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Regional

Students of black theater break stereotypes

Black theater is a performing art tradition that has a long history of helping to break race barriers and stereotypes.

"Black theater is conventional theater and it is an aspect of American theater," explained Kathryn Bentley, an associate professor in the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "When we are looking at any of the ethnicities and their contributions to theater, the black theater experience allows the opportunity for stories of African-Americans to be told in a way that is valued and treasured because it's being told by African-Americans."

Born in St. Louis, Bentley received her bachelor's degree in mass communications from SIUE and her master's in fine arts from Lindenwood University. She said that she became interested in the performing arts when she was 5 or 6 years old, and then started acting while in middle school.

"My parents introduced me and my siblings to the arts when we were young, so we would see shows and any performance that we could go and see," she said. "I was always intrigued by the theater." After spending 10 years in New York City, she decided to direct and teach. While always considering herself a performer, she decided to get her master's degree so she could teach in college. But her New York experience inspired in her a love for the city, and, in Harlem particularly, she found a respect for what she calls its "sense of history, tradition." At SIUE she specializes in black theater. The fact that people play roles different from those of their own ethnicity, she said, surprises some audience members and students alike.

"In my multi-cultural theory class, we study playwrights of different ethnicities. Out of 25 to 30 people, I may only have two black students," Bentley said. "I usually have zero Asian and zero Native American students, but that doesn't stop us from having somebody in an Asian play or studying and performing Native American pieces. I



Photo by Valerie Goldston

Professor Kathryn Bentley, center, teaching her students during a rehearsal of a play.

tell students, 'Allow yourself to get behind the words, allow yourself to enjoy the relationship, the universality of the stories, because they are American stories, they are our stories being told from this perspective.' Socio-economic issues also come to play in Bentley's class, for example when

an upper middle-class black student plays the role of a gang member.

"We talk about what it means to be of certain ethnic groups, and what stereotypes have developed around this ethnic group," she said. "A lot of my students will say, 'Well, I know the stereotype but I don't

fit into that.' So I give them a play that is written in certain vernacular that even my black students may not have grown up hearing. It's hard for them to fit into that, but that's the great thing about acting. You act as if you were this character. You get to play somebody else from a different back-

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ground." These cultural experiences that Bentley provides her students sometimes turn into true international adventures.

"I, along with Aminata Cairo from the anthropology department, take students to Suriname. On our last visit we saw the change in our students," she said. "Because you do have to step out of what it is your comfort zone and just step into another culture. We do incorporate a lot of theater into that. We witness that students do have a different sensibility when we return."

An interesting note is that the first black theater plays were written by whites for white audiences and played by white actors with blackened faces. "I think this is a reflection of some of the ugly things that our country has gone through, and I think it's important that we continue to enlighten students about these times of our history," Bentley said. For her it is clear that black theater has helped to break race taboos and stereotypes.

"Theater has the power to do that," she said. "I think that folks involved with theater are just as challenged with their own sense of what feels right. I think theater offers just the perfect environment for doing that. We should be at the forefront for change, for race relations. It's like you are going through an artistic experience and you are allowing yourself to have an emotional reaction to something and then turning it into an intellectual response to something. Why not utilize that as a tool for change?"

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.