



Improving Veteran Life

Psychologist's emotional healthcare measure goes national

OVER THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, the quality of nursing-home care across the nation has changed dramatically. Residents have more choices over their accommodations, their food, and their schedules than ever before; but when Dr. Lynn Snow, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at UA and clinical research psychologist at the Tuscaloosa Veterans Affairs Medical Center, visited nursing homes throughout the country, she noticed the care was somewhat one-sided—focusing more on physical well-being than emotional well-being.

"We can count the number of pressure ulcers or the number of falls, and we can monitor weight and diet," Snow said. "But it is harder to measure the psycho-social side of life."

Wanting to create a way for busy nurses and staff to measure the emotional welfare of their residents without taking too much of their already limited time, Snow and her colleagues came up with a program that anyone could learn—and use—in just five minutes. And with the support of various grants from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, she is now helping the nation's largest integrated health care system to enhance the emotional health of veterans living in these facilities.

The program relies on all personnel at the nursing home—from the nursing assistants to nurses, recreational therapists, and physicians—and each are asked to assess and record the frequency and quality of resident engagement in five-minute snapshots.

"In each snapshot, the staff member goes into an area, and, working left to right, rates each person's engagement," Snow said. "If the resident is just watching something, we call that receiving only. If the resident is actually involved, then that is considered active engagement, and if they are staring into space, sleeping, or have their eyes closed, then they are not engaged."

The staff record their findings, and then they regularly come together for short "huddles" to discuss what they saw. They focus on the positive by pinpointing when residents are most engaged and then try to replicate those scenarios.

"We call this the bright-spots approach," Snow said. "People don't solve problems by focusing on failure. They develop solutions when they recognize and then reproduce what has gone well."

One thing Snow hopes to see as the program rolls out is that staff members, who often cannot take an hour to sit and talk with

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residents about their life stories, will begin to utilize the time they already have with the residents to engage and grow their relationships—talking to them when they are moving them or helping them eat. She says this is often done silently, not because staff members don't care about the residents, but because their focus on physical health and safety indicators sometimes causes them to overlook how relationships and emotional health are absolutely necessary for physical health.

Snow hopes that as staff members realize that residents' quality of life can be increased through these small but frequent moments, they will begin to take advantage of these opportunities.

