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### ASF actors hope trip will provide spring break

[1]

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Start Page: 1

Section: H

#### Document Text

Catch them while you can. By summer's end, they'll be on the road to success.

They are the graduates of the University of Alabama/Alabama Shakespeare Festival Master of Fine Arts program, a two-year program that has played a major role in training actors across the nation. Some graduates have rejoined the ASF family while others have found success on television and Broadway.

Now this year's class members are preparing to find their role in the competitive world of professional acting, but before they do, they want to be introduced to some of the people who are already in that world.

The members will introduce themselves to some of the nation's top agents, producers and directors, when they will showcase their work April 17 in New York City.

Montgomery theatergoers have a chance to get a sneak preview of their showcase at the MFA Showcase Benefit at 7:30 p.m. April 10 in ASF's Octagon. The performance benefits the group in two ways -- it covers trip expenses, and it gives the graduates a chance to present their showcase for a hometown crowd.

"It (the benefit) is wonderful because everyone comes out to support us, and we get used to doing our showcase in front of people," said MFA graduate Regan Thompson, whose ASF credits include last year's "Lurleen" and "The Last Night of Ballyhoo" as well as this season's "The Comedy of Errors."

Graduate Company member John Nagle said the benefit is like a tryout for the group.

"We will be performing the exact thing we will be taking to New York in the second

half," Nagle said. "The other half will anything from us

performing scenes to monologues, sketches, music, maybe some dancing."

The first half also will include first-year MFAs as well as some of the professional actors, said Nagle, who had heard good things about the UA/ASF MFA program before

applying.

He said so many of the program's actors have become

successful actors that it has gained a national reputation.

Take Thomas Gibson, who co-stars on ABC's "Dharma &

Greg" and Michael Emerson, who has been in plays on and

off Broadway.

About two years after graduation, Emerson, a 1995

graduate, landed the title role in "Gross Indecency: The

Three Trials of Oscar Wilde." Then it was on to other plays,

including "The Iceman Cometh" with Kevin Spacey and "The

Misanthrope" with Uma Thurman and Roger Rees.

Emerson, who came to the MFA program with several years

of stage experience, said it was the ASF program that gave

him "the artillery" -- the powerful acting tools that he didn't have.

"Before I went to ASF, I thought when I did a play, I just talked and moved around," said Emerson, who had already

acted in regional theaters across the Southeast.

The program also attempts to prepare graduates for the

business of acting, he said.

"But I don't think you can ever be prepared for that,"

Emerson said. "No one can tell how you are going to react to New York."

Knowing how successful Emerson has been is good for current graduates, Thompson said.

"It makes us feel more confident, like maybe there is something in the water," she said, laughing.

While Emerson chose to pursue a career in New York, John

Preston, an '89 graduate, chose to remain in the Southeast, mostly in south Florida. After about two years, he returned and has become a member of the ASF's company.

"It is the greatest thing -- to come back and have a life in Montgomery," said Preston, who can be seen in this season's productions of "King Lear" and "Twelfth Night."

In addition to acting, Preston offers MFA graduates encouragement. He said he enjoys helping them when he can.

This season, Preston is joined by another MFA returnee, Wilson Cain III, a '93 graduate.

"This really is a trip home for me -- I was born in Montgomery," said Cain, who is in "The Comedy of Errors" and "Twelfth Night."

His other credits have included an off-Broadway production of "Iphigenia Cycle" as well as productions in Chicago.

"The main benefits of the program were focusing on the classical literature, having the opportunity to get very comfortable with the text and having the luxury of exploring myself," he said.

He also praises ASF dramaturg Susan Willis for providing graduates with a comprehensive overview of theater history.

Cain has fond memories of the New York showcase he took part in and recalls how the Montgomery showcase helped boost everyone's spirits.

Developing the showcase has been a positive experience, Thompson said.

"We have been working on it since November or December," she said. "My class is at a really difficult time in our education. We have all pulled together and are supporting each other."

It is important for everyone to have a chance to shine during the showcase, she said, because it is the next step in furthering each actor's career.

Still, while Emerson said MFA graduates should do their best on the showcase, he advised the graduates not to feel like their working life depends on it.

"There was a great deal of anxiety when we were preparing for it," he said. "But you don't really begin to prepare for professional work until you move to New York."

Nagle is realistic about the showcase. He knows he should not spend all his time focusing on it, but he also knows how beneficial the production can be for his career.

Agents and other industry people expect these showcases to feature actors of a certain caliber, he said, and ASF is well-respected.

"This takes us to the next level -- to find an agent to represent you," he said.

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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