

Backstage Pass

Minnesota State Mankato
Theatre & Dance

John Paul makes a (scenic) impression

Brita Askevold

John Paul, scenic designer for the Department of Theatre and Dance, hasn't always been interested in the theatre.

He received his undergraduate degree in psychology and physical education and later went on to get a graduate degree in counseling. It wasn't until much later that he got into theatre and scenic design.

"I became disillusioned while working with disabled workers and dealing with insurance companies," Paul said.

Paul always enjoyed art, taking classes throughout high school and college for fun. But he never thought of it as a job prospect.

He made a connection with Tom Bliese, who retired as scenic designer for the department last year. Paul had worked on a community theatre production and after Bliese saw it, he asked Paul if he had ever thought about going to graduate school.

Paul started school at Minnesota

John Paul became scenic designer at Minnesota State in the fall. He designed sets for *Enchanted April* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*.



State Mankato but moved to the Twin Cities area to get professional experience. He worked at the Cricket Theatre in Minneapolis as the technical director before going back to school and receiving his Master of Fine Arts from the University of Minnesota.

He was then given the opportunity to work on seven feature film sets in two years including "Fargo," "Grumpier Old Men," "Jingle All the Way," "The Cure" and "Feeling Minnesota."

"I think the reason I enjoyed working on films is because I like going to the movies," Paul said. "I love movies."

Working on films is different, according to Paul, because it is specified and more compartmentalized. While working on films, he mainly did the drafting and people were surprised to find out he could paint and build as well.

"Most film people do one thing," he said. "Theatre is broader. You have to be able to do everything."

Paul never wanted to be a fine artist working alone. He said he likes contact and collaborating with others. He enjoys each part of the design process from sketching and drafting to the model.

Paul is currently working on the upcoming production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* but made his faculty debut with scenic designs for *Enchanted April* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* this season. In *Millie*, his biggest challenge is keeping the numerous scene changes artistic and unified. The



John Paul's second faculty design was for *Dancing at Lughnasa*. His next is *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

musical is set in the roaring '20s with lots of art deco designs.

"The set has to match the script, dance and costumes, and pull them all together," he said.

There is a lot of research involved in designing the set. Paul said he starts with the script and tries to find enjoyment in the story. He gets inspired by the director and through brainstorming with others working on the production.

Paul said he builds a visual vocabulary by gathering lots of visual information. Each part of the process

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Nick Wayne makes beautiful music

By Brita Askevold

If you've ever seen a head peeking out through the pit during a recent Minnesota State Mankato musical production, then you've seen Nick Wayne.

Wayne is the musical director for the Department of Theatre and Dance. He has always been interested in musical theatre after growing up listening to show tunes.

"*The King and I* was the first musical I ever saw," he said. "I really enjoyed the songs." Wayne performed in musicals, including as Lun Tha in *The King and I* and Curly in *Oklahoma!* before changing to directing music.

"I never really wanted to be onstage," he said.

Right now Wayne is working on the upcoming production of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

Each production is decided on by the department as a collective. *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was suggested by fellow director Paul Finocchiaro. Wayne had heard of the show, but didn't know much about it.

"This show is one I've had to do the most research on," he said.

Wayne is also looking ahead to Highland Summer Theatre and the productions of *Smokey Joe's Café* and *The Music Man*.

The unique thing about Wayne is that his degrees are not in musical theatre. He is a 2002 graduate of Bethany Lutheran College, where he

majoring in music.

"My music background allows me to study and pull apart the music," he said.

Wayne went on to get his Master's degree from Minnesota State Mankato in vocal performance. He wanted to teach music and work with people who want to sing in musicals. He said one of the great things about the department is the opportunity for incoming students to take vocal lessons. They can work on the musical theatre style of singing. If a student is not proficient, Wayne said they spend a little time together to coach the student through the music.

"The best experience as a teacher is working with a soloist trying to master a special skill and watching them succeed in audition," he said. "The real work the student does is what makes it great."

One of Wayne's favorite productions so far was last summer's production of *The Robber Bridegroom*.

"All aspects gelled at a high level," he said. "Every piece was top-notch."

