

Downstage Center

Go behind the scenes with Kevin Selwyn



Let's start by rejecting the notion that "those who can't do, teach." It's obvious that at Shenandoah University, the philosophy is

teach by example.

This is evident across the board in all disciplines, whether it's an English professor reading his own work, a faculty member delivering a lecture on a topic on which she is an authority, or faculty singing, dancing and acting alongside students as is the case with Shenandoah Conservatory's upcoming production of the musical "Ragtime."

"Ragtime" is based on E.L. Doctorow's 1975 novel of the same name.

It follows the story of three groups in America at the turn of the 20th century: the whites, the blacks and immigrants. Some characters represented in the musical are historical figures such as Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Emma Goldman and Booker T. Washington.

Assistant Professor of Theatre Jonathan Flom had the difficult task of assembling a cast of 52 actors, singers and dancers. Among the large cast, Flom cast three members of the voice faculty alongside 47 students, as well as two children from the Winchester community. "It's exciting for students to get a chance to work with faculty. It raises the bar in terms of professionalism," said Flom.

"There are roles in the show that are appropriate for faculty members," said Flom, who is constantly trying to instill values of professionalism and preparedness in each and every one of his students.

Faculty in "Ragtime" include Byron Jones in the role of Father, Philip Sargent as Grandfather, and Michael

Forest as Booker T. Washington. Flom has not altered his directing style to his colleagues and believes doing so "isolates people if you start to treat them differently because they're faculty. Your cast is your cast. The leads are just as important as the ensemble."

The faculty members were asked at the end of last semester to be a part of this production. Dr. Sargent and Mr. Forest accepted on the spot, and Dr. Jones requested he be able to see the Kennedy Center production of the musical as well as read to book on which it is based before giving an affirmative answer, which he ultimately did.

"These shows are educational experiences for our students. I'm sensitive to the fact if I'm playing a role, a student's not playing the role, but there's a generational aspect of the production and there's not a lot of age diversity among college students," said Jones.

Sargent said playing Caiaphas in Shenandoah Summer Music Theatre's 2008 production of "Jesus Christ Superstar" rekindled his interest in musi-

cal theatre, which made him accept the role of Grandfather in "Ragtime." His last performance of musical theatre was productions of "The Fantasticks" and "Kismet" in the mid-1970s.

"Studio teaching is an isolated experience; you work with a dozen students or so, and there is a barrier that has to exist between faculty and students. In ["Ragtime"] there are dozens of students so interested in their craft you don't have the opportunity to see otherwise," said Sargent.

"I'm very excited to see my teacher perform. It's neat getting to study with him, but it'll be neat to see him on the other side of the proscenium," said musical theatre major Chris Douglas.

Jones's prior involvement in shows was a production of the opera "Elixir of Love" a few years ago, and he likes the fact faculty are involved in this production. Still, he admits to feeling some pressure rehearsing and performing in front of students, including three of his private voice students who are in the cast. "It's hard not to listen with a teacher's ear. It's great to see them,

and I find them impressive. I have to practice what I preach," said Jones.

"I'm really happy to see [Dr. Jones] do the work we do. I feel very honored to be in a show with someone I look up to as a person and a teacher and a respected friend," said Sarah Sesler, ensemble member and one of Jones's voice students.

Sargent admits, "The students are totally immersed, and for me it's a seat-of-my-pants experience. I don't feel I can be the best performer out there, but can be as professional about my conduct as anybody out there."

"Ragtime" is currently in rehearsal and opens Thursday, Oct. 1, for a five-performance run in the Ohrstrom-Bryant Theatre. Show times are 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and 2:30 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Tickets are free for SU students and employees with I.D.

Come out and enjoy what is sure to be a grand production. See the wonderful talent of our faculty and how that translates to the wonderful talent of our students.