This experience requires a lot of commitment from the students who wish to see their plays in the Little Theater. Ward says, "There is a heavy cost to be the boss." These students must now act on the opposite side of the fence by playing the role as producer and director for their own productions.

The selection for this year's lineup was finalized well in advance. The **Fine and Performing Arts Department** typically produce four to five productions a year and make their production decisions based on faculty, students and input from the community in April or May. Once classes are over, the faculty gets together and sees which plays haven't been done before as well as which ones fit the department's mission. From that, a list is narrowed down and the faculty looks at all the plays and each director decided what they might want to direct, given what their expertise is. The result is a composite of four plays to be run throughout the year, usually two in the fall and two in the spring. At least one is classic, one is contemporary; another is written by a black playwright, and also a musical.

The newest production the Hampton Players are presenting is "Stick Fly," directed by Robin Jackson Boisseau. She has been an assistant professor of theater at Hampton University since 2001. During Boisseau's time at the university, she has directed over 20 productions and is the adviser to the Hampton Players & Company student theater organization.

This play originally debuted in 2010 as the Broadway production by Lydia R.

Diamond. The playwright graduated from Northwestern University where she majored in performance studies and is a 2005-2007 member of the Huntington Playwright Fellows. According to the Huntington Theatre Company website, "She was a 2005-2006 Harvard WEB Du Bois Institute non-resident Fellow, a 2007 TCG/NEA Playwright in Residence at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, a 2012-2013 Radcliffe Institute Fellow, a 2012 Sallie B. Goodman McCarter Fellow, and a 2012 Sundance Institute Playwright Lab Creative adviser. She is currently a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists and a playwright in residence at Arena Stage."

The initial success of "Stick Fly" in association with the Arena Stage led to the play's 2011 nomination in for a Tony Award. "Stick Fly" tells the story of an African-American family that face issues of race, class and sibling rivalry, while they are spending the weekend at their second home in Martha's Vineyard.

There is a lot that goes on behind the scenes for these productions. The crew, directors and actors all have to pull their own weight to make such plays like "Stick Fly" a success. The actors and actresses interviewed said they dedicate all of their evenings to rehearsals and getting their costumes made. Practice is held every day except for Sunday, and students audition for the roles of their choice before they are assigned a role. Many students are juggling between their course workload; other extracurricular activities, the play and some have jobs to maintain.

Briana Nealey is a senior from Denver; her first time being in Hampton Players play was this semester's production of "Little Shop of Horrors." She auditioned in late April and began preparing for her role over the summer. When asked why she chose to be in the play, Nealey said, "I've always loved performing. I decided that I wanted to try out for a play at Hampton because I had been away from the stage for too long. I love acting and so I decided it was time to start doing it again." She is currently now practicing for her role in "One Wild and Crazy Night," which will be presented next year.

Nealey said she often has to miss rehearsals because they conflict with her current retail job schedule: "School and work has always been something I've had to balance. Adding rehearsals has really taken up a lot of time in my schedule. It's hard to balance sometimes and lots of times schoolwork takes the back burner. But it's just really about understanding that you need to plan out your week and make time for everything you need to get done."

The amount of hard work and dedication that must be committed to each play is substantial. Whether it be acting or being a part of the stage crew, many long hours and passion is required to create such original productions. These students submerge themselves in their craft. They live and breathe the theater craft, many spend their free time watching other plays, reading manuscripts and singing play numbers regularly.

*The writer is a student in the **Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications**.*