There are many musicals Wayne would like to direct the music for, but his top three are *Titanic*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Sweeney Todd*.

He said he likes all three because they are very different productions. He would like to do *Titanic* because of the large choral numbers and he is a fan of Maury Yeston who wrote the music and lyrics.

"It is a choral driven production and it would be fun to work with a large onstage chorus," he said.

Wayne would like to work on *Sunset*



Nick Wayne is the musical director working on *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

Boulevard because he is a fan of the movie and the "well written and terrifying" character of Nora Desmond. He also said that he enjoyed the score by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

"I think it is one of Andrew Lloyd Webber's most sophisticated musicals," he said.

Sweeney Todd, Wayne said, is the highest level of music.

"It is so epic; you can't do *Sweeney Todd* any year," he said. "You have to watch the students and see if they could fill the role. You can't do it if it's not right."

Wayne said the department is extremely blessed from the tremendous facilities to the workers.

"Everyone is first rate and I'm proud to work with them," he said.

From page 1: John Paul says theatre is very temporal

leads to new inspiration. He enjoys the whole process, even striking, or tearing down the set after the show.

"Now you're done," he said. "You can move to the next. Theatre is very temporal."

Paul said if you are an artist working on a canvas and don't like it, it can feel wrong to destroy that canvas because it isn't part of the process, but in the theatre striking is the last step of the process.

There isn't a certain show Paul would like to design. He enjoys working on anything from brand new productions to the classics.

"From a design standpoint, you don't dictate what shows to do," he said. "Designers are at the mercy of someone else. You do what you are asked to do or you don't agree to do it."

Paul's favorite shows are the ones he is working on at any given time, but

he did enjoy working on the original production of "Reefer Madness" in Los Angeles. He said he felt the design invoked what the campy musical was about.

When Paul works on a show for the second or third time he still finds it fulfilling.

"Even in redoing a show, you find something new," he said.

Dance program stepping up its profile

Andreas Guest artists visit

• Oct. 21-28, the First Andreas Guest Artist to the department, **Mary Fitzgerald**, worked with 10 dance majors to create *Dream Work*, a contemporary dance performed before a video backdrop. During her residency, Ms. Fitzgerald also taught modern technique, improvisation and dance composition as well as hosting a “brown bag” talk back session to share her insight on dance as a profession.

• Jan. 25-Feb. 1. Andreas Guest Artist **Alan Sener** was invited to campus to present a two-week residency. He is a former company member of the Louis Falco Dance Company (choreographed the film FAME) that was based in New York City. Sener now chairs the Department of Dance at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Residency activities included

teaching several master classes in contemporary dance and in creating a new work for Dance students. The work “Wind in Palm” will premiere in the spring dance concert on April 30th-May 2nd at 7:30 p.m. in the Ted Paul Theatre.

• Feb. 26. Andreas World Dance Guest Artists **Ranee & Aparna Ramaswamy** presented a master class in a classical Indian dance form called Bharatanatyam. The master class was open to the public and was part of course that all dance majors take called World Dance in Cultural Perspective.

• March 25. Andreas World Dance Guest Artist **Francis Kofi** presented a master class in Ghanaian dance and drumming. Mr. Kofi is an independent artist in the Twin Cities. He came to the United States as a Fulbright scholar. Now he is active in the state presenting and performing in various venues.



Left to right: Alan Sener, Larry Yazzie and Francis Kofi visiting the World Dance class.

Outreach & Accomplishments

• Jan. 11. Ten Dance students performed at Buffalo Arts High School in Buffalo to students interested in studying Dance. The variety of faculty and students works they presented were from the December dance concert, *The Bridge Project2: LiveWire*.

• Feb. 2. Twenty MSU Dance Majors and Dance Program Director Julie Kerr-Berry attended an All-State Dance Summit that was held at the Perpich Center for Arts Education in Golden Valley. Students took classes in modern, African and hip-hop throughout the day. Five students co-presented with Julie Kerr-Berry in a session that discussed the role the choreographic process plays in dance education. The Summit drew dance educators from all over the state.

