Father Hartke and a student at the Hartke Theatre construction site.

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At 75, CUA Drama Earns Rave Reviews

By Janice Colvin

Drama alumni are, literally, “everywhere,” and they are making a significant impact in major theater towns such as New York, Los Angeles, Boston, D.C., and Chicago, she adds. “What is really stunning is what is referred to in the greater theater community as the “CU Mafia,” say Ann Norton (B.A. 1975), founding executive director of The Washington Stage Guild in D.C. “It is very rare that if you walk into any theater setting today and ask, ‘oh, do you know so and so,’ they won’t reply ‘oh, yeah, they went to Catholic University.’ It is astounding.”

Megan Smith (B.A. 2006), Bruce Phillips (B.A. 2005), and Jeff Tinley (B.A. 2005) are part of this special group. Smith, Phillips, Tinley, and several other drama friends founded Sideshow Theatre Company in Chicago in 2007. Already the winner of one of Chicago’s top theater awards, the Jeff Award for 2011 for Artistic Specialization, the company is entering its sixth season. Smith is the executive director and also directs several plays a year.

Such an undertaking wouldn’t have been possible without the training and support she received at Catholic University. Smith says, “There’s something about that program that attracts a really wonderful type of person that I don’t necessarily think is the case at a larger institution,” she adds. “We got a lot of personal attention and a lot of opportunities to fail, and I mean that in a good way.”

Norton agrees. “The one thing I learned at Catholic University right off the bat is that theater is hard work.” And she learned that quickly, she says. Hartke Hall, which houses Callan and Hartke theatres, opened in her freshman year in 1970, with the department at that time offering up to 21 shows a year. “It was wonderful to actually run a successful theater company. Ann (Norton) and I would talk about liability, worker’s comp, equity paperwork, where your budget goes, government grants, and scheduling.” He says, “It was wonderful to see the other side of it.” He plans a career as a professional actor.

Actress Fallon Hogan notes that her CUA education led to her long-running acting career. Fallon Hogan’s myriad acting credits in television, stage, and screen roles include Saturday Night Live, several episodes of Singfield, as well as Forrest Cump, Men in Black, The Negotiator, Daddy Day Care, Holes, Dance in the Dark, and Dogville. “My training at Catholic University was superb,” she says. “Mark Hammer was a great teacher. Father Hartke was the absolute best, and I will treasure his wisdom, guidance, and humor forever.” CUA

Gary Sloan, professor, has been a professional actor for 30 years and has performed leading roles in New York, Los Angeles, and regional theaters. On stage, he has appeared opposite such recognizable names as Sigourney Weaver, Marsha Mason, Lynn Redgrave, Hal Holbrook, Tom Hulce, and Peter Gallagher. “I really love teaching grad and undergrads together, and working with professionals,” says Heidi Gabler director Holdridge. “I love the mix we have in this city, because there is so much theater.”

The drama department partners with local theater companies, which offer internships for students, who receive training in performance arts, and in business management and marketing. The department has long worked with such companies in the D.C. area as The Washington Stage Guild, Woolly Mammoth, Folger Theatre, Arena Stage, Theatre J, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company. Brendan McMahon, a junior drama major, has acted in several University performances including Hedda Gabler. He worked as a summer 2012 theater intern at The Washington Stage Guild and says his experience as an assistant stage manager was eye-opening. “One thing I learned was all the work it takes to actually run a successful theater company.”

Alumni accomplishments and contributions throughout the industry are notable, thanks to nurturing by a talented, award-winning faculty with national reputations in acting, playwriting, and directing. Jon Klein, head of the M.F.A. playwriting program, is the author of more than 20 plays, presented Off-Broadway and at more than 100 American regional theaters. He has won three National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting Fellowships for his work, as well as the Dramatists Guild/CBS New Play Award, the HBO Playwrights USA Award, and more.

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