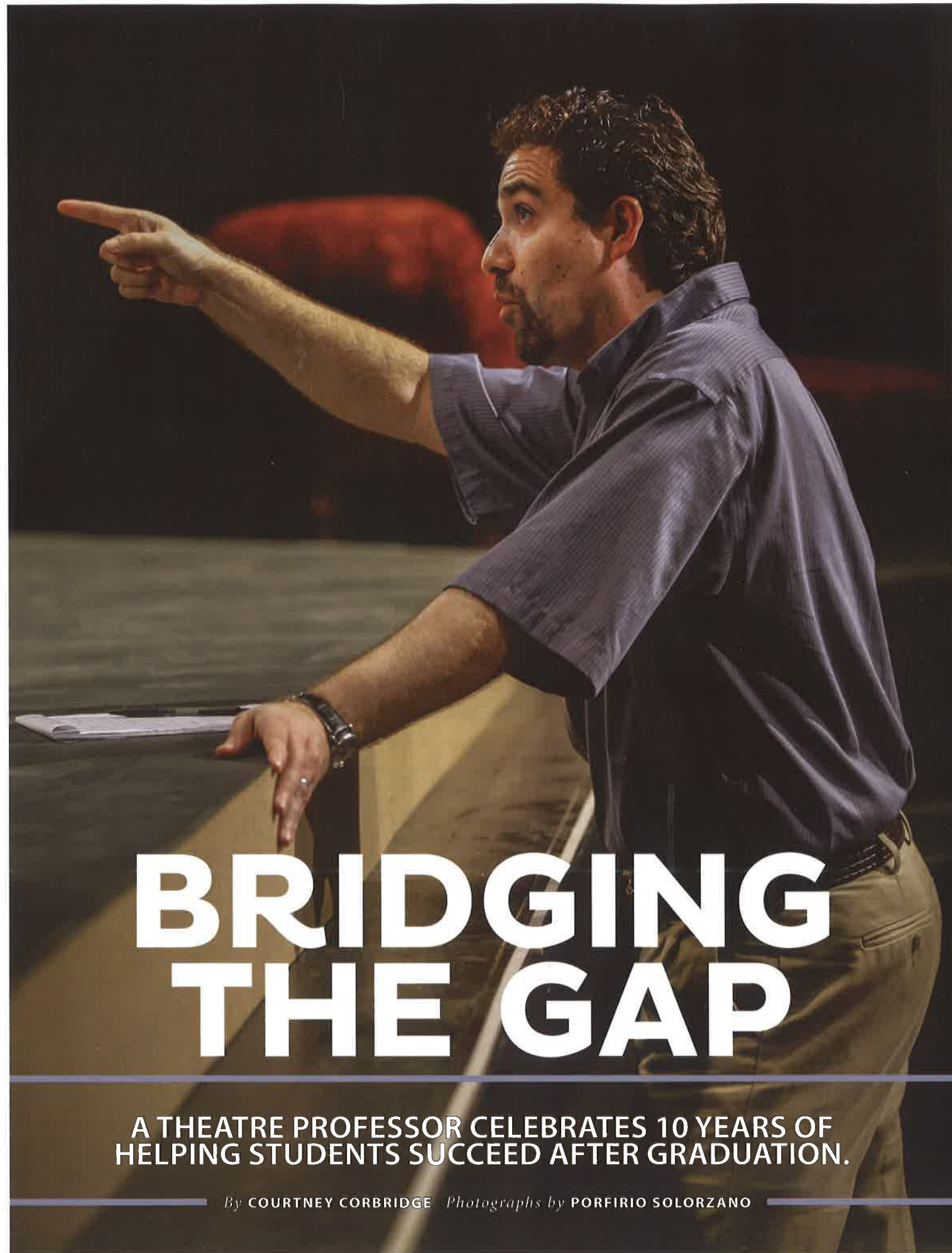
"It's a low-level goal to shoot for," she said. "But we think it will make a difference without singling people out and will start a cascade of bigger changes over time."

Reflecting the national scope of the VA, Dr. Snow partners with Dr. Christine Hartmann, a social work professor at the VA in Bedford, Massachusetts, and a large interdisciplinary team separated geographically but connected by teleconferences, the VA system, and the University's Alabama Research Institute on Aging. Snow particularly cherishes her team's close relationships with nursing staff at the VAs in which they have worked.

"Nurses are the only people who are at the nursing home, on the floor, 24/7, 365 days a year," she said. "They carry a special responsibility and deserve much more recognition and support."

Snow and her team originally tested their new method in six nursing homes across the nation and saw positive results. Over the summer they created implementation guides, training videos, and other training materials in preparation for an anticipated national roll-out to all 135 VA community living centers in the United States. The materials were also tested at an additional eight nursing homes to assure they met the needs of staff.

"My dream was to conduct research that directly influences and informs actual care," Snow said. "And now I am." ■



BRIDGING THE GAP

A THEATRE PROFESSOR CELEBRATES 10 YEARS OF HELPING STUDENTS SUCCEED AFTER GRADUATION.

