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THE LIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE

The magazine of the University of Hawai'i system

Volume 25, Number 1 January-June 2001



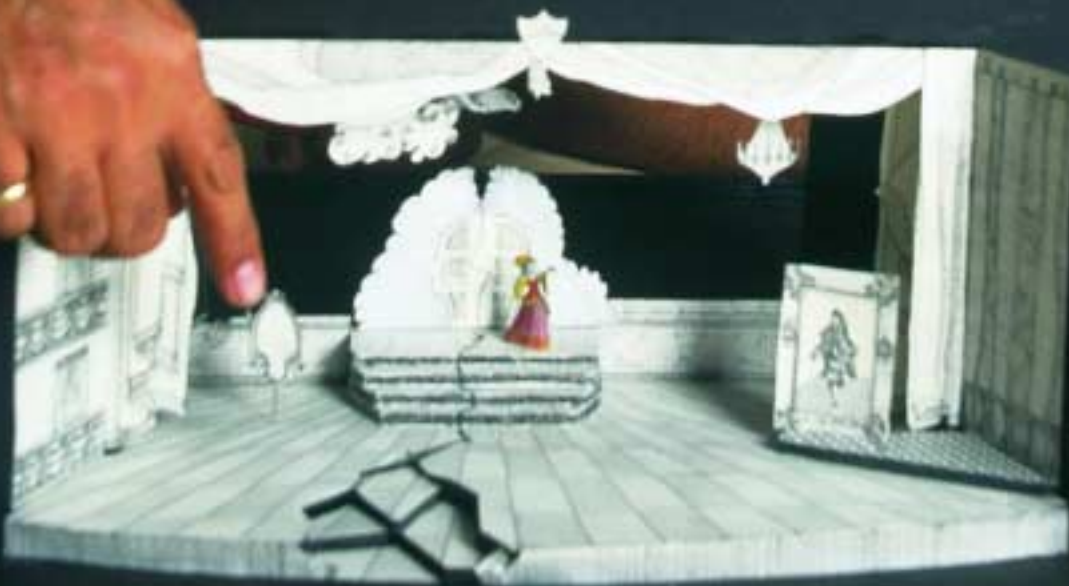
Behind the
Scenes
at Kennedy
Theatre

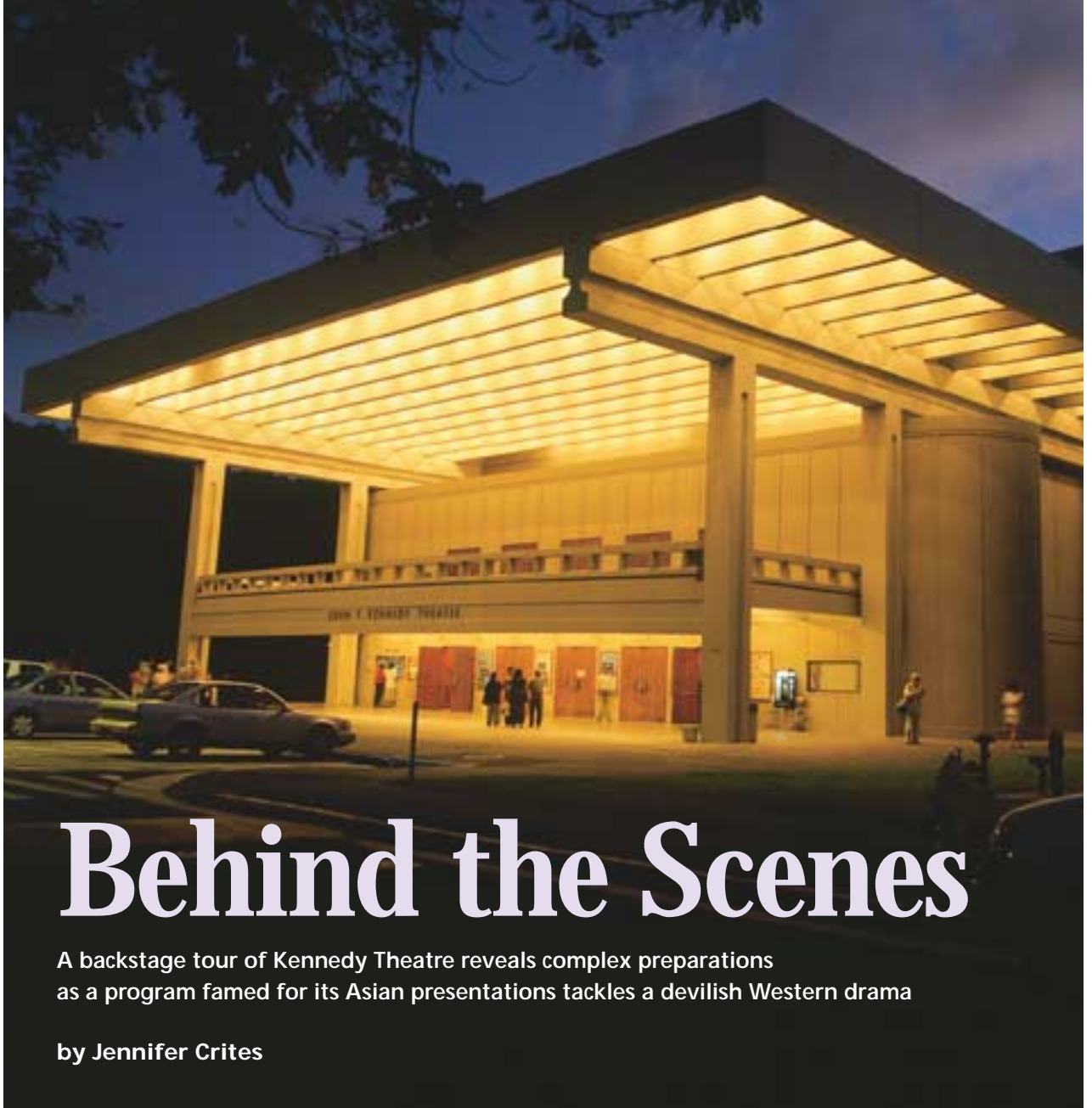
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Behind the Scenes

