With just a hint of eerie lighting, Bill Largess, B.A. 1976, enters stage left. As the light comes up a bit more, audience members see that he is holding a white coffee cup with blood dripping down the sides — foreshadowing a dark theme.

“As a boy, I was afraid of the dark.” And so it begins. For the next 90 minutes he will deliver a monologue. Largess’s nameless character in *St. Nicholas*, the one-man play written by contemporary Irish playwright Conor McPherson, becomes obsessed with a young actress, follows her to London, and falls in with a coven of vampires.

Portraying a cynical, alcoholic theatre critic (“Everybody was afraid of me and I loved it.”) in Dublin, the veteran actor must rely on his voice, his expression, his eyes, and his timing to draw the audience into a story that ranges from humor to horror.

It’s the first of two shows in one day for Largess. It’s not easy to fill the house for a matinee on a sunny, 60-degree February Saturday in Washington, D.C. There are 17 people in the 148-seat theatre. That doesn’t deter Largess, the artistic director of the Washington Stage Guild, a 30-year-old company founded by a group of CUA alumni.

To stick around that long takes grit, determination, and passion, and sometimes giving everything you’ve got even when the theatre is full of empty seats. Largess knows he can’t play off audience reaction for this performance. “People are very self-conscious about laughing out loud and making other obvious reactions when the seats around them are empty,” says Largess. “So you adjust.”

The secret to Washington Stage Guild’s longevity and success may well be its ability to adjust. The company has worked out of five different spaces in its 30 years. Five years ago, they found a home in the Undercroft Theatre of Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church at the intersection of 9th Street and Massachusetts Avenue, not far from the District’s busy Gallery Place/Chinatown area.

They are also taking a fresh look at their marketing strategy, says Laura Giannarelli, B.A. 1978, who directed *St. Nicholas*. “We have to find new ways to fill our seats and sell season subscriptions and that means email lists and all forms of social media. While we work to reach younger audiences, we don’t want to lose our dedicated fan base of seniors, many of whom arrive clutching the newspapers where they heard about our show.”

What they won’t do, she says, is compromise their mission just to fill seats. The company’s tag line is “smart theatre for a smart town.” “We are a classical ensemble. We love George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde and Brian Friel. And we are just as excited by contemporary playwrights who are producing eloquent plays,” says Largess.

“So much of what we do is inspired by the Catholic U. drama faculty of the 1970s: voice training, oral interpretation, love of language. We received a solid grounding in theatre history. And they really instilled in us a love for intelligent and challenging work,” says Largess.

They were a group of drama department alumni from the 1970s working in Washington, D.C., area theatre when they got the idea to form their own company. They found themselves together in 1983 for a production of *Heartbreak House* by Shaw at the Source Theatre, directed by the late John MacDonald, M.F.A. 1975. “The theatre scene in D.C. was starting to boom. We looked around at each other and realized we had all the experience: directors, actors, stage managers, technicians,” says Largess.

FOR GENERATIONS, CUA ALUMNI HAVE BEEN MAKING THEIR MARK ON THE LANDSCAPE OF AMERICAN THEATRE. NOT JUST ON STAGE, BUT BEHIND THE SCENES MANY ARE RUNNING THEIR OWN THEATRE COMPANIES. STARTING WITH FATHER HARTKE’S “KIDS,” AND CONTINUING WITH MILLENNIALS, ALUMS ARE BRINGING THEIR OWN UNIQUE ARTISTIC VISIONS TO THE STAGE.
The company launched its first season with MacDonald at the helm as artistic director and his wife, Ann Norton, B.A. 1975, as executive director. The large group of founding alumni also included Giannerelli and Largess, who was dramaturg. After MacDonald’s death in 2008, Largess became artistic director.

The company’s first production in November 1986 was Uncle Vanya by Anton Chekhov. By the end of that first season, The Washington Post declared, “Like the goddess Athena, the Washington Stage Guild sprang forth fully armed this year.”

The house is usually full during Wednesday matinees at Everyman Theatre in Baltimore. That’s because Vincent Lancisi, M.F.A. 1988, founding artistic director, offers a matinee performance at Baltimore City high school students. In addition to show tickets, he provides bus transportation, study guides, and talk-back opportunities with the actors. He also offers pay-what-you-can previews.

For Lancisi, who founded Everyman Theatre in 1990, it’s about living up to the name of his company — keeping theatre affordable and accessible to everyone.

