Jessimae Peluso and other local comedians navigate gender stereotypes to the stand-up stage.

EXCLUSIVE!
One student's comedic schooling at Second City.

Funny Girls

the Comedy issue

London: The Old, the Weird, and the Historic • The College Band Crisis
Dear Readers,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to read the very first issue of Syracuse Spotlight. Our main goal is to provide you with the goings-on of the performing arts world on and around the Syracuse University campus. As Syracuse University’s only publication dedicated to covering performing arts, the entire staff is very excited about the launch.

As the year comes to a close, we’re all gearing up for summer. If you’ve got graduation jitters, have no fear: two graduating seniors of the SU Drama department talked to us about their experiences here and their plans for the future (pages 8-9). If you’ll be in the Syracuse area for the sunny season, we’ve got a great photojournal of outside summer venues for you to check out so you can enjoy the arts while you enjoy the weather. There’s nothing better than the open air and a good show.

As this first issue focuses a lot on comedy, humor yourself with stories on Syracuse female comedians (page 18), the Wise Guys Comedy Club (page 10), and rising senior Sam Gerhardt’s experiences studying with The Second City in Chicago (page 12).

We’ll also look to next year. Check out a conversation with Timothy Bond, the artistic director of Syracuse Stage as he talks about the theater and the upcoming season (page 22). We also have some tips for you if you’re planning to study abroad in London (trust me, there’s no better place for good theater).

With no further ado, I proudly present to you Syracuse Spotlight’s first issue. Enjoy!

Ali Mierzejewski
Editor-in-Chief/Founding Editor
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May 2012
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Syracuse finds good comedy and good company at local downtown comedy club, Wise Guys.
Syracuse Spotlight: Did studying musical theatre in college make you feel more prepared for the real world?

Mary Claire King: Absolutely, hands down. I am completely changed by the work that I did in the last three and a half years at Syracuse. In all three areas—singing, acting, dancing—the growth is pretty incredible. So much of it was due to guidance of my teachers and professors. My voice especially is just completely different. I can’t even put into words what I gained this semester.

SS: What was the most difficult part of being a full-time musical theatre student?

MCK: The hours. We would rehearse up to 30 hours a week, and that was on top of class. And because they were studio classes, our presence was so required of us in every class. Physically and mentally, you always have to be there.

SS: Coming out of a theatre program, do you feel additional pressure to “make it”?

MCK: I think another way in which I’ve grown is the way I think about this question. If you asked me this years ago I would have said “yes.” But it’s lessened because I do feel prepared. I do feel ready. I do understand that in life an aspect is surviving theatre school and facing the real world. It’s very…boring at times to say the least. We don’t get paid very much. It’s hard to explain,” says Stiffler. “It’s like seeing a child walk. You’ve got this baby, and you’re taking care of it, teaching it, and watching it grow. Opening night, it’s like letting it free.”

SS: What goals do you have for your career?

MCK: After interning with the CW television network in Providence, Stiffler took on stage management and assistant stage management jobs in various types of shows—from a black box show consisting of eight one-acts to an internship at Syracuse Stage for A Christmas Story. MCK: “I just remember that show was like ‘This is why I’m here. This is why I want to be here, this is why I want to do this.’

SU Drama Stage Management senior Traci Stiffler discusses the behind-the-scenes world of theater school and what a show looks like from a backstage perspective.

When most people see the Broadway musical Wicked they are amazed by the spectacle and magic coming to life on stage before them. However, Traci Stiffler, a senior stage management major at Syracuse University, notices something a bit more.

“I love the show,” Stiffler says, “even though the [stage] manager has a bullpen times ten cues.” After a few seconds of thought she continues, “which I could do.”

Stiffler has an enormous passion for live theater, especially what’s going on backstage. She has found her time as SU Drama worthwhile, but busy. As a stage management major, one is required to take classes in all aspects of the theatrical arts including stage management, design, and acting. Therefore, Stiffler found her freshman year workload was incredibly time consuming. She remembers, “I was nonstop from the end of September to April,” she says, “I was nonstop freshman year. It was just a lot to take in. It was a heavy smush course but I learned so much.”

