

# Penn Theatre

## *A Work in Three Acts*

Theatre has a long, rich—and somewhat obscure—history at the University.

A new initiative aims to help Penn's professional, academic, and student performing arts entities do more to work together and raise their collective visibility on campus and beyond.

BY MOLLY PETRILLA

The spring of 1886 was an exciting time for Penn thespians and theatregoers. A group of students had decided to perform Aristophanes' 425 BCE play *The Acharnians*, and they didn't take it lightly. They created detailed costume plans and appointed a special committee to oversee production of the play. They memorized their lines in the original ancient Greek, and had music composed by a professor in the music department. They spent \$4,000—about \$94,000 in today's money—constructing sets and having spears and swords specially cast and authentic leather and metal armor made. Eadweard Muybridge, the pioneering photographer of motion, took rehearsal pictures that were later published in *Harper's Magazine*. *The New York Times* ran an article about the production the day before it opened, and more than 3,000 people—many of them prominent academics—came to see the students perform. It was a big deal.

Exactly 125 years later, theatre at Penn is still a serious undertaking, and it's now taking center stage. The University's three theatrical entities—its theatre-arts program, its student performance groups (under the auspices of University Life



Arts Initiatives), and the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts—have joined forces to strengthen the impact and visibility of theatre at Penn, and to provide “an all-around richer experience,” in the words of Ty Furman GrEd’08, director of University Life Arts Initiatives. “We want people to know that theatre is alive and well at Penn,” he says, “and we want to raise its profile and visibility.”

Calling it simply “the Penn Theatre Initiative,” the three groups are hoping to raise \$420,000 in three years—funding that they will begin to use this coming fall. “We’ve been working together informally for a long time,” says Michael Rose, managing director of the Annenberg Center, “but this is the first time we’ve gotten together to raise funds for a project. It’s a great opportunity to show that collaboratively we can provide even more opportunities for students and faculty to work together and offer even better productions and related programming.”

A preview of what the future holds for Penn theatre came this past fall when the Annenberg Center hosted performances of *The Laramie Project* and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. Knowing the importance of the plays’ subject matter—the first chronicles life in the town of Laramie, Wyoming, just after openly gay college student Matthew Shepard’s brutal 1998 murder and the second explores a return there 10 years later—Penn’s theatre entities put together a full six weeks of programming centered around them. In addition to two performances of each play, those offerings included a talk on “Theatre for a New Millennium” by Moisés Kaufman,

EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE, UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



the Tony- and Emmy-nominated director and playwright who directed *The Laramie Project*; a “queer art” alumni panel discussion at the Platt Student Performing Arts House; and technique workshops and post-show talks with the *Laramie* theatre company, Tectonic Theater Project.

“We wanted to use *Laramie* as a model for what we can do when we all work together,” Furman says. “We want to do a better job looking at what the Annenberg Center is [presenting] and then figuring out all the ways we can engage students to make the experience last past the performance. We also want to let the rest of the community—faculty, staff, and the average Joe Student—know that theatre’s cool.”

The new initiative will help fund theatre residencies and master classes, workshops and lectures, community-engagement endeavors, and various other projects. It will also allocate what Furman calls “a small pot of money” to each strand of Penn’s theatre community—its academic program, its performance center, and its student performers—to use however they see fit; the rest of the funds will go toward joint efforts.

Here’s a closer look at the entities who’ve banded together to bolster theatre at Penn—a trifecta that many say is more vibrant than ever. (Even without the Greek armor reproductions and *Harper’s* photo shoots.)

### ACT ONE: HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER (AT THE ANNEBERG CENTER)

**Richard Feintuch W’74** currently serves on the board of overseers for the Annenberg Center, but his association with the center goes way back—and beyond theatre. Annenberg had only been open for a few months when Feintuch, then a sophomore, invited his friend Merry Henig W’74 to see the Penn Glee Club perform there. He was wowed by the facility’s beauty and newness—“it was in stark contrast to a lot of the older performance spaces on campus,” he says—but the girl he brought as his date made an even greater impression. “Merry and I had been best friends since the first day of freshman year,” he explains. “When one of my roommates suggested I take her [as my date] to the concert I thought, ‘Oh, sure, why not?’ but it went from a

platonic friendship to something more in that one date.” The Feintuchs have been married for 36 years now.