On a cold, rainy December afternoon, high school students fill nearly a third of the new 253-seat state-of-the-art theatre on Fayette Street. They are transported to the farmlands of Ireland through music, sound effects, and stunning scenery and acting in Outside Mullingar, a tender, quick-paced one-liners about complicated family dynamics and finding unexpected love. The play, directed by Donald Hicken, M.F.A. 1969, is by playwright John Patrick Shanley, the author of Doubt and Moonstruck.

The Riley and the Muldoon families are at odds over their neighboring farmland. Anthony Riley lives with his elderly father, Tony, and Rosemary Muldoon lives with her mother, Aoife, (played by drama alumna Helen Hedman, B.A. 1973). The audience laughs along with all four characters. The high school students laugh the loudest at the quick-paced one-liners.

“She won’t smoke in front of me, and she’s always smoking so I never say her.”

By the end of the play, audience members don’t know whether to laugh or cry when the awkward adult children find themselves alone in the Muldoon kitchen over a Guinness and stumble through the realization they have feelings for each other.

Halfway through his master’s program in directing, Lancisi decided he wanted to start his own theatre company. “I met so many talented actors at Catholic, and they shared this incredible work ethic and a desire to be able to work for a living,” he says. “It wasn’t about the fame or the glory. They wanted to pursue their chosen profession, and not have to wait tables. So I thought the best way I could serve them was to found a company that keeps actors at its center; that has a resident company of actors who perform together on a regular basis.”

Today, Everyman Theatre is one of the few resident theatre companies in the United States. Three years ago, the company moved into a newly renovated space that has, in addition to its theatre, classroom and rehearsal space and a welcoming lobby complete with Vinny’s Bar. Lancisi and his crew kept the neoclassical façade, but gutted the inside. The E that stands in the United States. Three years ago, the company moved into a newly renovated space that has, in addition to its theatre, classroom and rehearsal space and a welcoming lobby complete with Vinny’s Bar. Lancisi and his crew kept the neoclassical façade, but gutted the inside. The E that stands for Empire Theatre, and at least would have it, now for Everyman Theatre, which has 5,000 season subscription holders, 50,000 patrons a year, 28 employees, and $18.5 million raised during the capital campaign that funded the renovation.

Lancisi is a long way from the day he drove a U-Haul to Baltimore, where he saw a market for a small professional theatre, after getting his master’s in directing. He worked out of his small apartment. It was two years before he raised enough money to fund his first production. He called his friend and former CUA roommate, Kyle Prue, B.F.A. 1989, who was in Los Angeles looking for film work, to come play a priest on the Muldoon family’s farm: “We put them on every other metal folding chair. At first our audience members thought it was quaint. But within 15 minutes, they were huddled under shared blankets,” says Lancisi.

In those early days, Everyman had a rule that if they had three or fewer patrons at a play, they would buy them a beer and ask them to come back for a different show.

Prue never went back to L.A., joining the resident company and later becoming director of production. In 1994, the company found a permanent home in a small storefront space on Charles Street. Another running point was offering season subscriptions in 1996. But Prue and Lancisi both credit the overwhelming critical and box office success of Proof by David Auburn in 2004 as the moment they knew Everyman had arrived.

“Thank God I have a video of my brother being shot.”

Vellos discusses timing with them. Miletich begins with the words of the poem describing America as a land of immigrants, a welcoming place.

“From her beacon hand flows worldwide welcome.”

He will provide the backdrop to the scene, reading in a continuous loop. Then, like a well-orchestrated harmony conducted by Velasco, the others come in.

“I just remember my parents crying so many times and not being able to leave and being so scared about the future of our country, of not having a place to go.”


There is no script. This is devised theatre. All members of the collective bring their ideas to rehearsals. Together they are crafting a story of what it means to be a refugee.

Sitting on the floor with their laptops in front of them, the actors discuss the scene. Alex Miletich reads The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus, the famous poem engraved on a plaque inside the Statue of Liberty. Olivia Haller has the part of a Syrian refugee; Stephanie Tomiko, B.A. 2015, plays a Bosnian refugee; and Asif Majid portrays a Mexican immigrant. The latter three are improvising based on real-life stories of refugees and immigrants.


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“I just remember my parents crying so many times and not being able to leave and being so scared about the future of our country, of not having a place to go.”

“Thank God I have a video of my brother being shot.”

“Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...”

spring
As the scene wraps, they critique their work. “We should scatter our endings,” says Majid.

“How was our timing?” asks Tomiko.

“Let’s find the arc of the conversations,” says Velasco. “Try it again, standing this time and using the space, walking around Alex.”

