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Theater degrees prepare students for careers

Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Regional

Theater degrees prepare students for careers

Few people realize the wide scope of work that a graduate with a degree in theater can do. It isn't just acting. A good example of all the things you can do with a theater degree is Wendy Greenwood, a native of St. Louis who received her bachelor's degree in theater performance in 2004 from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She said that she traces her interest in theater to her mother.

"It wasn't so much a profession at that time. I was in first grade and there was a school play and I was terrified. I wanted nothing to do with it," she said. "But my mother told my teacher I would do it and I got pushed into playing a little rabbit. It sunk in, and I had a really good time. Then in high school it progressed and just kind of spun off from there. I found that I loved it and I just couldn't get away from it." But when she got to college and majored in theater she saw a much broader world from behind the curtains.

"It is really a kind of a culture shock because when you are in college you are learning the education of theater and you are learning about acting or about being a technician or a director, and then you graduate and you go out into the real world. There you audition and you don't get cast or you audition and you do get cast." As in most other career fields, acting, Greenwood said, is a lot about networking.

"You end up working and networking with professionals and that's when you really get to use what you learned in college to build a career," she said. "In college you learn what it is going to be like or the idea of it and then you are kind of thrust into actually having to fend for yourself and network and build on these skills and use these skills. You have to really market yourself because no one else is going to."

For those interested in pursuing a career in theater, she has very straightforward advice.

"A lot of parents are scared that their children are going to come here to learn to be actors and fail, but there are so many careers," she said. "There



Wendy Greenwood (center) during one of her performances

are designers, technicians, carpenters, electricians, mathematicians, scientists, artists, writers and musicians. There are many careers in theater. I think people need to figure out what their actual interest in the theater realm is and then go from there. My recommendation is to realize theater is more than acting. There are thousands of professions, including the one that I do. I'm a teacher." Greenwood teaches in the Parkway

School District.

"Theater is such a collaborative art and in order to collaborate well you need to be able to empathize with people in the other areas of theater," she explained. "I think it's important for a director to be able to understand what it's like to be an actor or understand the pressure that a technician is under or a designer is under. You can then collaborate and make the production the best

that you can. As a director your goal is to make your vision and your understanding of the show come to life. To do that you need to trust the actors, and the designers and the technicians."

She has many dreams when it comes to her career. "As a director I would love to have the opportunity to direct a play by Sam Shepard called 'Curse of the Starving Class,'" she said. "He writes plays about Middle America and about

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gritty human struggles. It's not these big grandiose ideas, it's just about people and the play is funny and gut wrenching and odd and it makes sense. I don't know, I read it and it really hit me and I would love to direct this play."

When it comes to acting, Greenwood would like to act in a play by David Mamet called "Sexual Perversity in Chicago."

"It is just this ridiculous comedy," she said. "It starts off with these two characters just talking back and forth, just bam bam bam bam. It's so funny, but it's how people talk in real life. The two female characters are just the same and then all four just kind of inject themselves into each other's lives."

She recently directed "The Little Shop of Horrors," a play based on a well-known film. "Everything was based on the film, that's where the musical came from so everyone's idea of 'Little Shop of Horrors' is that movie," she said. "So you have to kind of pay homage to that, but the script does that itself, except the ending, the ending is different. In the film it ended on a happier note because the original ending didn't test well with audiences. In the play they give you the gritty, sad, everyone dies ending." She said that she wanted to pay homage to the film, but also work with the script and work with the talent.

"You might have in your head what a character should look like and then someone just comes in and blows your mind with talent," she said. "You have no choice. You just have to give the parts to those who are the best for the job."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. 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.

Photo courtesy of Wendy Greenwood