Through sophomore and junior year, she took on stage management and assistant stage management jobs in various types of shows—from a black box show consisting of eight one-acts to an internship at Syracuse Stage for A Christmas Story. Stiffler struggles to choose her favorite, claiming each show is the greatest experience at the time. But she finally lands on her first gig as an assistant stage manager her freshman year for The Way of the World.

“It was a language piece,” Stiffler explains. “It’s very…boring at times to say the least. We had people falling asleep during the show, but it happens, including my parents.” But still Stiffler holds that experience in her fondest memories.

“I just remember that show was like, ‘This is why I’m here. This is why I want to be here, this is why I want to do this,’” she reminisces. “It just gave me a really positive feeling. Even though I was at rehearsal every night, hardly getting any sleep. I just loved going to rehearsal because, I don’t know, everyone was just so great.”

After interning with the CW television network in Providence, Stiffler isn’t limiting herself to solely live theatre jobs after graduation. She recently shadowed a producer for The Road Show, Providence’s own Good Morning America on WPRO. “Honestly,” admin Stiffler, “I’m going where the job is at this point.” Having sent her résumé to nearly every theater in the Boston area, Stiffler is struggling to find anyone who is hiring.

“With the economy, theater obviously is dying a little,” she says. “Struggling to say the least. And with all the jobs, there are thousands upon thousands of shows out there. To pick one would be like picking your favorite grain of sand. There’s just so many.”
I entered the bar through a high archway as the pre-show crowd gathered around, sharing drinks and laughter. People of all ages sat on stools or propped themselves on the bar in the dimmed light. Women flipped their hair, laughing with their potential “Mr. Rights,” while a group of men shouted loudly and clanged glasses over the game that loomed over the bar on a plasma screen.

E verything – the floors, the tables, the stools, everything – was made out of dark wood, warming the room and adding to the familiarity. Candles flickered, leaving an accenting glow on each table. I inhaled aromas of food and wine. My eyes ran down the bottles lined up behind the bar as the bartender whisked by, shaking drinks, taking orders, and cracking jokes of all kinds. Clear, blue, green, red, black, gold – the collection of bottles was set out on display, just inviting you to come over and take a look at all the possibilities.

Cars zoomed down the rainy streets of Syracuse outside the window, but it was a different world within the walls. A popular music station played underneath the noise of the chatter. Two days earlier ESP Syracuse’s number one jazz-fusion band, would’ve replaced the radio’s music. A balding businessman relaxed in his chair at the table he shared with his colleagues checked his watch during a pause in the conversation. “Almost show time, boys.”

The body language on every person in the room sent out a vibe that overruled any possibility of stress or disorder. The bartender ran his hand through his sandy brown hair as he called Dave Wheeler, one of the club owners, over to the bar to see a regular.

Women in heels clicked by for a girls night out. Groups of friends gathered at the high tables hunched over an appetizer they were all sharing. Syracuse’s comedy lovers chose this as a way to get a last hurrah out of their weekend before returning to the grind the next morning. A wall of headshots of comedians who had performed at the club watched vigilantly over the scene during a pause in the conversation. “Almost show time, boys.”

The older girl called out. “‘Sup, Dad?”

The bartender ran his hand through his sandy disorder. “I’m no magician,” he says. “I’m just a guy who fakes around with cards. And is good at it.” The group laughs together as they are now not separate members of an audience anymore, but a family gathered around the TV in the living room.

A s homey as Wise Guys is at 201 S. Salina St., they only moved in about a year ago. When Jeannine Schirripa opened the club in 1985, it jumped from location to location, finally settling down at the Hotel Syracuse. Unfortunately in 1999, the Hotel Syracuse went under, taking the club down with it.

Dave Wheeler reopened Wise Guys in 2007. "Wise Guys became a bit of a nomad, doing a "comedy stimulus tour," where they would tour various hotels and bars, but Wheeler wasn't making any money. He and his sister, who is his partner, decided they had to do it right, or fold the company. They reopened the company at its current location and viola! Home sweet home.