• March 12-16. Twelve students and three faculty members attended the American College Dance Festival (ACDF) that was held on the University of Wisconsin, Madison's campus. A total of 533 participated in the conference from a total of 33 schools. MSU dance students participated in a variety of classes, attended several concerts and performed in adjudicated works choreographed by both a student and a faculty member. The student work was choreographed for

nine MSU dance students by senior Jena Sandell entitled, “Layers.” Assistant Professor Brad Garner presented his new work “Souvenir” in which 8 MSU dancers performed. Professor Garner, along with Professor Paul Finocchiaro and Dance Program Director Julie Kerr-Berry taught several master classes as part of the conference. As North Central Regional Director for ACDF, Kerr-Berry was also involved in additional activities that ranged from timing adjudication concerts to chairing a membership meeting.

• Dance major Nicole Curry (on behalf of the Student Dance Coalition) received an Institutional Diversity Grant to support student participation at ACDF. Student dancers took classes in African dance and Baharata Nytam, and attended a global dance concert that showcased traditional and contemporary Taiwanese dance. The dancers from Taiwan were from the National Taiwan University of the Arts.

• Dance major Staci Lipps received an Undergraduate Research Grant to create a new work, “Paper to Floor,” infusing print making and dance, which will be performed in the Spring Dance Collection 2008, *Thermofusion*, April 30-May 2. Her abstract will be presented at the Undergraduate Re-

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Coming soon ...

Thoroughly Modern Millie

Taking place in New York City in 1922, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* tells the story of young Millie Dillmount, who has just moved to the city in search of a new life for herself. It's a New York full of intrigue and jazz—a time when women were entering the workforce and the rules of love and social behavior were changing forever. Based on the popular movie, the stage version of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* includes a full score of new songs and bright dance numbers. Filled with frisky flappers, dashing leading men and a dragon-lady of a villainess audiences will love to hate, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* is a perfectly constructed evening of madcap merriment. And with the role of Millie Dillmount, musical theatre has found a new heroine for the ages in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

Hear director Paul Finocchiaro talk about the show at MSUTheatre.com



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search Conference on April 22.

- In February, Dr. Julie Kerr-Berry, Dance Program Director, presented a paper at the National Association for African American Studies conference that was held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The title of her paper was "American Concert Dance History: Integrating the Africanist Perspective." Later in the month, at the University of Minnesota Department of Music's SPARK Festival of Electronic Music and Arts, she was on a panel entitled "100 Years of Sound and Choreography: The Evolution and Praxis of a Collaborative Art Form."

- This has been a productive year for dance faculty member Brad Garner who was commissioned to choreograph three original works on students outside Minnesota State Mankato (Arizona State University; "Variable North," Dec. 2007, University of Iowa; "Canopy," Jan. 2008 and St. Olaf College; "Until Further Notice," Feb. 2008). During the fall of 2007 he also performed with Keith Johnson/Dancers at the Diavolo Theatre in Los Angeles, CA, The Dittman Center in Northfield, MN, and the Velocity Theatre in Seattle, WA.

Technical and Design students attend USITT national convention in Houston after break

Although the contingent to the United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) national convention in Houston in mid-March was smaller than in previous years—12 students plus five faculty—important connections were made and information shared.

At least 50 different sessions were attended, according to Sound Designer/Assistant Technical Director George Grubb, with topics ranging from "Animals in Production" to "How FCC Changes will affect your wireless Microphone." Both Costume Designer David McCarl and Lighting Designer Steve Smith had displays on the "cover the walls" expo.

ZFX, the people hired here for work on *Peter Pan*, are starting up their internship program and are very interested in our students because they know of the quality we produce.

PRG, a major theatrical supply company, also spoke with our representatives about possible internships. Minnesota State Mankato alum Laura Nigon went through their intern program last year and they said they were impressed with her.

Our annual alumni party was a rousing success, Grubb reports, with at least 48 people attending including at least nine different possible employers, plus all of our students and faculty, and even retired Scenic Designer Tom Bliese. Resumes were distributed to such companies as the folks from Cirque du Soleil, which will soon more than double its performing shows.