

dialog

OCTOBER 10/11

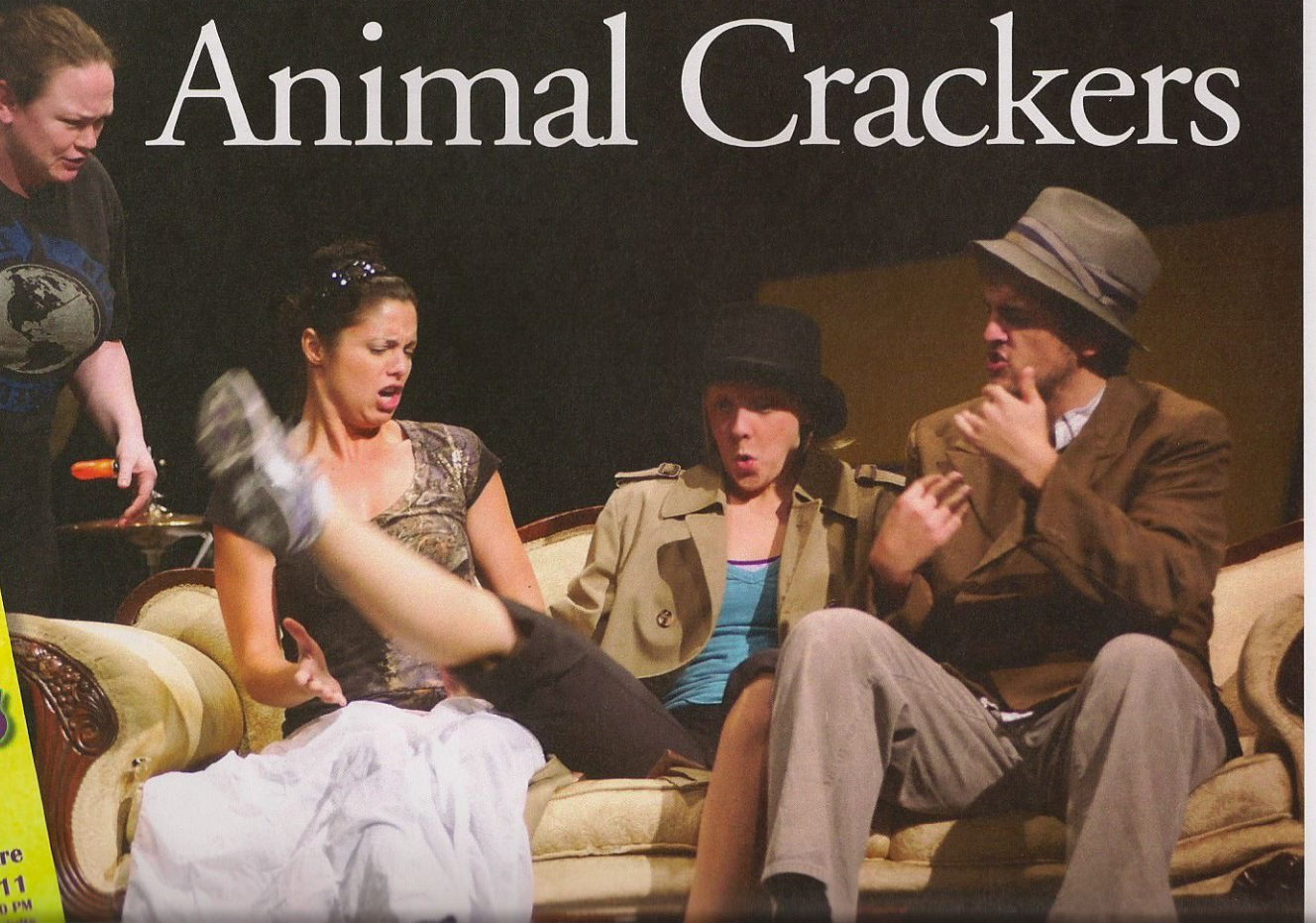
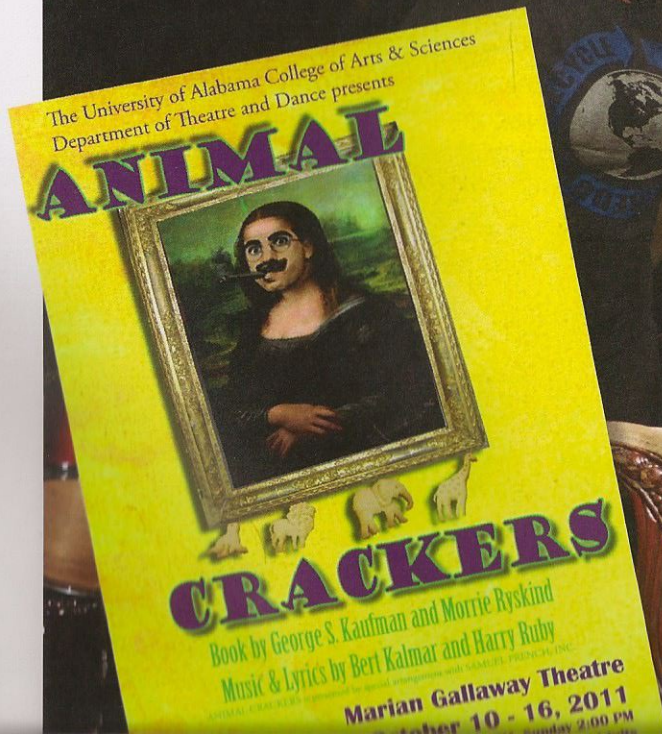
FACULTY | STAFF

