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## UA theater program shifting its focus

### Students get more experience, notice from professionals

By Mark Hughes Cobb

Staff Writer

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When "Hell" came to New York City, University of Alabama students rode it.

UA acting professor Seth Panitch wrote his comedy "Hell: Paradise Found" years ago, and staged it with success in Los Angeles, but rewrote it recently to lead students to professional, big-city acting experience.

The project featured recent graduate and undergrad students, some of whom earned degrees this spring, playing Gabriel, Eve, Adam, Lizzie Borden, Elvis Presley, Don Juan and more, in a two-week run at 59E59 Theatre, off-Broadway, in mid-July.

Before curtain opening night, Panitch saw Alexandra Ficken, who some here might remember from the title role in "Saint Joan" at UA, standing with her face peeking through the curtain, listening to the audience file in and fill seats.

"She looked like a little kid at Christmas," he said.

The students were joined by

director-actor Panitch, his wife Stacy Searle Panitch and Dianne Teague, both local actors who've worked professionally, and also coincidentally graduates of UA's theater program from years past.

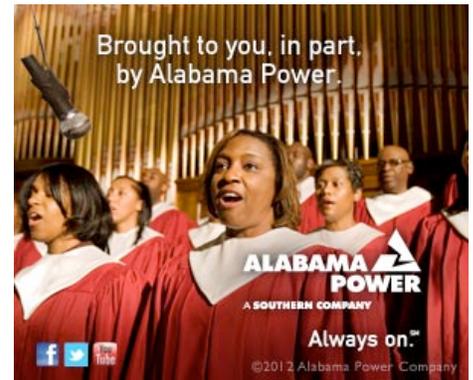
It wasn't just connections that made it happen. Professional development grant money came from Arts and Sciences, with the backing of A&S Dean Robert Olin, and UA Provost Judy Bonner, who's been a strong supporter of previous Panitch projects such as the 2009 joint Cuba-UA professional production of "Un Sueno de Una Noche de Verano" ("A Midsummer Night's Dream").

Even the hottest talents in the world must be seen by the right people, Panitch said.

"We can teach them all the theory in the world, but in the end, it doesn't get them employed," he said. "In today's economy, we've wasted the students' time if they don't come out of school ready to work. It's so different, so much tougher than it was 10 years ago or even five years ago. When I came out of grad school in '93, theater jobs were not as hard to come by.

"But these kids in 'Hell' now have an off-Broadway credit, and some great reviews (including one in The New York Times); they had an opening night in a sold-out house in a Drama Desk-winning theater off-Broadway. We've given them a shot of confidence they couldn't buy."

Project such as "Hell," and next summer's "Alcestis," which will again bring together



Cuban professional actors and UA performers in a production that will play Tuscaloosa, Havana and New York City, are part of the UA Department of Theatre and Dance's ongoing efforts to teach not just the art, but the craft, of performing.

For roughly a decade, the department has shifted some energy toward musical theater, partly because that's where jobs are. Raphael Crystal was hired as the director of the musical theater program in the same season that saw a long-in-the-making dream come true with SummerTide, a pro summer run for UA students, performed at Gulf Shores. Crystal, Panitch and other faculty also help students rehearse for a yearly New York showcase, facing top agents, directors and producers with scenes and songs students have honed all year.

When Jake Boyd, a graduate of Hillcrest High School, entered UA in 2006, he'd never had an acting class. Four years later, his performance at the showcase landed him an agent. Since graduation in 2010, Boyd has been out on national tours of "Carrie" and "Oklahoma," the latter in one of the leads as Will. He's been on TV a good bit, in a recurring role on "Are We There Yet?" and as a co-star of "Blue Bloods," and recently shot a piece for "30 Rock," playing a young Jack Donaghy (the Alec Baldwin character) that, alas, wound up on the cutting-room floor.

Boyd's currently off-

Broadway starring in the musical "The Last Smoker in America," getting better reviews than the show itself. Panitch, Crystal and dance teachers such as Cornelius Carter all molded his artistic development, he said, but it was the showcase that separated Boyd from thousands of other fresh faces in the Big Apple.

"I just got lucky, quite honestly, with our school showcase, that I found an agency that was wonderful," he said. "We clicked; they guided me through so much of the process, getting me in the door for auditions, telling me how things needed to go. Without (UA) having had that opportunity for us, my path would have been completely different."

Another change came when UA severed relations with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in 2009. Formerly, graduate students in technical areas would spend a portion of their years in Tuscaloosa, then finish up in Montgomery. While UA had acting graduate students all along, there was a separate graduate acting company at ASF that never set foot in Tuscaloosa.

"We have more people on campus now than we used to, although the number of graduate students is about the same," said Bill Teague, chair of the department. "Since the demise of our (ASF) relationship, one of the things we've tried to do was have a continued presence in the professional world," including expanding the showcase to add in grad students. Previously, the ASF served as that professional stepping stone.

Former students who got first acting paychecks through SummerTide, or first New York exposure through the showcase, are at work from cruise ships to regional theater to larger things. Sonequa Martin-Green had a recurring role on "Army Wives," played Courtney Wells on CBS' "The Good Wife" for two seasons, and is now Michelle Terry on the new "NYC 22." She's also had some one-shot appearances on "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" and "Gossip Girl," and continues to work in theater

and indie films such as the acclaimed “Toe to Toe,” which debuted at the South by Southwest Film Festival.

Erica Hansen just came off a two-year run with the national tour with “Cats.” Earlier UA students have done exceptionally well, too.

Lauren Hauser-Wiley is playing Cosette on the national tour of “Les Miserables.”

Stephen Tyrone Williams has been called a young Sidney Poitier in New York reviews so often he should probably copyright the phrase.

“There are people I’ve worked with who’ve come from bigger musical theater schools, and they are by no means any more talented than people I went to school with,” Boyd said. But connections seem easier if you attended Northwestern or NYU.

“I don’t know if there’s so much of a notice up here about the University of Alabama,” he said. “But give it a few more years and absolutely it should happen. There are so many great people coming up here.”

UA voice teacher William A. Martin is on sabbatical to tour with “Beauty and the Beast,” from which he’ll bring back practical advice on everything from the daily ins-and-outs of touring, what New York auditions are like, to how to maintain a character over an extended run and more.

“It’s a matter of being exacting,” he said. “When I give feedback, or make higher demands, based on actual experience, I think the students will understand that’s where the expectations are,” he said.

As with most artists, only a rare few will make a living at the art, so UA isn’t neglecting scholarship, Panitch said.

“But my focus is perform now, teach later,” he said. “You need a professional pedigree. You don’t want to be teaching strictly academic theater.”

Though justifiably proud of his “Hell” cast, he has warned that the ride won’t always be as cushy.

“I knew people would come see them work; 30 percent of them the real die-hard fans who’d come to see anything. Good word-of-mouth and reviews brought in the other 70 percent,” he said. “They’ve seen the greatest theatrical actors of our time, and now they’re seeing our kids. Bob Nederlander, who owns half the houses on Broadway, now knows these students.

“I’m kinda sad for them that it’s not always gonna be this kind of experience. But the best thing about this project is, they know now how it’s supposed to be. They know what the bar is.”

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