Looking back, the college sweethearts “recognize that this was a very valuable part of their undergraduate experience,” Rose says. In fact, throughout their courtship, Merry and Richard often went back to the Annenberg Center for various performances; they’d pick up an inexpensive pair of student tickets and see whatever Broadway preview or concert or play was scheduled for that night. “These were unbelievably fantastic productions at a very cheap cost, which made me thrilled with having the Annenberg Center on campus, and made me jump at the opportunity to get on the board,” Feintuch says.

Since the Feintuchs’ first date there in 1971, the Annenberg Center has gone through several transformations. Though it’s always hosted touring shows and theatre companies, for much of the 1980s and ’90s, two local theatre groups held long-term leases on the Center’s plum performance spaces, restricting its opportunities to present other theatrical works—student performance access, in particular, was “very limited” back then, Rose says.

Rose was named managing director in 1998, following the resignation of long-time managing director Stephen Goff Ar’62, who had worked at Annenberg since its beginning in 1971. The center had conducted a six-month review, and was in the midst of a three-year reorganization process when Rose came on board.

“We began putting more emphasis on the presentation of theatre ourselves, as opposed to just being a place where local companies could rent our space and produce their own shows,” Rose says. And the

students came back, filling Annenberg’s three theatres with their colorful productions and late-night rehearsals. Their presence had been missed, for, as Rose puts it, “the Annenberg Center’s vitality comes largely from the programs we present, but perhaps even more so from the wealth of activity that takes place here with student performing arts.”

By the early 2000s, the center had begun to focus on work that’s rarely seen in Philadelphia, Rose says. As a result, it’s hosted a number of big-name national and international companies over the years: the Globe Theatre from London, the Guthrie Theater from Minneapolis, the Deaf West Theatre from Hollywood, the Abbey Theatre from Dublin. Those companies, along with dozens of others, have helped the center present a host of provocative works.

“We’re really focused on looking at the theatre as a cauldron of issues and ideas that connect to what’s occurring on campus and off campus,” Rose adds. “We’re focused on theatre that has substance; theatre that’s challenging. Even when we brought in Shakespeare with the Globe, it was two dark, difficult plays.”

Annenberg also helps connect Penn’s often-scattered theatrical points. It provides a plush, professional performance venue for student theatre groups; offers classroom and stage space to a number of theatre arts classes; hires students to work in its box office; and serves as a home for the entire theatre arts faculty, whose offices occupy the third floor. It also works hard to entice audiences from within the Penn community, offering \$10-\$15 student rush tickets and a 10 percent discount for staff and faculty members. (Alumni discounts are also available.)

MICHAEL LUTCH



While the Annenberg Center has been providing actor-led workshops, pre-show talks and post-show conversations for years, Rose says the Penn Theatre Initiative will allow it to further expand those offerings. It will also provide more opportunities for companies in residence—that is, those with extended engagements at the Center—to offer master classes, workshops, open technical rehearsals, and other student-friendly fare.

Despite all that's happened (and continues to happen) since his first trip to the Annenberg Center, Feintuch says that "in many ways, it's almost precisely today what it was back then. It was a place where highbrow professional performances intermingled with wonderful student performances on different days. That makes it a very special treat for everyone in Philadelphia, but most especially for the Penn community."

#### ACT TWO: LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

It's just after 7:30 on a Saturday night, and at this moment, Angie McGuinness is no longer a sophomore majoring in cinema studies. Now, and for the next two hours, she's Bonna Willis, a tough-talking kid trapped in 1960s suburbia. She's been rehearsing the role for about 20 hours a week for the last month and a half, learning the nuances of the self-proclaimed "ass-beater" Bonna—one of the main characters in *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, cartoonist Lynda Barry's coming-of-age tale about the interracial friendship between two girls in the era of "white flight."