A family-run business, Wheeler’s wife is his co-owner. His kids know the secret hiding places. Everyone knows each other and feels like family. That’s what they strive for at Wise Guys. They invite you to become part of their family by providing you with a full evening of entertainment and food. The bar takes quite a turn after the show. Patrons gather around a slight-of-hand magician, paid in boozes, who makes everyone part of the show. After he amazes them with each trick he clanks his bottle to one of the people in the audience.

“It’s not magic,” he says. “I’m just a guy who fakes around with cards. And is good at it.”
I grab my homework off my desk and quickly stuff it in my bag. Just barely catching the bus, I look over my history notes on the way to school. I have a busy day ahead of me; three classes in a row followed by rehearsals. I hurry into the classroom where my peers are already gathered, excitedly chatting about last night’s television shows. Our teacher walks into the room and, with a booming voice, exclaims, “C’mon you c***s, it’s time to work on pratfalls.”

The Second City has been a training ground for aspiring comedians for over 50 years. With alumni such as Steven Colbert, Chris Farley, and Tina Fey, it is the institution for improv-based sketch comedy. The New York Times has called Second City “A Comedy Empire.” And I got to study there for a semester. Second City’s “Comedy Studies” program is an intense study in comedy with college credit through Columbia College Chicago. All students accepted into the program take six core classes: Creating Scenes Through Improvisation, Acting Ill (Sketch and Theatrical Comedy), Writing Comic Scenes, Context for Comedy, and Physical and Vocal Training for Comedy. The semester concludes with an end-of-term comedy revue for a large audience.

As an aspiring comedic TV writer and a Television, Radio, and Film Major in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, I could not ask for a program that catered more to my interests. I was able to experience all aspects of the comedy world - from how a writer’s room works to performing a stand-up set. Second City gave my classmates and me unprecedented access to their extended selection of archival footage, a privilege that any comedy nerd would kill for. My teachers’ professional insights into the industry shaped my experience, including Second City Producer Anne Libera, Director and Second City Resident Company member Michael Gellman, and comedy writer Andy Mura, who is currently developing a TV project with Comedy Central. I gained invaluable insight into the entertainment business world (along with some equally good gossip on Steve Carell and Bob Odebile).

While in Chicago, I was honored in Second City’s first annual Mary Scrugg’s Works by Women Festival, where a sketch I wrote was selected and performed on a Second City Stage. With the guidance of a Second City Training Center teacher, I rewrote and helped direct my scene about an insecure man getting his nails done at a nail salon. My sketch debuted in front of a sold-out audience. Waiting to see if a room full of strangers will laugh at something you wrote has to be one of the most terrifying and exhilarating experiences for someone in this industry. And after this semester, I can say with confidence that I am no longer just a comedy admirer. I am a creator.
The New York State Fair Grandstand holds concerts, rain or shine, outdoors during the span of the Fair. The 2012 New York State Fair will run from August 23 through September 3, with concerts such as Jake Owen and Luke Bryant (August 31, $65; nysfair.org/grandstand).

The Thornden Park Amphitheatre presents great shows for the summertime. This includes a Shakespeare play for the Syracuse Shakespeare Festival usually in August. The shows run for two weekends Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. So grab your blankets and enjoy Shakespeare in the Park! (thorndenpark.org)
London theatre is frequently said to kick American theatre’s ass. When Broadway is in a pinch, it turns to the West End for inspiration (for recent examples, see Billy Elliot and War Horse). But it can be a little daunting to tackle all the various venues London offers. That’s why we’ve compiled the following list of London theatres, which cater to the history buffs, the experimental and contemporary fans, and even the Ghost Hunter obsessed.

1 Theatre Royal Drury Lane
This Westminster theatre was originally known as “The Little Theatre in the Hay” when it was commenced in 1720. It almost didn’t last. It had no royal charter upon opening, but was essentially saved by a French duke, who commissioned a performance of “Les Fils de la Patrie” when it was constructed in 1720. It almost didn’t last.

2 Theatre Royal Haymarket
This Westminster theatre was originally known as “The Little Theatre in the Hay” when it was commenced in 1720. It almost didn’t last. It had no royal charter upon opening, but was essentially saved by a French duke, who commissioned a performance of “Les Fils de la Patrie” when it was constructed in 1720. It almost didn’t last.

