

Broad education for Oklahoma State's theatre students



While Oklahoma City is quite out of the way, Stillwater, where the Oklahoma State University campus is situated, is even more so – over an hours drive from city. Oklahoma State is primarily a research university so it doesn't have a huge reputation for having a theatre department. "The State University has a bigger standing as a practical university but I have to say, having now been there twice, its one of the best teaching faculties for theatre that I've ever been invited to," said Denis Hutchinson, South African Lighting Designer. **Photos of *Cabaret* by Heidi Hoffer**



Oklahoma State presents a broad education to equip their students. Part of what the school offers is welcoming outside experts from across the world to visit their campus.



Dennis Hutchinson

"It's a bit extreme bringing in a lighting designer all the way from South Africa, but they're set up to do that," said 'Hutch'. In 2012, he was the invited lighting designer for the department production of *The Drowsy Chaperone* and spent three weeks working with students. Earlier this year, he was both lighting designer and production electrician for *Cabaret* and stayed at the campus for a month, working alongside the students, "and hopefully teaching something!"



"When I go there as a production electrician I don't do things exactly as the Americans would. So the students go, 'Okay, this is how we are used to doing it, but here is another way of doing it.' I think that's quite important."



Denis worked closely with Heidi Hoffer, Professor of Design at the University, who has been involved in theatre since 1975. Known for her outstanding scenic work and musical productions, Heidi met Denis when visiting South Africa in 2010 where she assisted both the drama departments WITS University and Tshwane University of Technology with workshops and ideas to expand their syllabus. She was back in South Africa again this year.



Heidi Hoffer, Professor of Design at the

University.

“Somehow I got the idea that Denis would be good with the students, and the students have loved him,” said Heidi. “When I work with Denis it’s like he can read my mind!”



What Denis likes about Oklahoma State is the inclusiveness of their programme. “To give you an example, I went to a rehearsal on the first evening I arrived in 2012 and watched a girl doing a tap routine from hell. She was ridiculously talented! The following afternoon, I saw the same girl walk into the workshop, put safety goggles on, pick up power tools and comfortably build scenery. The point is she was comfortable using power tools with proper safety equipment and there was no sense that this was inferior to what she was doing on stage the night before. There was as great an appreciation of the skill involved in carpentry, as there was the skill involved in tap dancing.”



The theatre programme is incredibly empowering. Girls gain a huge amount of knowledge learning carpentry, welding and painting. The guys have to learn to sew. “And what it means is that the kids who leave this particular school go out into the greater world and are well equipped,” explains Denis. “We all know there is no shortage of actors, but there is a shortage of jobs for actors. But all of these kids have very strong secondary skills. Even if they can’t get into theatre immediately as a performer they can get into theatre as a props maker, scenic painter, or production electrician. Very often this is a way to get your foot in the door. Once you’re in your talent comes to the fore and you end up going to where you should be.”



The level of training is very good. “The painting these kids do; yes of course a level of talent is required, but wow! The level of carpentry! I’ve watched these kids weld and I’ve thought I wish I could do that. I think it’s a very good school. It’s not a school that is fashionable by any manner of means. It’s a school for getting a damn good education which I think is way more important.”



The faculty is unrivalled. “I don’t think you can beat the passion of the faculty,” said Hutch. “There’s not a single member – and they all have talent – who is waiting it out until they can start their pension. They are all committed, doing things. I watched a staff member present a fight class, which was extraordinary. Students are examined through the British Academy of Stage and Screen Combat. The lecturer handed students a sabre and shield, while their exam had been on the sabre and dagger. And he said, “Right, now I want you to adapt the routine that you learnt for the exam using the new weapons. Go!”



Captivated, Denis watched this exploration of, “Okay, we just did this routine with the dagger, how do we do it

with a shield?" He elaborates, "I didn't know the shields in medieval times had their edges sharpened so that you could cut people. It makes those battles seem so much bloodier. But it was fascinating for me, sitting watching this, and the passion in which the class was given, as much as watching Heidi Hoffer with her paint students or any of her design students. These kids leave not only with knowledge but also with this passion infused to them, and I think that's tremendous. It also makes the students very easy to work with."



Heidi Hoffer agrees. "I love seeing the light bulb go on in a student's mind," she says. "They see that they can do something and all of a sudden they are not afraid to experiment and try something. The faculty are like family and Oklahoma State cares about the students, and because we do, the end product is good."

Says Denis, "There is a very interesting thing I noticed while I was there, a little disturbing actually. There was something that needed to happen. I started to say what I would normally say in South Africa, and that is, "Guys I know it's a pain but...." And then went on to describe whatever it was. The response was, 'It's my job, don't worry, I'll do it.'



"I suddenly realized I spend a lot of time apologising for asking people to do their job. I shouldn't have to preface anything with "I know it's a pain but...." I should be able to say, "We need to do x " and somebody should say, "Done". And that's what I was finding there. And it was so refreshing.

"The other thing that I absolutely loved and unfortunately is a sad indictment in our society is something I noticed when I went for coffee one morning. There is a coffee shop across from the theatre called the Daily Grind, which I think is an inspired name for a coffee shop. As I was walking back, I suddenly realized that all I'd done to get back onto campus was cross the road. There was no fence, I had not seen a security guard since I had left the

airport, the building I worked in was open 24/7. When I got to the building I wasn't sent to get fingerprints taken or have an ID card issued; they handed me a master key and that was it. I'm old enough to remember when this was the way it was in South Africa and its how it should be.

Denis valued the entire experience and the opportunity to work with Heidi. "We get on very well. We work very well together. We both have a slightly off sense of humour and I think the direction of our focus is very similar too. What we do is very different, but I think that's why we work together so well. On a scenic level Heidi comes from a painterly tradition whereas I come from an architectural tradition. I'm in awe of anyone who can paint because I can't. I just look at it and go, "you're a genius."



"But there is a fundamental respect for the different schools that we come from and I think that's great. We can talk to each other and be completely open. I never feel like I have to say things to Heidi nicely, and I'd like to believe that she feels the same way in terms of talking to me. We can be very direct with each other. 'What are you seeing that I'm not seeing?' And usually the answer leads to, 'Oh, that makes sense.' It's a very good, solid working relationship, which I really enjoy.



Denis Hutchinson is a respected lighting designer and consultant in South Africa. He has just returned from Italy touring with Robyn Orlin and the Moving Into Dance Company as a lighting designer and technical manager – the show played in a restored wooden Italian Opera House during a festival. This year has seen him very active in South Africa and he worked on three new dramas, one of them with an original text, and also had the rare opportunity to work on a new ballet, based on Noël Coward's *The Vortex*.

"I've been very lucky, I've worked all over the world from Noumea in the East to Bogota in the West. The only thing in-between is the Pacific Ocean," he says. "I would go back to the Oklahoma State University any time. But that depends on if they would want me back! You're only as good as your last gig."

