

LEARNING BY DOING

High School Students in Theater Spotlight

In the nostalgic films of the late 1930s and early 1940s, it seemed easy to put on a successful stage production. Mickey and Judy gathered the kids from the neighborhood, slapped on a little greasepaint then opened the barn with a show-stopping production number. Next stop? Broadway.

In today's competitive world of acting and theater, things don't happen by magic — there's a lot of hard work involved — so what's a young person with dreams of a life on the stage to do? Enter the Eccles Old Lyric Repertory Company High School Apprentice program at Utah State University.

Offered by the Theatre Arts Department at USU, the program is supported by a grant from the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation that allows its young participants to earn stipends to cover costs. Further financial support from the Cache County RAPZ tax (Recreation, Arts, Parks and Zoo) supports the showcase production presented at the conclusion of the season. In 2008, the program entered its 21st year.

The company's high school apprentices get to step into

the spotlight, but there is much more involved. Everyone accepted in the pre-university program is immersed in an intense, varied and professional experience in theater training during the nine-week summer program. The high school juniors and seniors involved in the program get a taste of college life and earn college credit while learning and living on campus.

"The Apprentice program provides a transitional experience that is designed to both encourage and test the students' commitment to a career in the arts," said Colin Johnson, Theatre Arts Department head and producing artistic director for the OLRC. "They study acting and also work on every aspect of production in hands-on fashion — scenery, properties, lighting, costumes, publicity, running and set-change crews — both for the OLRC productions and their own showcase play."



The class of 2008 — members of the Old Lyric Repertory Company High School Apprentice program take a break on the stage of the Caine Lyric Theatre.

The OLRC is one of the few remaining regional theaters with a rolling repertory schedule, opening a new production almost weekly until all four have opened, then playing in rotation. The company features several guest artists who are members of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

"One goal is to provide a hands-on experience so the students can learn how a professional company operates and, perhaps, decide if theater is what they truly want to study at a university," said Apprentice Program Coordinator Fred Willecke, a long-time high school instructor in Idaho. "They work from the front door to the back."

The 2008 class included several recent high school graduates. Bric Slade, 18, a graduate of Cache County's Mountain Crest High School, learned about the program when he auditioned for a scholarship at USU. Rebecca Huntsman, another 18-year-old, is a graduate of Wasatch High School who said she loves the performing arts.

"I choose to participate in the Old Lyric Repertory Company to expand my horizons and to make connections with a professional company," she said.

A younger member of the group is Christian Seiter, 16, about to enter his junior year at InTech Collegiate High School in Logan. No stranger to the OLRC and its programs, he was a member of the acting company during the 2007 summer season, appearing in *The Member of the Wedding*.

"I was able to observe the High School Apprentice program last year," Seiter said. "I looked forward to participating in a year or so, but my opportunity came sooner — Colin Johnson attended InTech's production of *The Importance of Being Ernest* and offered the apprenticeship opportunity to all the actors. I was overjoyed and joined the program."

Jessica Jackson, 18, came to the program from Declo High School in Idaho. She learned of the

program from her drama teacher. "I've never really done offstage work, so it has been exciting getting to know this side of theater," she said. "It's been amazing and I've really enjoyed it."

JR Dupont, 17, another InTech College High School student came with a strong background in technical theater and wanted to learn more. The program was perfect for that, he said. But, in keeping with the do-it-all philosophy, he appeared on stage as an actor in the capstone production.

As a graduate of Emery High School in Castle Dale, Utah, Dory Peacock got involved because she wanted to get real-world theater experience, learning all elements of the craft. "It's been a great experience for me," she said.

Jeremy Sean Lofthouse, a 17-year-old senior from Weber High School in Pleasant View, Utah, heard about the program from a friend who attended in 2007.

"OLRC has taught me a lot about technical theater and acting, but most of all, it taught me the value of hard work and working together as a team," Lofthouse said. "Observing professional actors and administration at the college level has been very rewarding because I would like to be a professor of theater someday."

Johnson said the Apprentice program is an excellent recruiting resource for the Theatre Arts Department at USU. It is advertised in *Dramatics* magazine and is open to students nationwide.

"Students in the Apprentice program are made familiar with the facilities, our policies and procedures and are introduced to many of the faculty a year earlier than other incoming students," he said. "This gives them a running head start, and many of them become our most productive students."

Contact: Theatre Arts Department 435-797-3046

Writer: Patrick Williams 435-797-1354,
patrick.williams@usu.edu
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The High School Apprentices complete their experience with a showcase production. In 2008, the future stars of the OLRC produced and performed *And Then They Came For Me: Remembering the World of Anne Frank*, a work that combines interviews of Holocaust survivors Ed Silverberg and Eva Schloss. Scenes from their lives are recreated by the young actors. The ensemble performed three sold-out performances to appreciative audiences. *Bravo!*