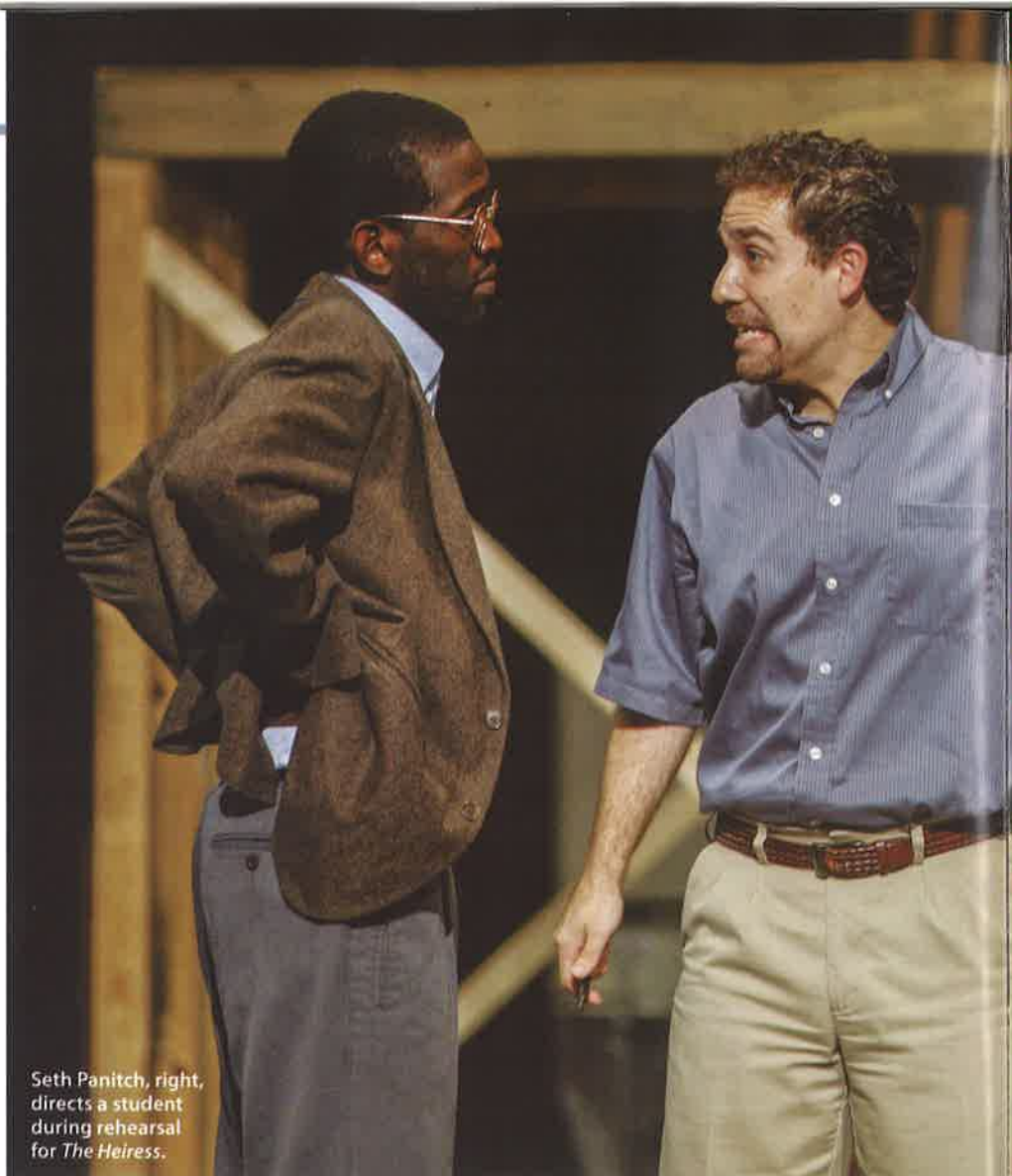
By COURTNEY CORBRIDGE Photographs by PORFIRIO SOLORZANO

GROWING UP, SETH PANITCH thought he would be a doctor like his father. He dreamed of going to medical school and was familiar with the apprenticeship-like process of residency that allows young professionals to apply their academic training in the real world. But when Panitch, now the director of UA's acting programs, pursued theatre instead of medicine, he was on his own. Despite the classical training he received at the University of Washington, the professional theatre world was uncharted territory for Panitch. Two years went by before he made his big break in New York.

"After graduate school, most theatre students are sort of dumped out into the world," Panitch said. "In some respects actors pop out of the womb too early, and what they need is a bridge to connect them professionally and get them on their feet. I didn't have that."

Learning from his own experience and wanting to provide better opportunities for his students at UA, Panitch created the Bridge Project in 2006. The premise of the project is to give students the opportunity to be in a professional production with professional actors in a big city, so they can learn the ropes and make the connections they need to be successful after graduation.

In the 10 years that the program has been operating, Panitch has already seen dozens of students succeed. Some have gone on to perform in Broadway and off-Broadway hits like *Hamilton*, *Kinky Boots*, and *Wicked*; others have made their names in television and film. The common thread, however, is that they all participated in the Bridge Project.



