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ASF show marks new stage of students' careers

[2]

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Start Page: 6

Section: H

Document Text

If you're looking for entertainment, look at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival tomorrow night. It's there that at 7:30p.m., you can for a mere \$15 see a once-a-year event, the fundraising benefit for the graduating second-year students in the masters of fine arts program.

It's your opportunity to see the result of this exceptional program in one variety show, as the August graduates open the showcase that they will mount the following week in New York for assembled directors, producers and potential agents. Each year, it is a lively spectacular. And your ticket dollars help them to get to New York.

I spoke a week ago with Eric and Jenny Sheffer Stevens, two of the aspiring stars who have spent the last two years in ASF's taxing program. Shortly after they first arrived in Montgomery, I interviewed them. Now, I asked them to tell me about tomorrow night's showcase as well as to comment on what they have accomplished in two seasons of spear-carrying, message-bearing and intensive classroom exercise.

In fairness I should say that in Eric's case the on-stage assignments have risen above the category of extra. In a rare occurrence for the MFA program, he has a major, a much more than a swell-the-scene, role in the current production of the Turgenev/Friel "A Month in the Country." As the young tutor/lover, he gives a performance telling both in itself and as an example of what the program accomplishes.

As for tomorrow night's showcase, Jenny described it for me as a two-part affair. The first act has "all sorts of different acts; the second half is our showcase." In Act I are scenes of stage combat, at least two original monologues, vocal and dance numbers and a couple that they had to explain to me.

The first of the latter has to do with an instrument called the diablo which, to me, at least, is a very specific Spanish word. Jenny said, "Rob from the props department is going to do--I don't know how to explain it--a sort of circus act with the diablo." "Isn't that the Spanish for Satan?" I asked. Eric explained, "It's two sticks connected by a string; you keep the sticks spinning and do tricks with them." Apparently complicated tricks, because they prompted Eric to ask the performer, "Does that name imply anything about what you had to sell in order to learn this trick?"

I am perhaps even more mystified by another of the elements of Act I: A Poetry Slam! At first glance the name sounds more like a critical attack than a creative performance. Again explaining, Eric relates it to the Beatnik poetry performances accompanied by jazz and says, "It's more of a musical kind of poetry rather than literary."

"The second half is our showcase," Jenny says proudly. "It's getting exciting now. For a long time we were just searching, looking for material and trying to figure out exactly how we wanted to showcase ourselves. It's very hard to find scenes that are really short--two to three minutes--and still show what you can do. It's exciting now because we've found them, we've got the order set, and it's startling to move smoothly."

The showcase, modern material with "nothing classic," is the result of "hundreds of scenes" being "reduced to this show," they explain. In arriving at their final choices they were guided by advice from several panel discussions arranged by Colleen Kelly, pro tem head of the MFA program. The panelists were various actors as well as professionals who have studied the showcase phenomenon and analyzed what directors look for.

Taking an equitable view of showcasing, Eric says, "Anything can come of it. Nothing can come of it." He adds, "I've already gotten what I came down here to get, what I wanted: to work a professional theater." Jenny seconds that assessment and points out the uniqueness of ASF in this respect. Its MFA program actively engages the students on stage. She says, "The thing that really stands out about this graduate program is that it is constant involvement on stage. It's constant experience."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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