NEWSLETTER

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# Animal Crackers





Actors at an early rehearsal of "Animal Crackers" practice a bit from the famously madcap play.

When asked to name great theatre performers, few people think of the Marx Brothers. Groucho, Harpo, Chico and Zeppo don't seem to belong emblazoned on the same list as Barrymore and Olivier.

Yet, their antics – from Groucho's nonstop patter to Chico's deadpan delivery to Harpo's mute brilliance – helped define classic theatre comedy.

And it is because it is a classic comedy that "Animal Crackers" (one of the greatest of the Marx Brothers' shows) was selected for the fall schedule of performances for the department of theatre and dance, according to director Seth Panitch.

"Actors need to learn classical theatre and they need to be challenged," says Panitch, associate professor and director of the MFA and undergraduate acting programs at UA.

"Animal Crackers" is a funny play, (even working in a reference to Auburn) but funny doesn't mean quick or easy. Panitch knew in February that the play would be in the schedule and spent most of the summer studying the script, but students could not be cast until after fall semester began. With an opening date of Oct. 10, cast and crew immediately began devoting many hours a week to the production.

Rehearsals were not linear. Rather than starting from the opening scene and going forward, early rehearsals were a time to concentrate on the more complex physical bits – chases, mock fights, pickpocket scenes – which required painstaking staging and blocking, choreography and matching dialogue to movement.