*Good Times* is the passion project of Marcia Ferguson, a core faculty member

and senior lecturer in the theatre-arts program. She says it was love at first read for her and the play, and she spent several years thinking about how to stage it at Penn. This spring, when it was Ferguson's turn to teach THAR-350: Rehearsal & Performance—a one-credit theatre-arts class that rotates instructors and productions every semester—she decided it was finally time to attempt a production of *Good Times*.

"It's an interesting, different way of learning," she says of the class, "but I think it's some of the most concrete and valuable work you can do in a theatre arts class—to actually be out there staging a production." In addition to rehearsing and producing *Good Times*, the class also has an academic side, including required reading assignments and critical essays—two hallmarks of a theatre education at Penn, Ferguson says. As the theatre arts program's current director, Rose Malague, points out, "Performance is only a part of what we do."

The program has been working to prove its academic prowess since the beginning. In a *Gazette* interview marking the 25th anniversary of the program's first graduating major ["Arts," Sept/Oct 2005], program founder Cary Mazer, associate professor of theatre arts and English, recalled that "the key thing to selling the idea was to convince the faculty of Arts and Sciences that theatre arts was an academic discipline."

While performance is certainly a part of the program—just watch Ferguson's Introduction to Acting students rehearse challenging scenes in preparation for an end-of-semester showcase—it has remained equally focused on the-

atre's history, theory, criticism, and literature, Malague says. This is clear from only a quick glance at the major's required classes: a trio of "theatre, history, culture" courses; "Play: Structure, Style, Meaning"; and more performance-oriented courses in acting, directing and scenic design.

Malague says that from the time she became program director in 2007, she's been on a mission to "raise the profile of the program." It's still a tiny major—right now, there are just under 30 students who've declared—but it's also in a moment of expansion. "We've tripled the size of the major in the last two years," she says. "We've put more attention on publicizing our events and bringing in larger audiences. We've been trying to make more students aware that it's possible to major in theatre at Penn or to study theatre at Penn."

Still, the major remains among the University's smallest—something many consider more of a strength than a liability. "We function almost like a small liberal arts college within a giant research institution," Malague says. Adds Ferguson, "You probably wouldn't believe it, but when we—the core faculty members—have our meetings, we talk about each individual student [major] and what would be best for them and who needs what class. We actually structure our seasons and our course offerings according to our student body."

Theatre arts majors and students come from all over the University and, as with other liberal arts degrees, go on to a wide range of careers. Malague has taught future doctors and lawyers, nurses and engineers, businesspeople and



journalists. “That’s something I always try to highlight,” she adds. “You’re just as prepared to do a wide range of things as anyone else graduating from Penn.”

Of course, some students do choose to stay in the theatrical world, performing in regional theatre companies, appearing on TV series, or even starring in Hollywood blockbusters. Malague distinctly remembers a senior from her first year teaching—a standout theatre major known then as Liz Mitchell C’96 but who found fame as Elizabeth Banks [“How to Succeed in Show Business By Really, Really Trying,” Jan/Feb 2010]. “I’ll never forget her in [longtime theatre-arts faculty member] Jim Schlatter’s beautiful production of *On the Verge*,” Malague says. “She did it as her senior thesis. Elizabeth Banks was luminous on stage, and now I’m watching her Thursday nights on *30 Rock*.”

### ACT THREE: LONG HOURS, LATE NIGHTS

**When Harold Wolpert C’88 unpacked his bags as a Penn freshman,** he’d already decided to take an unofficial leave from all things theatre. He’d been active in it throughout high school, but wanted a chance to find his footing at college before diving back into the stress of putting on a show. “That lasted about two days,” he says. His speedy change of heart came when a friend from high school—Seth Rozin C’86, who now works as producing artistic director for InterAct Theatre Company [“Alumni Profiles,” Jan/Feb 2004]—called Wolpert in desperate need of an assistant stage manager for his student group’s fall musical. Rozin cajoled, Wolpert relented, “and the rest is history,” Wolpert says now.