“Yes, movement will help convey our emotion,” says Tomiko.

“Guerrilla Theatre Web is set for its first workshop performance in a few weeks. In choosing the topic for the play, Velasco says, “We are all touched by the refugee crisis — in Syria, in Central America. The heartbreaking situation of unaccompanied minors. We are exploiting the definition of home. For most people in our audiences, that’s a very simple notion. But for others in the world, it’s extraordinarily complicated.”

Velasco believes “theatre cultivates understanding and compassion.” And she’s hoping this second production by Convergence will encourage discourse.

The company’s first production, Illust the Averger by M.F.A. playwriting candidate Tareannte Chisholm, won positive reviews by The Washington Post (“Inaugural offering from Convergence Theatre is whimsical, resourceful”) and was honored by DCMetroTheatreArts with three awards (play, performance, and directing). Chisholm, who has been recognized by the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival with awards for several plays, including the Rosa Parks award for Alibi, is resident playwright for the Convergence Collective. Tomiko is director of development and Philip da Costa, B.M. 2015, is director of social media.

The mission of Convergence, says Velasco, is rooted in exploring themes of social justice. She often cites the work of Brazilian theatre artist Augusto Boal, who started a revolution with his groundbreaking work now known as Theatre of the Oppressed. “His work changed communities by raising attention to injustice and encouraging dialogue and action,” says Velasco.

Velasco received her undergraduate degree in drama in 1989 and then her master’s in theatre and dance in 1996, has been presenting devised performances that incorporate new social media. The mission of Convergence, says Velasco, is rooted in exploring themes of social justice. She often cites the work of Brazilian theatre artist Augusto Boal, who started a revolution with his groundbreaking work now known as Theatre of the Oppressed. “His work changed communities by raising attention to injustice and encouraging dialogue and action,” says Velasco.

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It is not hard to find CUA alumni at the helm of professional theatre companies. Longacre Lea has been specializing in “absurdism and magical realism” since 1998 with Kathleen Akerley, M.F.A. 1998, as artistic director and founder. The company offers one show per season every summer at the Callan Theatre on CUA’s campus. “With so much good theatre already in this market, we are committed to one really great show every year,” says Akerley. The company’s 2006 production of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead received a Helen Hayes nomination for best ensemble.

Since 2008 dog & pony dc, founded by Wyckam Avery, M.F.A. 1996, has been presenting devised performances that incorporate new ways for audiences to experience theatre. Their original production Beertown was the first ensemble-devised show to receive a Helen Hayes nomination for Outstanding New Play (2011), and was named one of Washington Post Express’s top 10 shows (2012). It made its off-Broadway debut in 2014, and the audience-participation play is now set for a multi-city national tour.

Parlor Room Theater opened in Prince George’s County, Md., in 2006. The company, founded by Frank DiSalvo Jr., B.A. 2009, M.F.A. 2012, and his brother, Thomas DiSalvo, B.A. 2012, is on a mission to foster a love of theatre at affordable prices in a county with limited options for live theatre. DiSalvo, like many who run companies, also works professionally in D.C.-area theatres. He currently has two Helen Hayes nominations for design and set at other theatres, one for his set design and costume design at the Callan Theatre on CUA’s campus. “With so much good theatre already in this market, we are committed to one really great show every year,” says Akerley. The company’s 2006 production of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead received a Helen Hayes nomination for best ensemble.

Early in his college career, Whalen began considering how he could create more performing arts opportunities for people with disabilities. He says a turning point came when he took Theatre Topics: American Drama taught by Rosalind Flynn, B.A. 1978, head of the Master of Arts in Theatre Education Program. The course is one of several drama department courses required for musical theatre students.

“The class was magical,” says Whalen. “In addition to reading and learning about great American dramas, we learned life skills like ice breakers for introducing yourself in professional settings and marketing skills. Most important, we were encouraged to follow our dreams by jumping in feet first even if that means making mistakes.”

The first thing Whalen did in launching his theatre company was put together a board — a requirement for a nonprofit organization. And he invited Flynn to join the board to share her expertise in theatre education. He also invited Emmjolee Mendoza Waters, B.A. 2001, M.S.W. 2009, CUA’s associate director of Campus Ministry and community service, to lend her expertise.

He enlisted friends from the musical theatre program to take on production jobs. Meredith Eib, a junior musical theatre major, is helping him with a cabaret production this spring. “At Catholic University, we have this gem of a music school with the most talented faculty and students, and then we have this amazing campus ministry program that...” says Eibbin.