3 The Old Vic
The Old Vic aimed to bring the nobility and the gentry “entirely new entertainments...on a scale of magnitude and grand expense” when it first opened its doors in 1818. Over the years, it’s been written up by Charles Dickens, just barely survived the World War II bombing of London, and helped launch the careers of Sir Laurence Olivier and Dame Judi Dench. At this point, the theatre is such an institution that it’s even spawned a child of its own, the Young Vic.

4 Barbican Centre
An essential for any Bard fanatic, Shakespeare’s Globe was originally built back in 1599. It’s been through a tumultuous few centuries of closings and reopenings since then. It was destroyed by a fire in 1613, rebuilt, closed in 1642, demolished in 1644, and then rebuilt again in 1661. Today, the theatre puts on Shakespeare plays ranging from “As You Like It” to “Hamlet,” as well as works outside Shakespeare’s oeuvre, like Howard Brenton’s lauded “Jerusalem.”

5 The Royal Court Theatre
The Royal Court has hailed itself as not a producer’s theatre, nor an actor’s theatre, but a writer’s theatre. It’s served as the launching pad for provocative pieces like Sam Shepard’s “Anger” and Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot,” and isn’t embarrassed to proudly advertise a play titled “God.” It may not boast the fame of, say, the National Theatre, but it’s been called “one of Britain’s most producing theatres” and even “one of the most exciting arts organizations in the world.”

6 Camden People’s Theatre
It’s all about now, experimental, and community theatre over at Camden People’s Theatre. Despite its less-than-opious Moreover, the theatre partners with local groups as much as it can, and has been nominated twice for an Empty Space Peter Brook Award for bringing exceptional theatre to “much needed” areas. It has twice shown plays at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (Napoleon in Exile and Round 2.0) and presented “Sprent,” a contemporary theatre festival, each spring for the past 14 years.

7 Theatre Royal Drury Lane
This venue is considered to be the most haunted theatre in London, as it is rumored to be the home of several famous ghosts, including Grimaldi, the Clown and the Man in Grey. Grimaldi is the “bottom pincher.” Male cast members at the theatre have often reported feeling watched as they change clothes, but this ghost doesn’t stop at mere voyeurism. No, he also apparently grabs their asses. Oddly, the female cast members have not been similarly harassed.

8 Fortune Theatre
The same play “Woman in Black” (originally a novel by Susan Hill and now a movie) has been spoofing the patrons of the Fortune Theatre for 22 years, but some people insist the story isn’t just for effect, but then again, maybe they’re just having terror-induced hallucinations.

9 Queen’s Theatre
While a Victorian lady is also rumored to haunt the halls of Queen’s Theatre, which has housed “Les Misérables” since 2004, its most famous specter is the notorious “bottom pincher.” Male cast members at the theatre have often reported feeling watched as they change clothes, but this ghost doesn’t stop at mere voyeurism. No, he also apparently grabs their asses. Oddly, the female cast members have not been similarly harassed.

A handy guide to London’s oldest, quirkiest, and spookiest stages.
Once she stopped performing there, Phillips thought she’d retire from the comedy game, but couldn’t deny her desire to perform: “I had already become addicted to it,” says Phillips. “It forced me to broaden my horizons. I had to prove a point.”

She started driving to Rochester and Albany to stay involved in comedy. Working comedians in the Syracuse area were few and far between, so she started making the trip more often to make a name for herself in comedy. Phillips’ mentor and Syracuse native Jessemae Peluso, moved to Boston to pursue her comedic career. There, open mic nights happen almost every day of the week at various bars, restaurants, and clubs. She started doing improvisational sketches at various venues in Boston. “I didn’t know it was something I could do until I went to Boston and someone said I was funny,” says Peluso. “It’s not a dig on Syracuse, it’s just not built to be a big cultural market.”

