



SPOLETO

SPECTACULAR

GOLDRING STUDENTS Take Their Multimedia Talents to Charleston, South Carolina, Enhancing Coverage of Renowned Arts Festival

BY KRISTEN RAJCAZAK

AS JESSICA NOVAK G'10 INTERVIEWED RHIANNON GIDDENS FROM THE Carolina Chocolate Drops over the phone one afternoon in June, she sounded practiced and calm—even though the Drops had just been featured in *Spin* magazine and she was writing a preview about the band performing the grand finale at the 2010 Spoleto Festival USA. She and her classmates in the Goldring Arts Journalism Program at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications had encountered plenty of fame in the past year during the various arts excursions embedded in the program. The Goldring graduate students attended the same production of *La Traviata* at Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown as U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, spotted actress Julianne Moore at the Toronto International Film Festival, and saw legendary dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov at a ballet performance during a 10-day arts immersion in New York City. “I don’t get star struck,” Novak says. “If you just approach an artist like a normal person, it’s not a big deal. They just want to talk about their kids and simple things.”

Since 2005, the Goldring program has traveled to experience art. The program’s 19 most recent graduates added another trip for their capstone project: an intern-



Facing Page: The finale of the 2010 Spoleto Festival USA featured music and fireworks. **Above, left to right:** Goldring arts journalism student Kristen Rajczak G'10 interviews Andrew Larson, a cellist in the Spoleto Festival Orchestra (SFO); Emmanuel Villaume leads the SFO; a performance of *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo* is held at Charleston City Hall as part of the festival's opening ceremonies.

ship covering Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina. “Art is a very corporeal kind of subject,” says Professor Johanna Keller, director of the Goldring program. “You have to be in the room with it, interacting with it in some way. So, we have to travel to where the art is. That’s true throughout the program, and this capstone is a great way to put ourselves in the middle of a place where there is just so much art happening.”

Over the course of three weeks, from May 23 to June 13, the Goldring students wrote 46 feature pieces, six reviews, about 250 blog posts, and a few hundred tweets, and made more than a dozen videos for the *Post and Courier*, the daily newspaper in

Charleston that provides the main coverage of the festival. Their print stories ran in both the newspaper’s special section, “Spoleto Today,” and in its entertainment magazine, *Charleston Scene*. They previewed performances, investigated art exhibitions, and explored the inner workings of the artists and professionals involved in the festival. “We used every skill we learned and even ones we didn’t realize we learned,” says Novak, who wrote four print features, contributed to a music blog, “Beat on the Street,” and had a blog about her daily jogs called “Things I Run Into.” “I run everywhere and every day,” Novak says. “I noticed how beautiful Charleston was, so I decided to take my camera with

me. I thought it would be cool to document the city from a newcomer's point of view."

While she hit the pavement for about an hour each morning after waking between 6 and 7 a.m., the capstone project kept her running the rest of the day. By 10 a.m., Novak and her classmates—those who were not out on assignment—met for a progress meeting with Keller and Steve Daly, a former writer for *Entertainment Weekly* who was co-teaching the capstone. During the afternoon and evening, Novak interviewed sources for future stories, transcribed the interviews, and wrote. Some nights, she also covered local music shows or Spoleto events in downtown Charleston. "If I didn't have one or the other, I would be transcribing from another interview or writing about something else. Any combination of those," Novak says.

CONVERGING ON CHARLESTON

The Spoleto trip was two years in the making. According to Keller, it started as an end-of-the-year conversation with Newhouse Dean Emeritus David Rubin in 2008. "I was expressing how I felt that our capstone course, while good, could be even better," Keller says. Until this year, the Goldring students had spent six weeks researching and writing for a magazine workshop, something students can now do in other semesters during the academic year. "That capstone was designed about five or six years ago, and the reality is that long-form journalism is changing," she says. "It also didn't feel quite right with the new reality of online journalism and arts coverage. I was aiming for a capstone that more closely mirrored what it is like to work in the arts field. David got a light in his eyes and he suddenly said, 'Why don't you take them to the Spoleto festival?'"

Founded by opera composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who launched the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, in 1958, the Spoleto Festival USA has drawn world-renowned artists of all persuasions to Charleston since 1977. In the past, the festival has presented soprano Renée Fleming, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and violinist Joshua Bell. Keller had been to Spoleto a number of times and thought it was a good fit for the Goldring program. "It's a multidiscipline festival. It's got something for everyone in this program," she says. "Charleston is a gorgeous, historical, walkable city. The weather will

be a counterpoint to what they've experienced all winter in Syracuse, and best of all, there's a very fine regional paper there that our students might want to write for."