A backstage tour of Kennedy Theatre reveals complex preparations as a program famed for its Asian presentations tackles a devilish Western drama

by Jennifer Crites

Standing on the stage at Kennedy Theatre at UH Mānoa, I am torn between two roles. The amateur actor within me looks out at the empty auditorium and imagines a packed house on opening night. When I turn around, I'm a theater patron gazing at a maze of curved plywood ramps that rises, roller-coaster-like, from the stage floor as the complicated set for a musical fairy tale.

The stage is cavernous, stretching 80 feet deep and looming 70 feet high. Hanging from a grid of metal bars at the ceiling is a cyclorama (curved canvas projection

screen), which can be lowered during a performance like a giant guillotine blade severing audience and actors from backstage flotsam and jetsam.

Behind the cyclorama, three rows of black spotlights hang upside down along the back wall like giant, sleeping bats; and off to the side, curtains—called “legs” in theater parlance—hide warehouse-size doors leading to the set-construction shop. A conical steel staircase winds up to the fly gallery, where ropes, steel cables, pulleys, counterweights and technicians on a catwalk control the movement of curtains, lights and dangling props.

I cross the stage through a warren of tiny backstage offices to meet with Dennis Carroll, director of theater graduate studies. Carroll is tackling one of the most challenging projects the theater world has to offer—directing a staged production of the entire *Faust*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's epic poem in which the old and scholarly Doctor Faust sells his soul to the devil in return for infinite knowledge, power, youth and worldly pleasure. Seldom will a director stage both parts of *Faust* because the powerful drama, which includes an eclectic collection of monsters, sea creatures, spirits, witches, angels,

Greek gods, grave-digging zombies and scenes that whisk the players to both heaven and hell, strains the resources of a theater to the limit.

In Part II, widely considered unstageable and rarely attempted, the story hinges on magical transformations and surreal scenes in which Faust visits the mythical worlds of the past, the dead and the future; falls in love with a reincarnated Helen of Troy; drains the ocean as part of a land-reclamation project; and helps sire a test tube offspring. To stage the unstageable, Carroll plans to keep the *Faust* costumes and sets simple. Stainless-steel cages will represent worldly prisons in which characters are trapped, released and confined again. Wagons (platforms on industrial casters) will move the action around a gutted stage. “The audience will be able to see the theater’s chipped back walls, the door to the set-construction shop, the fly-line system, everything. It will all be part of the scenery,” says Carroll.

His presentation emphasizes the conflict between demonic and celestial forces as well as Faust’s internal struggles. “The work is a statement about the need for constant striving, change, evolution, the inevitability of dissatisfaction, never settling for an easy score,” he explains, “These are all things that Goethe’s life exemplifies. He was never satisfied to sit back, savor and relax, never content with what he had achieved.” The same could be said Carroll, who previously directed the complex and equally challenging Greek tragedy, *Oresteia*, at Kennedy Theatre in 1989.