Peluso returned home, playing a few self-funded shows at The Palace Cafe before moving to New York City. As shows, audience members would heckle her about her looks. Despite the audience’s laughter, she felt like she was judged at a beauty pageant, not the field of comedy. Peluso also had to constantly deal with deary male comedians and bookers. During what Peluso considers one of her best auditions a few years ago in New York City, a booker had only one comment: “Well, you’re pretty nice to look at but you did nothing else for me.” Peluso left the audition fuming. She learned quickly to carry a “don’t look with my attitude.”

Peluso plays an annual show at The Palace Theater where she breaks out her strictly Syracuse material, drawing on her favorite memories of growing up in Syracuse: The Great New York State Fair bumper sculptures, missing children at Green Lakes Park, or stealing from the Carousel Mall as a teenager. She plans and advertises for the show on her own. The Palace doesn’t offer much for up and comers.

As Peluso demonstrates, comedians need to find and create their own opportunities in Syracuse. That can add up: spending more time traveling than working on new material, traveling constantly, and approaching venues to ask for that coveted chance on stage. The prospects are terrifying to Phillips. “I can only take so many days off of work. There’s a balance,” she says. For some people, it’s moth- erhood. For me it was: Eventually I’m going to have to make a decision.”

But driving to other cities pays off. Phillips landed gigs all over the state, including New York City and an opening gig for comic Tom Green in Rochester in 2011. “I was told I was picked for Tom’s show because he demanded a female comic for his opening act,” says Phillips. “My first thought was ‘He just wants someone to sleep with’ but he ended up being one of the nicest people I’ve met in the business.” Phillips believes being a woman will not restrict her success. Last March, Phillips participated in the 2012 Women in Comedy Festival in Boston, performing amongst known comedians like Wendy Liebman and Peluso. The festival, which featured 225 female and male comedians, was a stepping-stone for Phillips. “It’s a

Women who want or need to stay in Syracuse might find better luck in one of Syracuse’s five improve troopers. Some, like Drink Feed the Actors, have been around since 2008. While they provide more outlets, each troupe only has one woman, or any at all. Each troupe has around five men. Tina Nubatchi, a performer in Kathy’s Fun Coat, says viewes warm up to women performers pretty quickly. Like Phillips, she士is to use her female perspective to her advantage. “The jokes in improve come from a place of truth: I am a woman. Let me tell you what it’s like to have big boobs,” says Nubatchi. “I can draw on it, so making fun of marriage obsessed women comes from a place of truth.”

Nubatchi, a professor of public policy at SU, first got into im- prov to better entertain her students and to try any question or circumstance. She eventually got hooked and liked adding a female perspective to the male dominated troopers. Gender plays a big part into what gets her biggest laughs. “I remember we got our best reactions from someone imitating Dolly Parton and giving birth on stage,” she says. She adds that women need to learn to be funny and outgoing quickly in order to succeed in comedy: “I feel woman aren’t used to putting themselves out there, which is big in comedy. We’re not taught to be risk takers. Growing up, in elementary school, the good off is always a guy. But women are funny.” She adds. “They might just need a few drinks in them.”

And Peluso realizes she will continue to come across comedians and bookers who will be sex, but knows she has her footing outside of the Central New York comedy bubble. “At the end of the day, they don’t determine my career,” she says. “It’s gender. Gender will always come into play but perseverance and probably a little bit of luck, she keeps focused on what matters: her work. “You have enough problems, with always being birde; always traveling,” she says. “Your gender becomes a problem when you make it a problem. The moment you make it is the reason you’re not succeeding it’s just another excuse.”
words by Eric Vila-Bou illustration by Joe Pasko

Sarongs, an innovative college post-punk band, lasted hardly a full year before their untimely formation-spurred breakup. The only ones of their type in Syracuse, Sarongs packed houses to capacity in the East Campus neighborhood and played hardly beautifully music. This month, they’re set to release their 12” self-titled LP, Sarongs, on vinyl. Syracuse Spotlight sat down with guitarist Andrew Nerviano at his home on Lancaster Avenue on a rainy Syracuse day for a cup of coffee and a conversation about his old band and the music they made.

SS: So what are you guys doing right now? You guys were trying to decide where to get the record mastered?