MUSICAL THEATRE STUDENTS ENTER THE SCENE

Newcomer L.J. Whalen, B.M. 2015, is preparing to launch the inaugural season of L’Enfant Rebelle Theatre Company. He is laser focused on a mission to create inclusive and accessible theatre experiences for artists, audiences, and arts administrators.

“We welcome people who have physical, intellectual, and cognitive disabilities to our company,” says Whalen. “We are not a theatre company exclusively for people with disabilities. We welcome all people and we seek to showcase the similarities among us, despite our differing abilities.”

The goal is to create an inclusive environment where a person with autism can feel comfortable auditioning for a show or a director who uses a wheelchair can be confident that we will offer a setting free of barriers,” says Whalen.

He came to the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music as a musical theatre major with Broadway aspirations, but soon realized his path was theatre management rather than performance.

While a student he worked at a Catholic elementary school in Rockville, Md., where he had the opportunity to work with students who have special needs in an arts elective theatre program.

“One of the students had high-functioning autism, and the other two had Down Syndrome. I cast them in a musical,” explains Whalen. “In theatre, you need to be able to genuinely convey a story, and be unbound in that. These kids were able to embrace that concept and run with it. One boy’s dad came up to me after the show with tears in his eyes, and said ‘I didn’t know my son could do that.” I wondered how many more kids were being denied that opportunity.”

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allows you to use your skills in service to others. Working with L.J. is such a natural extension of that,” says Eib.

Monumental Theatre Company is another new professional company run by young musical theatre alumni. Jimmy Makrivis, B.M. 2013, is co-producing artistic director (along with Michael Windsor), and Beth Aman, B.M. 2013, is managing director.

“We would go to the theatre and look around and wonder where are the millennials,” says Aman. “So we knew we wanted to make it part of our mission to reach out to our generation in a different way. We are especially committed to fostering new work by emerging writers and providing platforms for local artists.”

The group’s inaugural season garnered favorable reviews and high attendance. They produced Girl Versus Corvid and Holidazed and held a wildly successful gender-bender cabaret called Sex Swap that featured an array of talented young performers singing popular musical theatre and pop songs meant for their opposite gender. This spring they produced THEATRE. The company premieres work by contemporary playwrights, presenting “new plays in new ways.”

“When I give student tours, I talk about the reach of CUA. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a professional production in this area without there being another alum in it in some capacity. And that’s an instant connection even if you’ve never met before,” he says.

“We are all aware of the legacy of this department. Iconic figures like Father Hartke and Bill Graham and so many more put this department on the map nationally. We’ve changed with the times, but we still honor that legacy. We are still greeted in the professional world with respect, admiration, and open arms,” says Ripa.

“By working with Centerstage, students find out that they either love theatre management or that it’s not for them,” says Brock. “I was in a unique position to do this, and as a faculty member I take particular pride in seeing them flourish and create an identity.”

CUA’S WIDE REACH

“I often tell the students, ‘This is your family, not just for four years but for the rest of your life.’ Theatre is so much about networking. We build a supportive environment in both the music school and the drama department, and that serves them well in the professional world. They will be working for each other and with each other, especially if they stay in the D.C. theatre community,” says Brock.

“Working in theatre is a tough occupation but it is full of joy and support. It’s so much about the people you meet along the way,” says Matt Ripa, M.F.A. 2008. He is the administrative specialist in the drama department and the producing artistic director of Doorway Arts Theatre. The company premieres work by contemporary playwrights, presenting “new plays in new ways.”

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“CUA students, alumni, and faculty are very loyal. They help each other out,” says Joel Markowitz, publisher and editor of DC Metro Theatre Arts, a well-known website that has more than 100 writers reviewing and writing about D.C.-area community, professional, and university theatre.

“CUA has a solid reputation in the professional community. The University has great teachers who are role models, and who are honest about what it takes to make it in the profession. And the alumni are working. If you attend any show in this area, read the bio and you are sure to find a number of alumni. It’s the same with local theatre awards. They are filled with CUA alumni,” he says.

“The program is very different than when we attended. I was among the last group that Father Hartke taught,” recalls Large, referring to Rev. Gilbert Hartke, the “show biz priest” and legendary founder of Catholic University’s 78-year-old drama department.

“I feel close to my kids. That’s a bond that a generation of us has,” Giannerelli says.

Her ties to the department remain strong. She teaches for the drama department’s High School Drama Institute. In 2009, the Washington Stage Guild hosted a conference with the drama department in collabor-