Faust’s themes of compromising integrity for pleasure or material benefit appear in many spinoffs, including Baclav Havel’s modern retelling of *Faust* set in

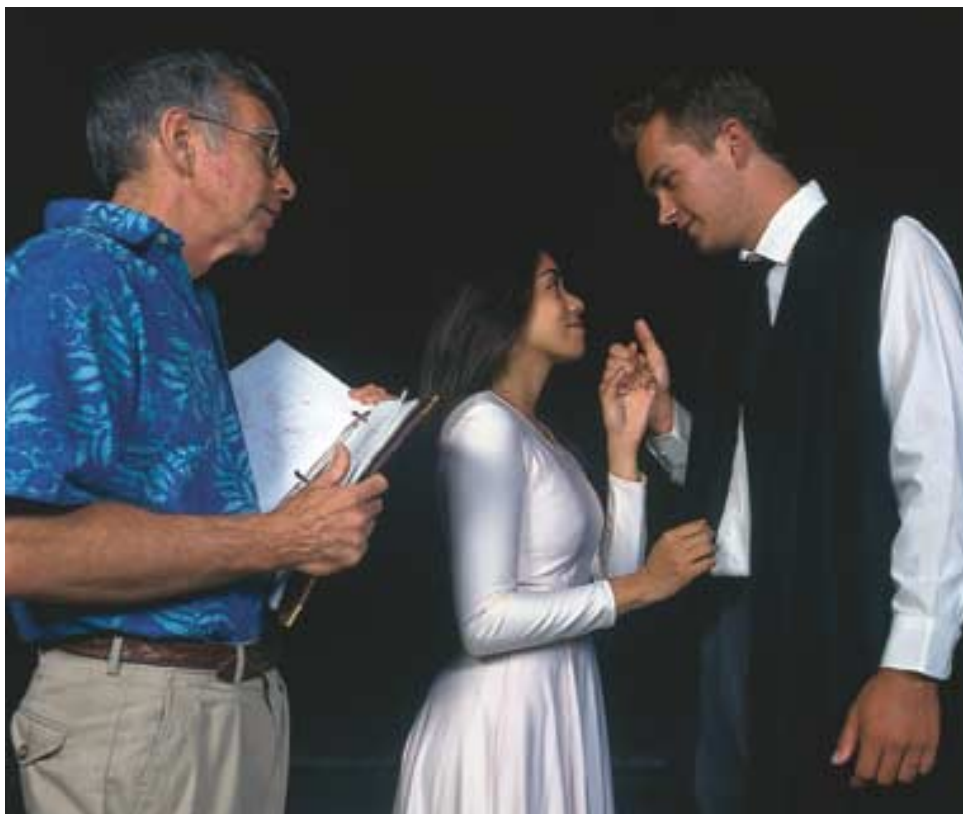
Czechoslovakia and the 1967 film *Bedazzled*. Carroll has dreamed of staging the original for many years. Now, he says, the time is right because theater resources are available.

Staging any theatrical production is a complicated process involving the collective efforts of dozens of people, from actors and directors to costume and set designers and their crews. On the day of my visit, Sandra Finney, Kennedy Theatre’s costume designer and director of undergraduate studies in the UHM Department of Theatre and Dance, is working on *No One Will Marry a Princess with a Tree Growing Out of her Head*. “It’s an apple tree,” she points out, nodding in the direction of a nearby head

covering with an arbor sprouting out of its top.

Elaborate head pieces are only one of Finney’s many challenges. Large casts are another. She and her students and staff must create wine-colored jumpsuits and other outfits for Faust’s ensemble of nearly 50 actors, most of whom will play at least eight different roles. “I’d like to get my work week down to six days,” she says with a laugh.

Upstairs, Professor of Theater Joseph Dodd is concluding one of his scene design classes. “A set is something three dimensional that actors can move through and around and on, an environment for the action to take place in,” he explains. “It must support the playwright’s and the director’s vision.” It may create a visual analogy, such as a



Professor Dennis Carroll, left, directs UHM undergraduates Allison R. Jucutan (Gretchen) and Scot Davis (Faust III) in the rarely staged two-part epic drama about a deal with the devil.



Professor Sandra Finney, left, involves students such as theater major Sadie Yi in turning a director's concept into wearable costumes.

giant compass for a play about a journey to the four winds. Before actual sets are built, designers make scale models out of paper, cardboard, strips of wood or veneer, glue, acrylic paint and “pretty much anything they can buy or scrounge.”

Productions also rely on such key backstage players as a lighting designer, sound designer/musician (for *Faust*, an original computer-generated score has been composed by New York/Hawai'i-based musician Tony Bergamo), a stage manager and a house manager, among others.

Kennedy Theatre may be best known for lavish Asian productions, but each season reflects the wide range of its academic program, including Asian, Western, children's and dance works. “Fitting everything into the calendar is always a challenge,” says Lurana O'Malley, theater historian and associate professor of theater, “but we try to balance educational

value, mood (the dramatic *Faust* against the Molière-inspired comedy *La Bête*, for example) and size to stretch theater resources.”