Seth Panitch, right, directs a student during rehearsal for *The Heiress*.



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"All of our successful students have participated in this program," Panitch said. "And though it's not the only reason they are successful, it is certainly a part of their success because actors need to be seen in New York. They need to connect with other actors, directors, reviewers, and playwrights—and this project makes that possible."

Panitch's concern for others, however, extends beyond his current acting students. The Bridge Project invites students from across the Department of Theatre and Dance to receive opportunities to put their training to the test. For each production, Panitch brings a team of UA costume, set, and lighting designers—and he invites

alumni to participate as well.

"We don't forget about our students once they graduate," Panitch said. "No other program does that. No other program allows alumni to take advantage of these opportunities. We do because we want to help those who have been in the industry for a few years get the extra push they need to get their careers going."

Alumnus Matt Lewis, who played in two Bridge Project premieres after graduating in 2012, has since played in network television shows like Fox's *Sleepy Hollow* and ABC's *Resurrection*. Currently, he also plays in roughly five shows a season in many of Atlanta's respected theatres.

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opportunities arose because of the skill set I acquired studying under Professor Panitch and performing in Bridge Project productions," Lewis said. "The fact that UA is willing and able to support something like the Bridge Project is astoundingly rare. Most universities don't—or can't—provide the amount of financial and professional resources required. All involved in the continued support of the Bridge Project should be applauded."

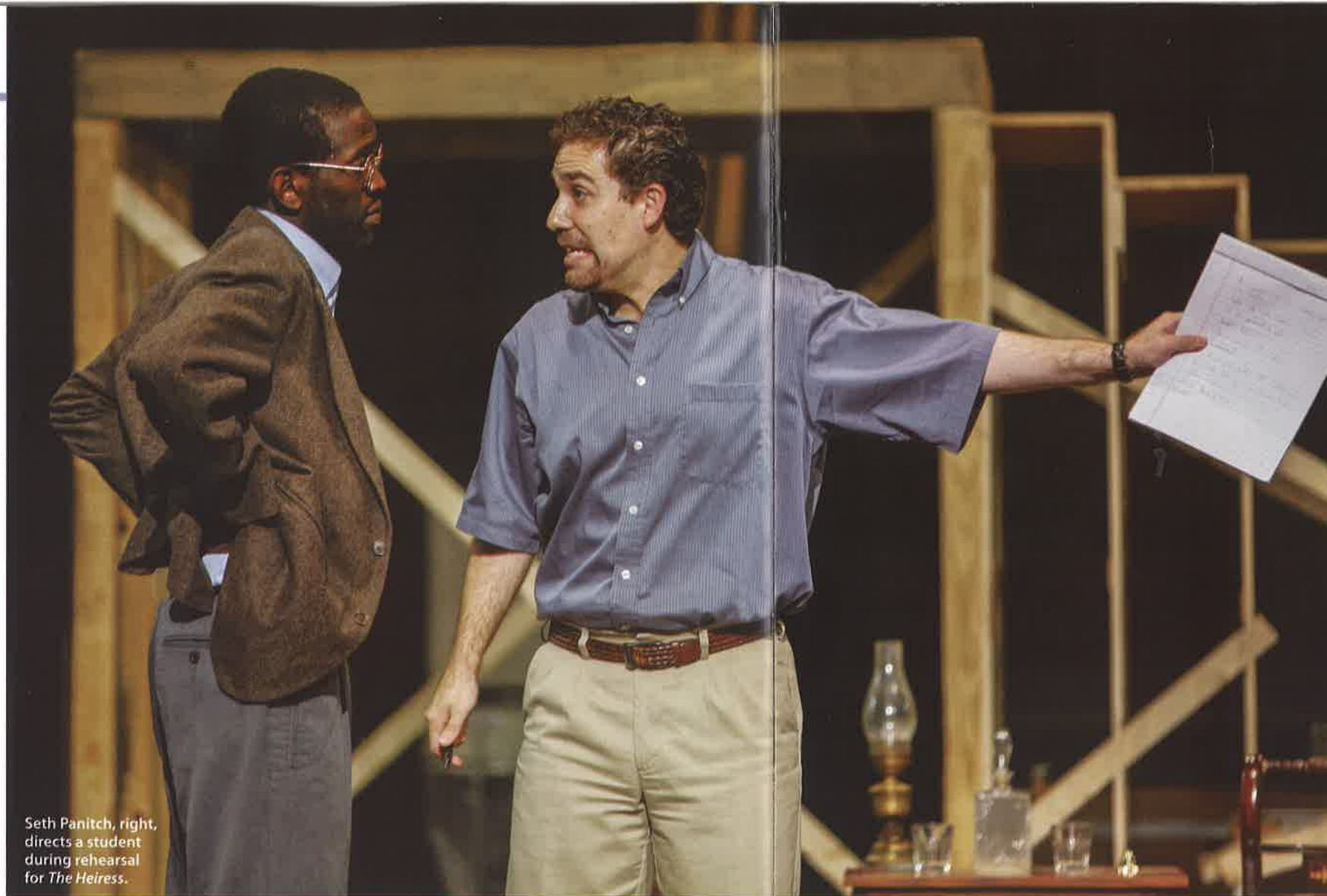
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FROM BRIDGE PROJECT TO BROADWAY