The planning began during Keller's semester-long sabbatical last fall. First, she spoke to longtime friend Nigel Redden, the general director of Spoleto Festival USA. He was "wildly enthusiastic" about the idea of the Goldring arts journalists covering the festival and put Keller in touch with Paula Edwards, director of marketing and public relations. She, in turn, pointed Keller to Stephanie Harvin, the features editor for the *Post and Courier*. The first time they spoke, Keller proposed the momentous project, and Harvin agreed to take on all 19 arts journalists as interns for the week leading up to the festival and its 17-day run—a project unlike any other undertaken by an arts journalism program in the country. "The idea of bringing a lot of people down to cover Spoleto was a little intimidating to me because I didn't know how it would work," Harvin says. "But the more I talked with Johanna, the more I realized she knew what she was talking about, and if she knew what she was talking about, the program was probably going to be good. Then we talked about training the next generation of arts writers and how if we didn't do it when we had the opportunity, who would? There's no one else out there that's going to do something this spectacular."

Before the festival starts, Harvin, who has been in charge of the newspaper's Spoleto coverage for years, maps out when each story will run. The *Post and Courier* produces all of the content for "Spoleto Today," and although the daily special section is only a couple pages, the work adds up. "Once Spoleto starts," she says, "it's a freight train that leaves the station."

This year's festival had more than 120 arts events, including jazz singer Lizz Wright, performances of the ballet *Giselle* starring Nina Ananiashvili, and Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*—a formidable amount for any features section to cover. And that's not all that happened in Charleston's art world when Spoleto was in town. The local fringe festival, Piccolo Spoleto, featured about 700 comedy, community theater, and other local arts events. "Covering Spoleto and Piccolo is usually another layer of stories for my features reporters," Harvin says. "They do this in addition to their normal work. Most of them are not arts writers, so they don't have a lot of background in



Flora, an Opera (left) was among the performances at the Dock Street Theatre (center), one of the festival's main venues. A member of the Piccolo Spoleto Brass prepares for opening ceremonies.



Goldring students in action (left to right): Sonaite Debebe-Kumssa G'10 and Bethany Larson G'10 pose with the newsboy outside the *Post and Courier*; Jessica Novak G'10 interviews Emmanuel Villaume, then director for opera and orchestra at Spoleto Festival USA; and Thomas Riemschneider G'10 tweets during a Spoleto press party.

this. They do good stuff, but for them it's not an exciting process."

MILLENNIAL GENERATION APPEAL

Harvin stresses that the Goldring collaboration wasn't just about having "extra hands on deck." She viewed it as an opportunity to gain perspective from the student journalists on what kind of coverage might appeal to Millennial readers, those ranging in age from about 20 to 40. Instead of just writing standard previews about events, the Goldring students tried to find angles that hadn't been investigated before. One student wrote about how the Colla Marionette Company takes care of the marionettes used in its production of *Cinderella*. Another wrote about how and why the *One Man Star Wars Trilogy*, a Piccolo Spoleto theater production, has played at the festival for so many years. "It's not the 50-year-old viewpoint, which is good," Harvin says. "That's what we're trying to do: interest young readers and find out how we can most do that at the newspaper, even when it's not Spoleto."

The 2009-10 Goldring arts journalists—ranging from 22 to 30 years old—fit the bill to help gear coverage to a younger audience. And while most of the list of stories was determined from pitches the students presented to Keller and Harvin during the spring, room for innovation was ample. "Spoleto is all about planning well enough so that when you are in the moment, you can take advantage of things you don't expect," Harvin says. "You need to have a baseline of copy coming in, so you can say, 'Yes, let's go do that video; let's go do that other story on things you discover.'" Goldring student Leah Dennison G'10 appreciated the opportunity to conjure up her own projects—a valued skill in both journalism and life. "It's important to have the motivation to go out and find your own stories or develop your own methods of communicating something," she says.

The Goldring students took this outlook to heart, pitch-

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Johanna Keller,
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ing stories after arriving in Charleston about young patrons at the festival and late-night food in a downtown neighborhood, among others. But, as Dennison says, print pieces aren't necessarily the "gold standard" anymore. The students used their knowledge of social media and the 24/7 nature of the Internet to grow the *Post and Courier's* web presence. They made Flip Videos, posted links to stories and blogs on Facebook and Twitter, and even projected the *Post and Courier's* "Spoleto Today" Twitter feed onto a wall in Gaillard Auditorium, a major Spoleto venue. Keller says the Goldring students' work reflected changes in the Newhouse curriculum that emphasize learning skills

to produce content for the Internet. "Staffs of all newspapers are under enormous pressure to not only keep up the work they do, but add a lot of new kinds of work online with digital skills, video, and blogging," Keller says. "Many of the new digital skills that younger journalists have, people in the newsroom are having to learn for the first time."

Harvin says the collaboration far exceeded her goals, particularly those linked to the online components. "I was hoping for some good journalism and was very open to what other kinds of online presence we got," she says. "I think I underestimated the students' ability and the training. Next year, I've got plans for a podcast or other kinds of things we could do because it's a good number of people and you can spread the work out across them."

Dennison says being "guinea pigs" for the partnership between the *Post and Courier* and the Goldring program was a whirlwind—and worth it. "It's cool to be innovative," she says. "We're part of something new, something that's really a pioneer effort. And that's exciting in and of itself."

Kristen Rajczak G'10 is a graduate of the Goldring Arts Journalism Program. While in Charleston, she enjoyed blogging about the renowned Charleston Farmers Market.