The community helps. Part of the \$35,000 cost of staging *Faust* came from outside donations, and *The African Tragedian*, a one-man tour de force honoring African-American Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, was cosponsored by the

UH President's Diversity and Equity Initiative. Grants and community support are critical to making Asian theater possible as well.

In the Earle Ernst Lab Theatre, where student experimental work is showcased, budgets are definitely shoestring. Primetime programs, the academic showcase for students working on a master of fine arts degree, are allotted roughly \$600 for

Also at Kennedy Theatre

Indonesian theater

Kennedy Theatre, which has earned an international reputation for its staging of Japanese kabuki and Beijing opera, introduces the unique West Sumatran theatrical form of *randai*, rarely performed outside of Indonesia. *Umbuik Mudo and the Magic Flute* combines martial arts, music, dance, acting and storytelling in a tragic love story complete with robbers and dangerous quests. Tickets go on sale Jan. 22 for

performances Feb. 2–11.

You can have this dance

Alumni Fest features choreography by UHM alumni from across the country, including Caren Cariño, Darryl Thomas and Chris D. C. Ramos, Mar. 9–11. *Doug Varone and Dancers* highlights one of New York's hottest, dare-devil modern dance troupes, Mar. 16–17. *Spring Footholds*, showcases the work of master of fine arts candidate Catherine Zahrn, May 2–6.

costumes and construction and depend on volunteers for labor. Late Night projects, productions chosen by a student board that commence after the finale of the main-stage show, receive a \$100 stipend.

Students are the heart and soul of everything, O'Malley emphasizes. "We try to work the curriculum together with what's happening on stage because theater can't be just theoretical, it has to be practical, too," she adds. "Often we'll have classes that offer specific training. In conjunction with this year's Asian theater presentation, *Umbuik Mudo and the Magic Flute*, guest artists from Indonesia are teaching classes in circular breathing, the *silat* martial art form and how to play specialized drums, flutes and *talempong* (bronze kettles)."

The department has cosponsored specialized summer courses, including staged combat, which teaches students to duel with swords and quarterstaves, parry and thrust using sword and shield, throw fake punches and other techniques. Last summer, a master artist from Italy presented a two-week workshop on the Renaissance *Comedia dell'Arte* form, which relies on masks to represent exaggerated character traits. "It is the root of works by the Marx Brothers, Chaplain—all the slapstick physical-comedy stuff," explains O'Malley.

Productions and specialty classes provide experience and diversified skills, but the cornerstone of a UH theater degree is a four-semester undergraduate course called World Theatre Sequence. "It's very intense, and the students may think it's a course conjured up by the devil, but it gives them an incredible background," says O'Malley. "It's a

A playgoer's guide to Goethe

Considered one of the greatest thinkers of the modern world—not only for his literary accomplishments, but also for his achievements in science, history and sociology—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The son of a lawyer, Goethe practiced law and held a number of government positions in the court of Duke Karl August of Weimar, including war commissioner, director of roads and services, manager of financial affairs, general supervisor for arts and sciences and director of the court theaters. He delved into the occult, philosophy, astrology, alchemy and religious mysticism as well as chemistry, anatomy, mineralogy and geology. His interest in osteology led to his discovery of the human intermaxillary bone. During a two-year sabbatical to Italy, he immersed himself in the art, architecture and literature of ancient Greece and Rome.

Goethe spent 60 years writing *Faust*—which emphasizes the right and power of the individual to inquire into affairs both human and divine and to work out his own destiny. The epic poem is based on Christopher Marlowe's retelling of a legend about a disillusioned scholar who makes a pact with Satan. The real Faust, who died in 1540, was reported to have been a disreputable man who alluded to the devil as his crony and claimed to be an astrologer, magician and alchemist. A collection of exploits attributed to this Faust first appeared in *Faustbuch*, published in 1587.

Kennedy Theatre's production of *Faust* runs April 19–29, with Parts I and II on separate days or together in a one-day cycle.

unique course because it's team-taught by specialists in both Western and Asian theater. Mainland universities don't offer that cross-cultural comparison."

Such dualism, in one of its many guises, is echoed throughout the *Faust* epic. "Two souls within me wrestle for possession, and neither will surrender to his brother," declares Faust in Part I. "That, for me, is the key to the staging," says

Carroll. Perhaps, for the audience on opening night, it will be the key to understanding and enjoying this literary masterpiece. ♪

For more information on Kennedy Theatre, call 808 956-7655 v/t or visit www.hawaii.edu/theatre. Performances at Kennedy and other UH theaters appear in the calendar on the back cover of this publication.

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Drawing by Valentino Valdez