

Region 7 Welcomes the Aloha State

By Michelle Pitel

Spokane, Washington welcomed the 50th Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF) for Region 7 of a total 8 in the nation. The event offers scholarship competitions, auditions for potential educational programs and employers of the arts, numerous workshops, lectures, and performances throughout the week. This myriad of opportunities for the some thousand plus college students and faculty in attendance this week pulls from the diverse and energetic community spreading across 8 north western states. This year, Hawai‘i moved to Region 7, making its reach stretch across the Pacific Ocean and growing that number to 9 states.

Not only did the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) accept an invitation to perform as one of the 8 invited scenes, but they offered a workshop only hours before the evening performance to educate and prepare audiences for what they would see. The department at UHM is known around the world for its in-depth and prominent Asian theater program, taught alongside Western theater, to all its theater students. The department rotates the Asian form of focus each year, and brings in master practitioners from Asia to train UHM’s students. Last year was the year for Kyōgen, a traditional Japanese comedic theater form. Resident Kyōgen teacher, Julie A. Iezzi, began teaching the form to students during the Spring 2016 semester. The Fall of 2016 saw the further training and subsequent casting of the Kyōgen show, *Power and Folly - Japanese Satire for the 21st Century*, set to open in April 2017. The show toured to 5 of the 7 populated islands in the state of Hawai‘i. The success of the production brought opportunities to cast members to travel to Ohio in November 2017, and now to Spokane to share the many laughs

this ancient social satire form of storytelling invites from its viewers. Professor Iezzi explains, “Kyōgen enables people to laugh at themselves as the form highlights the foibles and weaknesses that exist in all of us.”

Iezzi, along with 2 of her students presented a Kyōgen workshop for the Western actor at the Montvale Event Center downtown on the opening day of the festival. A shocking 75 plus participants came for a crash course in what makes up the foundation of this form. Control of energy is essential in the meticulously stylized structure which relies on exaggerated mime, and a specific pairing of a rolling cadence and a repetitious speech pattern. Students learned the basic “kamae”, ready position, with feet shoulder width apart, knees bent, pelvis in, back straight with a subtle forward lean, and arms bent at the elbow to allow the fingertips to gently rest where the thigh meets the pelvis. This position is also used in martial arts, as the tradition dates back to medieval Japan. Much time was spent exploring “suriashi”, a stylized walk that consists of sliding the feet in order to stay grounded and prevent the upper body from the natural bob that occurs with the transfer of weight from one foot to the next in a normal walk.

The energy in the room was focused and dynamic. For many participants, this was the first time they’d interacted with any non-western performance art, and they were enthralled. “You could tell that they really wanted to learn these skills, and they offered great respect and awe to the process as they worked with us,” said Christine Lamborn, a UHM graduate student who assisted the workshop, “we had no idea the students would be so adaptable to the cultural differences.” I as the other UHM student assistant, feel there is something valuable to be learned, beyond the teachable skills, when we take time to respect, consider, and be present with a culture

different from our own. The festival welcomed Hawai'i's diversities with open arms by being an engaged and responsive audience for the Kyōgen workshop and scene performance.

When a majority of the world's population lives in Asian countries, it proves valuable to consider the ways they tell stories. Storytelling is a powerfully provoking art form, and there are so many different ways to tell one story. The rest of the week's events will follow suit in offering more ways for students to expand their worldview, cultivate their storytelling tools, and strut their stuff in hopes of a scholarship or job offer. While Kyōgen reminds us that we all have flaws, it teaches us to laugh at ourselves and not to dwell on those things. There's always plenty to learn.

Love and Information, Lost in Translation

by Michelle Pitel

No matter the script, it's the director's job to shape a vision for bringing the typed words on the page, to the living breathing stage. Whose story are you telling, what are you saying exactly, and why now, in this way? William Ball's book entitled *A Sense of Direction*, instructs directors to squeeze together these things into one sentence, one idea, called the "seed." An acting teacher of mine called this the "spine" of the show. Having a spine provides theater practitioners a tool to create a unified piece of art together. During the artistic process, when questions need answering and choices must be made, the spine serves as the backbone to coordinate the sum of the parts, and acts as the compass to guide the way. Every choice communicates information, and when all the choices serve the same north, the audience knows where to go.