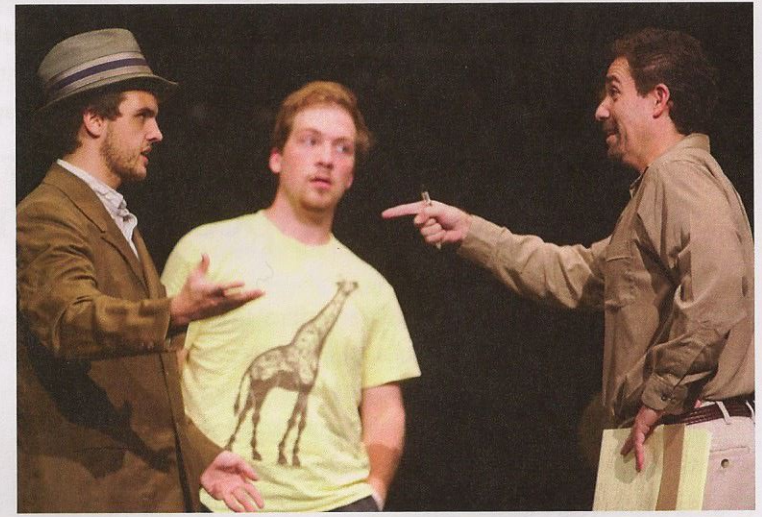
Panitch believes deeply in the value of

teaching technique. During rehearsals his directions are more than "Turn toward the audience." "Plant your feet here." He includes the reasons: "Turn this way so the audience can see you better." "Doing it this way will help you keep your balance."

While he doesn't always give an explanation with his direction, Panitch feels that good students absorb the principles and skills that come from being part of a good

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Seth Panitch (far right) gives direction to Tommy Walker (far left), playing the part of Señor Ravelli, and Jake Green (center) playing Roscoe W. Chandler.

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## Henley Earns Accreditation

Teri Henley recently earned Accreditation in Public Relations (APR), the public relations profession's national post-graduate certification program.

APR certifies the practitioner's knowledge of the practice of public relations and is administered by the Universal Accreditation Board.

Henley teaches advertising and public relations writing and campaigns courses in the department of advertising and public relations and advises Capstone Agency, the student-run public relations and advertising agency. She brings to the classroom 10 years experience in public relations, plus 20 years experience in integrated marketing communications.

"Achieving APR certifies that I am teaching the industry standards in the classroom and enables me to credibly encourage my students to pursue APR at the proper time in their career,"

said Henley regarding the importance of APR.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is the Universal Accreditation Board member organization in which Henley sat for the APR.

PRSA is the nation's largest community of public relations and communications professionals, providing training, setting standards of excellence, and upholding principles of ethics for the public relations profession. ●



Teri Henley



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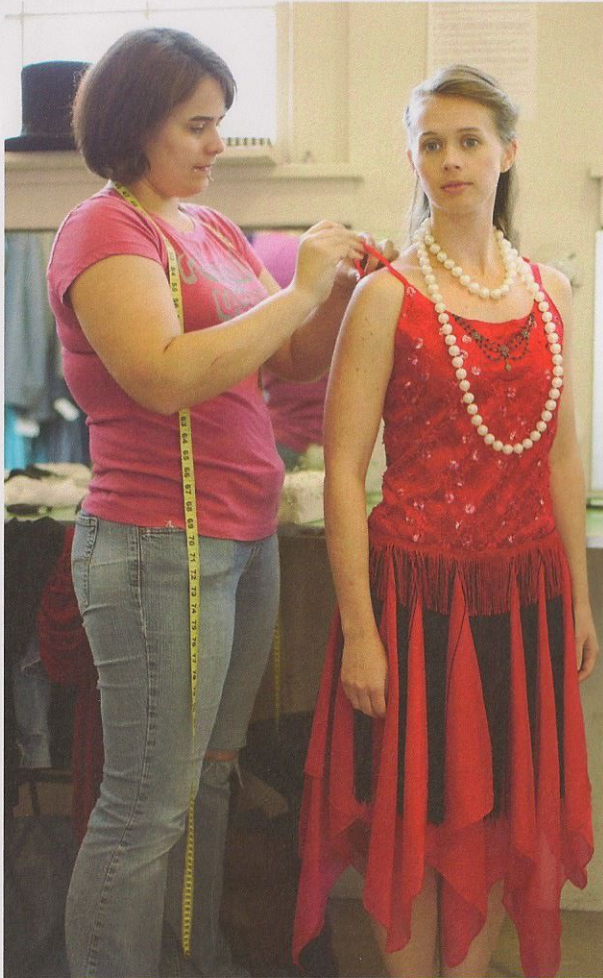
production. Just getting the lines down isn't enough. What will appear to the audience as a 30-second bit of silly horse-play is actually a practiced, choreographed movement. "Let's try this bit again," Panitch says at one rehearsal. "Remember, it's never too early to be good."