THE UA BRIDGE PROJECT LEADS ITS STUDENTS TO SUCCESS. BELOW ARE JUST A FEW ALUMNI WHO HAVE MADE IT BIG.



Within a year of performing in Panitch's *Alcestis Ascending*, **NICK BURROUGHS** was recruited as the understudy for Tony Award-winning Billy Porter in Broadway's *Kinky Boots*. He also starred as Judas in *Jesus Christ Superstar* at Birmingham's Virginia Samford Theatre and won the Broadway World Award for best local actor in a musical.



MATT LEWIS, who performed in two of Panitch's creations for the Bridge Project—*Hell: Paradise Found* and *Here I Sit, Brokenhearted*—now has a steady professional life in Atlanta's well-regarded theatres. He has also performed regularly in the Texas Shakespeare Festival.



JAKE BOYD was back in Alabama this summer, playing Fiyero in the Birmingham production of *Wicked* for the national tour. Before that he debuted on Broadway in *Rock of Ages* and also performed in *The Sound of Music Live!* with Carrie Underwood—among other productions. His kick start, however, came through his appearance in the Bridge Project production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



THADDEUS FITZPATRICK has taken his theatrical skills across the Northeast, performing in Philadelphia, New York, and Washington D.C. His first show in New York, however, was Panitch's *Alcestis Ascending*.



MICHAEL LUWOYE didn't just make it to Broadway; he's playing the lead role in *Hamilton*—the new musical sensation that *The New York Times* says "is on track to become one of the biggest critical and commercial hits in Broadway history." Prior to making it big, however, he first played in the Bridge Project production *Beyond Therapy*.



Since her time in Panitch's *Hell: Paradise Found*, **ALEXANDRA FICKEN** has played in TV series like *The Vampire Diaries* spin-off, *The Originals*, and the HBO series *Vice Principals*. She has also worked in multiple regional

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Panitch says that it takes an army to make a program like this work, and he attributes so much of the program's success to the support that the University has given the arts. The Bridge Project received its initial funding from UA's Research Advisory Committee and

the College of Arts and Sciences Leadership Board. Additionally, *Service to Man*, the only Bridge Project film which won best film at the American Black Film Festival this year, was made possible because of support from the president's office, the provost's office, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of Theatre and Dance, and many other organizations across campus.

"My film was the only University-supported film at the American Black Film Festival," Panitch said. "It's unheard of, but it happens because this University has an artistic vision that other schools don't."

Panitch, who has written six of the 11 Bridge Project productions, isn't stopping either. He plans to bring another Bridge Project production, *Separate and Equal*, to the stage in 2018. That show, he hopes, will run for an entire month in New York.

"We want our graduate students to put Alabama's name out in the lights on Broadway or Hollywood or wherever else our graduates go," Panitch said, "so we'll keep going and growing." ■