The script of Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* is not like most scripts. It lacks the conventions of a typical western script as it's sans a character list, stage directions, and the order of things is quite flexible. While Churchill presents a package of vignettes, assembly is required. Imagine it's like if the director's job was normally to decorate a baked cake, Churchill hands directors the ingredients and invites them to bake the pastry from the ground up. Churchill provides the general theme of the show, but she doesn't provide the spine, or the through-line.

This year, Colorado State University brought their production of *Love and Information* to Region 7's Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. Directed by Laura Jones, the cast of 16 walked us through the dialogues of varying lengths and topics. This take on the script relied heavily on multimedia components- projections filled the cyc and ambient sound design- to shape their simple stage with angular acting blocks to create context for each episode. The Brechtian use of displaying the title of each scene, while the actors wore matching white linen jumpers in different configurations encouraged reflexivity and self-awareness that we were indeed watching a "constructed" performance.

While many of the 60 scenes had clear characters, relationships, and contexts, most of them lacked clear objectives. Without the people in these moments of their lives needing something specific, I couldn't figure out why I needed to see it. A few of the scenes did have a clear, impactful message, and there was visual consistency throughout the show, however, the overall production lacked thematic unity. I wanted to know what "information" had to do with "love." Why or how are they connected, and what impact can/do these two things have on each other?

Jones' overall direction lacked specificity. While in her directors note she wrote of intentions to bombard our senses and, "evok[e] emotions ranging from joy to grief while questioning both the truth and consequences of communicating information," I found myself searching for meaning, questioning the contexts, and the stakes rarely felt high enough to evoke much from me. I left not knowing what to think or take away from that hour and 45 minutes.

As storytelling artists, we are responsible for crafting information in a way that impacts its viewers. Stories have the power to reach within us, to stir change, to cultivate community, and

offer a catharsis. It's important to be specific, know what you want to say with your art, and craft it with that unifying purpose. Choose your north.

“I burned down his house, so he wouldn’t burn mine down first.”

By Michelle Pitel

Aaron Sorkin, probably known best to those of the baby boomer generation for creating and writing TV show, *The West Wing*, and to millennials for writing movie, *The Social Network*, brings his witty flair to his most recent stage script, *The Farnsworth Invention*. Originally meant for the screen, this battle for control of the patents for the invention of television features dueling monologues from Philo Farnsworth, a boy-genius scientist from Idaho, and David Sarnoff, Russian immigrant who pioneered American radio. Sorkin told National Public Radio that by putting the story on stage instead of screen, he could solve the problem that the two men never actually met in real life. The characters take turns narrating each other’s side of the story, which builds to a powerful, yet hypothetical conversation between the two after the court’s decision is set. Sorkin rouses a great sense of injustice by making the script’s focus about the people involved- the changes in their relationships, the sacrifices they made, and the ways they changed- while the specific science that led to one of man’s most favored inventions provided the backdrop.

Sabotage is a recurring theme in Sorkin's works, reflecting not just the battle over television's beginnings but also the state of current American politics. One friend turns on the other, someone throws someone under the bus to stay afloat, spies, lies, theft, and ultimately, the “good guy” loses because someone had to be the “bad guy.” While Sorkin takes some artistic liberties with historical facts, he does highlight and reveal a truth of what has been done by those in pursuit of the American Dream. He is particularly skilled at showing the tilt when the desire for the promised joys of the American Dream surpasses the importance of relationships in a person’s life. I think Sorkin’s writings are popular not only for their rapid-fire dialogue and wit, but also because he captures the reality that many of us have experienced in one way or another, being burned so another can get ahead at our expense.

In an age where news coming from the White House feels more like reality show *Big Brother* than the leadership of one of the most advanced economies in the world, we have more examples than ever promoting sabotage. The constant stream of 280-character (doubled from the old 140 on Nov. 7th 2017), undermining tweets coming from the Commander in Chief has normalized destroying others to “save” yourself.