And, underlying all the action happening on stage is what's happening inside the actors.

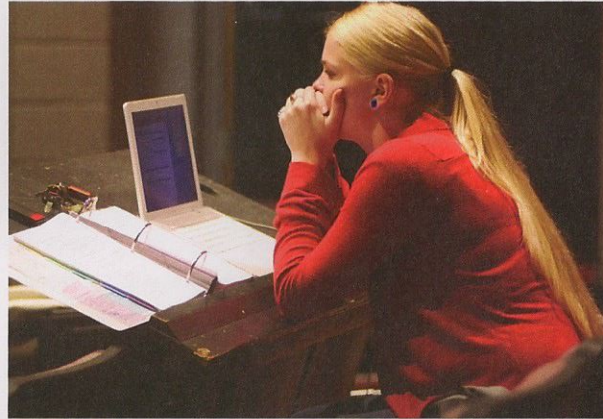
"They are becoming comfortable with the role, the dialogue, their fellow actors," Panitch says. "At first the actors learn the part, what it means to play the Marx Brothers. Later, as they become more comfortable in the role, they bring their own interpretation to it." When the curtain opens and the actors take the stage at the Marian Gallaway Theatre, they are not playing the Marx Brothers. They are playing the roles of



(Left to Right) Tommy Walker, Jake Green and Caroline Schmidt work on timing dialogue and actions with sound effects provided by the musician pictured behind them.



Costumer and graduate student Tiffany Harris (left) says that while normally professors urge designers not to copy looks that have already been done for a play, with "Animal Crackers," she was encouraged to watch the movie. "Their clothes are so signature, such as Harpo's hat and plaid shirt, and Groucho's coat, we need to know what they look like." Here, she fits an actor for a scene set at an elegant party in the Rittenhouse mansion.



As stage manager, Bethann Williams works from preproduction to final curtain making sure everything runs smoothly. She is the communications link between Panitch, designers, actors and the technical director.



In the costume shop in the basement of Rowand-Johnson Hall students spend hours painstakingly building, fitting and repairing outfits for the productions.

Captain Spaulding, Senior Ravett and the Professor. Without luxuries such as taped sound effects, camera angles or cutaways, theatre actors learn to adapt. At the first rehearsals, the actors work on a stage empty of everything but a piano and a handful of chairs. At later rehearsals a musician sits at a drum set. He will be there during the actual performance, in full view of the audience, adding sound effects ranging from groans to cow bells.

While the audience will see the musician and actors, a great deal of the work is done before the first curtain rises, or behind the scenes, and the audience sees only the finished product. The show requires a set that represents a pre-1929 stock market crash Art Deco mansion, a 5-by-7-foot picture frame and a litter to carry Captain Spaulding.

Set designer Jason Vogt says, "The set is what we call a unit set, one big piece that more or less represents one room. In this case it is three rooms of a mansion with only one small moving wall to show that. We have 27 different wall pieces; 14 of them are the mansion and 13 other pieces are used as masking to hide backstage from the audience."

Both graduate and undergraduate students, a shop supervisor and three professors spent dozens of hours building, painting and placing the set. A student even welded the railing used for the mansion.

Tiffany Harris, head costumer for the production, said costume designers found or built 60 period costumes needed for the 26 actors. During the play's run they will repair or replace damaged costumes and even launder any garment that touches an actor's skin. After the show closes, they will clean, repair and store all the costumes.

In professional theatre, the director's job finishes when the play opens. As part of academic theatre, however, Panitch will attend each performance and make notes for his actors. "They want to improve, and some of them grow tremendously after the opening performances. They are learning and they are putting on the best show possible." ●