ANI: I guess as a band we have been inactive, officially, since early May 2011. It was like the last blowout show. It was a pretty nice way to fall apart as a band, just to go out. We had been doing a series of some pretty hot shows, and that one just sucked. There was a massive meltdown at the end. It was the best-cited “band breakup” ending. It was pretty much what we needed. Right now, we’re at a point where, if we had a record out, doing a release show would be fun. Lindsey (Leonard) even put out there of doing like two or three to promote it. And just to hang-out again. We all get really, to be good friends. It’s always good to just see them. As far as mastering’s going, doing the record has been this huge learning experience in a kind of difficult, slow-moving process. There’s so much work and decision-making. You have to make sure everyone’s totally cool with every little thing that’s going on, step-by-step.

SS: And you have to deal with everyone being split apart. Lindsey’s in California.

ANI: Tyler’s in Pittsburgh. Wes and I are here. Eli was here. He just moved to New York City. Everyone’s in different places in their lives. It definitely makes it harder when everyone’s trying to get their own lives together and started, and trying to finish and tie the loose ends of this really cool thing that we had. Eli had heard someone who was great at mastering, apparently had won some Grammy or something like that. He was offering Eli a good deal. I don’t know what the situation is now. I just hope we can recoup the money from making the record. If we decided to go this route, it’d be like double, basically. That’s why we’re all heartbroken about it. It’s a great one for that quality of work, but I don’t know. This wasn’t talked about early on. This was definitely not something that we were thinking about. We had a price range in mind, what was realistic for us to raise/shoot. But you can only hope that a record is successful, gets wild and maybe gets a following. It’s kind of scary. I guess Eli could’ve sold the money, but then we would’ve lost him money, which makes everything not cool. Figuring out compensation was kind of wild, how contracts would work. It’s gets more complex. What we took away from creating the record and releasing it ourselves is that you assume it’s going to be with your friends and it’s going to be a fun project. But you have legal things, money issues to worry about. There’s always going to be pop up and you need to take seriously beforehand.

SS: So what about this blowout meltdown show you talked about?

ANI: Oh yeah! I guess there was a lot going on at that one. It definitely was our least successful. For this one I think the idea was to do a music video. It was a terrible day: pouring rain, disgusting out, no one wanted to come out. But we blow all the money we had raised on liquor and party supplies. Everyone was bunting heads by the end of it. We wanted it to be like a fun huge thing and it really just didn’t fly. Lindsey can offer a few times. She was trying to kick Eli out. I was playing with no emotion. I mean, I was playing well. I was just mad.

SS: Did you guys feel like you were coming to the end of the band at that point?

ANI: We all knew it was kind of done. Once we knew Tyler was moving to go to grad school, we knew that was it. And then Lindsey wound up moving anyway, so it wouldn’t have worked. Tyler was such an integral part of the band. Even though he wasn’t a bassist by trade or anything, he picked it up and got better while being in the group. He kind of defined the sound to a huge extent. Without him, Wes was really against keeping the band going. At that point what made things tense was just issues within the band. And there was a lot of personal drama. That’s the bitch of being a career musician. You have to continuously make records of a high quality so people can buy your shit and stay your fans, and you also have to deal with keeping a group of five people friendly.

SS: How did Tyler’s bass playing define the sound of the band?

ANI: Tyler brought the darker edge to the music. He had been into hardcore styles of music, as well as ’60s darkwave, no-wave, and post-punk movements. That definitely opened doors for all of us. Without him, Wes was really against keeping the band going. At that point what made things tense was just issues within the band. And there was a lot of personal drama. That’s the bitch of being a career musician. You have to continuously make records of a high quality so people can buy your shit and stay your fans, and you also have to deal with keeping a group of five people friendly.

SS: What was the first real show?

ANI: It was our first show in late May. We were trying to get tighter. We had a bunch of new songs. I think the first show we sounded decent was at Spark in full of junior year. That was our first real show, a small show, and the crowd’s there with people. [laughs] It was our first show, not a big venue. Then we opened playing shows. Once people knew that they liked it, they would hear about the parties, and then be interested in seeing the band, which is cool because then other bands would play. We did shows with bands from Upstate New York, with people from Florida, just on tours. The house shows were always more fun. My experiences with playing the Lost Horizon or other real venues was that people just kind of stand around. The crowd’s more, theatric - with certain expectations to see the band they really like.