One of the final lines in *The Farnsworth Invention* is delivered by Sarnoff, “I burned down his house, so he wouldn’t burn mine down first.” But the reality is that Farnsworth wouldn’t have burned down his house, Sarnoff just selfishly wanted the monopoly on entertainment. It would seem our current President thinks he will protect the White House by “burning down” other’s houses. Maybe, the reality of America and its dream, is that it was built on this mentality to stop at nothing to get ahead, on the backs of many unrecognized for their contributions, to crush others as you climb your way to the top.

Our Kuleana

by Michelle Pitel

Tonight, I attended California State University East Bay's production of *Ferguson*. I sit here now, blinking frequently to help my swollen eyes see the screen, tasked with writing about my experience with the show. To say the show impacted me is an understatement; To say much at all, I fear, would not do justice.

A powerful chorus of sniffing noses from the audience cried with the cast as they closed out Act 1. Compelling and unfeigned, testimonies and pleas came from mothers who've lost their black sons, a slow and heavy moment of silence, which was all but silent, where candles, flowers, and stuffed bears were left to mourn the losses, and a dynamic, robust, and vulnerable movement piece performed by the black men in the cast.

The lights came up for intermission and I was paralyzed. The weight of what I had just seen sat in my heart and the pain I felt brought a stream of tears I couldn't control. I couldn't move. I sat there, unable to stop the tears and the snot, wishing I was alone so I could grieve loudly and unapologetically. I just cried, stifling my release as much as I could. Then, I wished I *wasn't* alone, so I could be held or hold someone I love. I closed my eyes and let the tears just fall. I didn't know what to say. The salty droplets slipped over my mouth like a needle sewing my lips shut. Then finally, the lights went down for the start of Act 2.

The stories told throughout the evening focused on minorities of all kinds of races, countries of birth, sexual identities, and disabilities. Sexual violence, police brutality, patriarchy, white privilege, and capitalism all took the stage to play their roll in oppression. Act 3's community circle gave the audience a platform to respond to the content of the show by sharing their own stories. The community in the room was welcoming to all who needed a place for their voice, to tell their story, and many did.

My story? I grew up in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area, a mostly white region. I'm white. The only oppression I claim is that I'm a woman... but I'm a white woman at that. Then I moved to Hawai'i 4 years ago. I am not the same person today as I was when I flew over the Pacific Ocean, starry eyed and ready to live in paradise. I wanted an adventure, something to shake up my life. I didn't know that I would lose the worst parts of me living there as I collected my baggage from that carousel and dreamed of spending my days at the beach.

In Hawai'i, the tables turned on me and I became the minority race. The Hawaiian people have suffered great losses and damage to their culture and land at the hands of white people. There's a general distain for white people there and they call us "haoles," a now derogatory term for someone who is not Native Hawaiian. For the first time in my life, I often found myself as the only person in the room who looked like me. For the first time in my life, I experienced being judged for something about myself I couldn't change. For the first time in my life, I found

myself outside the popular culture. I had to learn, often through mistakes, how to fit in and behave properly. For the first time in my life, I had a taste of what it felt like to be a minority.

If I had to sum up quickly what these last 4 years have taught me, it's this- it's my job to listen. I know I matter, but there are countless others around me who the world is telling they don't matter as much, or at all, who have been s**t on by societal systems. What a heinous thing to experience. I can't speak for their pain, I have to learn from them. I shouldn't speak for them. I need to keep my mouth shut, to give space to those whose mouths have been threatened silent by the oppression that crushes them. My story? I'm learning how to be an ally. I learn more about myself the more I listen to those who are different than me. The more I learn about those who are different than me, the more I discover we are all the same.

The Hawaiian people have fewer words in their vocabulary because their language has only 13 letters. Yet I have learned of numerous words for which we don't have the equivalent of in English. My favorite is "kuleana." "Kuleana" means one's personal sense of responsibility, a sacred responsibility that drives self-motivation and self-reliance. A kind of responsibility that is deliberate, diligent, and held accountable.

The message of *Ferguson* was that we all have a "kuleana" to each other. It is our sacred responsibility to care for one another and we are accountable to ourselves to follow through on that. We are in a time where in-action from those of us with privilege is just as damaging. We must *step up* with the oppressed around us, then *step aside* to reinstate the power they deserve. There is much to learn, and much to change. It's time to own the roll I play in the world and recognize that my story, is *our* story.