As luck would have it, he’d stumbled into one of the oldest and most celebrated student performance groups at Penn—one that boasts 19-time Tony Award-winner Harold Prince C’48 Hon’71 among its alumni: Penn Players. Founded in 1936 as the first coed performance group on campus, Penn Players is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year—a milestone that takes Wolpert back to his own Penn days, during which the group turned 50 and, as chairman, he produced the musical, *Company* (the original Broadway production of which was directed by Prince, as it happens). He still has the poster from that performance; it hangs in his

office at the Roundabout Theatre Company in New York, where Wolpert serves as managing director.

While the theatre program divides its curriculum between practice and theory, its student theatre groups are all about hands-on learning and performance. In student theatre, there are no class credits and no experienced professors to help in a crisis; there are just other students, often equally unprepared or inexperienced or overwhelmed. Still, the University’s student theatre groups remain the school’s oldest theatrical breeding ground, and have produced a host of successful alumni who still work in the industry.

Penn Players is just one of 10 theatrical student groups at Penn, all of which fall under University Life Arts Initiatives. From classic musical theatre to Shakespearean classics to cutting-edge experimental performances, “you name it, they’re producing it,” Furman says. Each group has its own constitution and executive board, and—save for the occasional professional director—they do it all themselves, from submitting a budget to ordering lumber for the set to selling tickets on Locust Walk.

“I’ve often said that many of the skills I developed in Penn Players are the ones I use today, only now I have a bigger budget,” Wolpert says. “Working with Penn Players, I learned about management skills, personnel management, problem solving, critical thinking—many of the things that happened then, I experienced in some way years down the road. It was very good training.”

It’s also a lot of work. Rehearsals can require anywhere from 10 hours a week and up—closer to 30 when a performance date nears—and almost always occur at night. Wolpert still remembers saying a quick hello to his non-theatrical roommates when he got home at 11 p.m. after rehearsals; they were headed to bed, he was about to start studying. And yet he kept doing it, as have thousands of students both before and after him. (In fact, Wolpert says the semester he took off from theatre was actually his worst academically. Go figure.)

Rachel George, a junior majoring in cognitive science and the current Penn Players chair, says the experience is as much about friendship as it is about the-

atre. “We spend so many hours together, and after the show, you miss these people, so you get involved in another show,” she says. “That’s what happened to me. It’s like we’re all part of a family.”

That sense of kinship extends beyond individual groups, she says, since many students are involved in several groups’ productions, often simultaneously. George, for instance, was making paper flowers for Quadramics’ upcoming *Little Shop of Horrors* production while producing Penn Players’ spring play; another student, the head of the Quadramics board, was playing the lead in the Players show. “Lines aren’t really drawn between groups,” George adds. “Penn theatre is a community, and we all try to support each other. Putting on a show is a very stressful experience, and you need people to give and take. We’ll often say stuff to each other like, ‘You used a really nice bed last semester, where can we get that for our show?’”

And while there’s plenty of stress to go around—popular culprits include lack of funds, lack of time, and lack of sleep—students say any strife is worth it in the end. “Ultimately, the project and the product are theirs,” Furman adds, “and they wouldn’t have it any other way.”

But it’s not only the students who are proud of what they do. There’s Marcia Ferguson, sitting in her Annenberg office, glowing like a new mother after her *Good Times* production’s sold-out final performance. There’s Rachel George, proudly reciting that age-old mantra that “the show must go on,” no matter how many obstacles arise. And there’s Mike Rose, ticking off the mile-long list of world-class performance troupes who’ve graced the Annenberg stages over the years—and those who are coming soon.

They’re all eager to see how the new Penn Theatre Initiative could revolutionize their shared passion. “As far as I know, this is a very unique model for Penn, which makes it even more exciting,” Furman says. “If it works, we’ll talk about continuing it for theatre, and possibly extending it to other areas of the arts, too.”

“For now,” he adds, “all eyes are on us.”◆

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