SS: How did you guys eventually arrive at the sound of the band? “Post-punk band with a female vocalist” seems like a nebulous description to start with.

ANI: Well, yeah, I don’t know what that is. I had no expectations of what the band would sound like, or if it would even be a band. I think it’s a good sign for me, that I can be in a band that can evolve organically. When we would practice, we would just jam. All of our songs were written through improvisation, all of us doing our own part of it, and contributing equally. We didn’t talk about it, actually. I think that’s what I really liked about a project like that. You want to be consistent, to have a sound. Once we arrived at our sound through jamming a lot, and getting out our first songs, we just stuck with it. There were a few times where I said “Hey, I want to write this great riff,” and it just didn’t work, because it can’t. And I liked that.
As Syracuse Stage gears up for its 40th Anniversary season, artistic director Timothy Bond reflects on the current season, the coming year, and the impact Syracuse Stage has on the community it serves.

A Syracuse Stage’s ‘11-’12 season comes to a close, Timothy Bond, the regional theater’s artistic director is incredibly proud of what the stage had to offer. Besides taking on challenging works and succeeding critically, Bond is happy with the Stage’s box office turnout as well.

“I was looking to try to get people interested in seeing new work more this season and we hit all of our goals for audiences,” Bond says. “This gives me confidence in going forward that there is an audience for new work here and we are doing the right things to reach out to the community.”

And Bond is dedicated in reaching out to the community with both his upcoming ’12-’13 season, and The Brother’s Size, which he calls the “capstone” of the current season.

In the coming weeks, The Brother’s Size, the ’11-’12 season’s last play, will be moving from Syracuse Stage to South Africa. Thanks to the Sterling Clark Foundation of New York City and the collaboration of the Baxter Theatre Center and The Marketplace Theatre in South Africa, this production will play internationally.

“It has been a very long involved process,” says Bond. “Speaking to the artistic directors there, with the foundation, getting all of the cast to be signed on to be able to go long out of the country, visas, passports, you know, everything.”

The Sterling Clark Foundation provides grants to arts projects in the New York area and the United States to further those that have a deepened cultural meaning.

But the paperwork isn’t the only process that needed to be worked through.

“The design process has been one of having to design the show for three theaters,” Bond says. “And working through the metric systems as well as our system. So it’s actually been a very complicated, exciting, expanding experience for us.”

Bond will travel to South Africa before the show closes at the Stage in order to start getting all the technical elements set up. That way, when the actors arrive after the run in Syracuse, there will be a couple days of technical rehearsals and the cast and crew will go immediately into previews in South Africa.

Bond is also greatly looking forward to the upcoming ’12-’13 season at Syracuse Stage. “It’s our 40th anniversary season,” he says excitedly. “I think it’s a great accomplishment for us.”

The Stage will actually open its season with a show off-season that has been in the works for two years. Cry for Peace discusses the local Congolese community working with peace and reconciliation since the Congo’s civil war. Internationally known director and playwright Ping Chong and Stage staff drama- rurg Kele Bua will work with five members of this community to create this new work. After its run at Syracuse, Cry for Peace will move to La MaMa in New York City.

The full-subscription season opens with Julian Rada’s Drama Desk award nominee A White Devil. With 36-acapella sea shanties, Melodict’s language, and a lot of physical theatrics, Bond believes that this show will be accessible for audiences of all interests.

Then the Stage will team up with SU Drama to produce Irving Berlin’s White Christmas. Based on one of the most popular holiday movies, this show features the song “White Christmas,” which might be one of the most well-known holiday songs. Bond expects this will be a really great tribute to not only our relationship with the drama department but to this great musical. We’re going to reach out to veterans from around the area and he hoping that they’ll come because that does celebrate those guys that have come back from war and are trying to find their place in society back in the 40s. Not unlike what’s going on today, but a very different time.”

