

Director plays with hypocrisy in 'Tartuffe'

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Over a lifetime, every person is certain to have encountered a greedy, miserly, old man. They have most likely met the witty and mostly aloof, always hungry, always tired, sidekick, too. And who could overlook the know-it-all "doctor" of everything from medicine to physics to obscure philosophical theories?

Director David Sebren sits across from these characters day in and day out, in rehearsal, onstage, and from the house of the theater.

He brings these archetypes to life by coaching his students and actors in the ways of Commedia dell'arte. While studying in Italy, Sebren earned a certificate in the practice at an international training session led by a renowned maestro of Commedia dell'arte, Antonio Fava. The art form was developed in the early 1500s but remains relevant to Sebren's work as he fleshes out the characters in his thesis production of "Tartuffe," which will run from March 30 to April 8 at the FSU Lab Theatre.

"Commedia deals with stock characters," explains Sebren. "We still see all of these characters coming out today in any comedy, and they still exist because we still see these character traits in people as they walk down the street. If you scratch the surface those archetypes are right there."

"Tartuffe," a 17th-century French comedy, follows a wealthy family and the antics of a religious hypocrite. Though the text was written 300 years ago, Sebren is amazed by the comedy's ability to have a finger on the pulse of modern day issues and the hypocrisies of society.

As an FSU graduate student earning his MFA in directing this spring, he's excited to see the growth of his students and the actors who will perform in the show. To prepare them for their roles, he introduced them to Commedia through workshops as a way of learning the characters and "wearing the masks" to color their work.

"They're always coming up with



Tartuffe played by Cecil Jennings (in black) and Orgon played by Christian Douglass (in Blue) in FSU production of "Tartuffe." BRUCE W. PALMER

something new and attempting to break the mold," remarks Sebren. "So often we get stuck in traps of doing things the way they've always been done. We have to remember, especially as artists, that we have to be before thinkers, and I'm constantly inspired by my students."

Growing up in Asheville, Sebren can pinpoint his magic moment with the performing arts as a high school student in a production of "Guys and Dolls." Committing to the path of an actor, Sebren graduated from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with his BFA and spent a decade working.

Some of his favorite roles have included playing Patsy in a production of "Spamalot," touring with the California Theatre Center, and spending his summer months performing in outdoor theater. After graduation, Sebren will jump into the role of artistic director at Snow Camp Outdoor Theatre in North Carolina. With him, he'll carry the many quips of his mentor, and former FSU School of Theatre program director, Fred Chappell.

"I have a lot of Fred-isms and things to keep in mind while directing," says Sebren. "Like, 'Everything must be as valuable as the space it occupies,' and always coming back to 'What is the story, what is it that we're seeing?'"

Sebren believes that directors should distance themselves from having recog-

nizable signatures, instead focusing on the work rather than who is orchestrating it from behind-the-scenes. He sees his style as being very physically based with an emphasis on the body moving through space. This could be a result of Sebren's early years taking tap, jazz, acrobatics, and ballet, as well as playing football, baseball, and wrestling.

"It's about the movement involved, but that also means stillness too," adds Sebren. "Stillness is so powerful, and far too often people think about movement as chaotic and everywhere, but stillness is still movement. It's the punctuation to movement."

Much of his work as director involves cleaning, and making every choice onstage as specific as possible, clarifying motives with the actors. Sebren says that the first time he reads through the script is purely for fun, because after that it's all work. He looks for questions and factual evidence in the text, uncovering relationships between characters and re-reading to gain a clearer picture on the setting and time period.

With "Tartuffe," he wants to focus on the religious hypocrisies still present in our society while leaving the play set in France in 1669. Sebren then takes his concept to set, costume, lighting, and sound designers to create a cohesive stage production. Much of directing for Sebren is making decisions and stand-

If you go

What: Tartuffe

When: 8 p.m. on March 30, 31, April 4-7, 2 p.m. on March 31 and April 8

Where: The Lab Theatre, 502 S Cope-land St.

Cost: Adults \$22, Seniors (62+) \$20, Students \$10

Contact: For more information please call 850-644-6500 or visit <http://theatre.fsu.edu/tartuffe/>.

ing by them in order to be a strong leader, but not forgetting or overlooking the importance each player contributes to the overall goal.

"I like to describe directing as a bicycle wheel," says Sebren. "The director is the axel, the designers, production team, and actors are the spokes, the rehearsal process is the rim, and what the audience sees is the finalized wheel with a tire on it rolling down the street. But without the wheel, the spokes, and the tire, that axel is not going anywhere, and without the axel, the wheel just rolls for a little bit, falls down, and does that wobbly thing on the ground. It's a cohesive process, and I need them just as much as they need me."

As in all good comedies, Sebren laughs while he mentions that "Tartuffe" attendees can look forward to many iconic comedy bits from pants falling down to chase scenes. While he enjoys the personal growth gained from each production, Sebren is generally invigorated by theater's collaborative nature and proximity to the audience.

"The audience and the actors share the same air and there's an immediacy to that," says Sebren.

"We want to entertain and have people enjoy themselves. Having the audience be able to enjoy all our work is a reward in and of itself."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).