Bond will then direct Twelfth Night Running by August Wilson. Wilson wrote a play for every decade in the 20th century and Bond is doing a cycle of those in the Stage. Twelfth Night is the 7th in this cycle and Wilson’s play about the 1960s. “It is, I think, one of his most humourous and politically potent plays in his cycle,” says Bond. “We’ll be bringing in some terrific actors and designers to work on that.”

The Stage will end a seven-year Shakespearian dry spell with its spring production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, starring SU Drama students in the roles of the lovers, alongside a professional cast. Midsummer is followed by David Lindsay-Abaire’s Pulitzer Prize winning Good People, which Bond says “has an extraordinary wit and great sense of humor, but also digs into some issues of class and race.”

The Stage will close its season with the Bond, a one-man show based on Homer’s The Iliad. The actor, who plays a vet wandering the streets as a poet, is a story-telling epic reminiscent of the ancient Greek ways. “It has a very contemporary edge, contemporary music,” Bond says. “The speech is all contemporary speech, but it’s self-classic.”

I t takes Bond and his team a year and a half to create such a diverse season. They start out by “tangly looking at what’s going in Syracuse, what’s going on in our nation, what do we think our themes of issues that we want to tap into, and then we start reading plays around those subjects,” Bond says. Then he finds plays that speak to him through these issues and looks into what resources are needed to produce it.

“I want to make sure we have a comedy in a season,” says Bond. “A serious drama, contemporary plays, musical, and classical work that celebrates those traditions, and reaches a diverse audience.”

With all of those exciting shows and artistic plans, Bond cannot contain his anticipation for all things to come. “I’m just excited that it’s our 40th season,” he says, “and our connection to the university, to the drama department, and to the Syracuse community has been so fruitful and supportive. And that we’re expanding our reach nationally and internationally as we go into that season. It feels really good.”
A first-year vocal performance major, Alex Shenkman played George in the First Year Player’s production of The Drowsy Chaperone, which played April 12-14 in Goldstein Auditorium.

On his role in The Drowsy Chaperone:
I’m George. He is the best man. Drowsy Chaperone is basically a play within a play. And in this play within a play, there’s a couple getting married and I’m basically the best man. He wants to make sure all these people get married and in the end like four couples end up getting married and I’m the best man at all these weddings. My character is neurotic, constantly forgetting things.

On the best part of playing George:
Probably tap-dancing. We have a whole tap dancing number and that’s a lot of fun. I’ve danced before cause I’ve been in musicals, but I never tap-danced or even ventured near there.

On his experience with FYP:
Well FYP is a really cool thing cause it’s all students so it’s really relaxed. That kind of “relaxedness” causes a really very loving, really family-type environment so that’s kind of awesome. That’s just what I guess I love about it the most is that it’s just cool to have that kind of family – that’s rare to find on a college campus.

On his theatrical start:
Well, I was in sixth grade and my neighbor did the forensics team – it’s like a speech team – in my middle school and my mom was like, “Why don’t you do that?” And I was like, “I don’t think so.” So I went and auditioned doing Cuddly Dudley, the children’s book. I did paper bag puppets, a reinterpretation. It was really bad, but the director of the thing really liked me and I was in shows and stuff there. All throughout high school I did theater and musical theater and I took theater classes.

On his favorite role he ever played:
I did Tom Sawyer. I was Tom Sawyer and that was just a lot of fun. I was in Footloose. That’s a fun show. I was Willard.

On his dream role:
My dream role isn’t actually a musical. It’d probably be Biff in Death of a Salesman. It’s just my favorite play of all time. I love Arthur Miller. I guess that’s a little darker than The Drowsy Chaperone but I love that role. I feel like every teenager has that kind of anger side and it’s just such a perfect role. He is, I guess, an angry person, but everyone deals with that struggle with what they want to do with their life and what the future’s about and who they really are so it’s really a cool thing.

On performing:
It’s that life is full of really complicated things. Nothing in life is very simple, but when you’re on stage, it is simple. And you know, you’re doing one thing and you’re in one place, and you can put your whole heart and all your energy into that. To find something like that is really difficult. I guess just to throw yourself into something full out is a really amazing thing. You just kind of lose yourself in it. That’s what always kept me going.