

Spiking Your Own Drink: St. Ambrose University's Corinne Johnson

Written by Mike Schulz
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“There’s something about being in a live theatre,” says St. Ambrose University Professor of Theatre Corinne Johnson, “and experiencing that moment with the actors and, maybe more importantly, with the audience. You walk out having tasted that fine elixir that’s only there for that night, ’cause even the next night, with those same actors, the audience will be different. The *experience* will be different.

“That’s why I go to concerts rather than just listen to CDs.”

Johnson, meanwhile, is the reason many students and performers participate in theatre rather than just watch it. The joy she takes in her roles as director and educator is not just evident but infectious, and it’s a joy that audiences will have the opportunity to experience in two shows directed by Johnson this spring: New Ground Theatre’s comedy *String Fever* May 18 through 28, and, this weekend, St. Ambrose University’s production of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, running at the Galvin Fine Arts Center April 21 through 23.

For the record: Johnson directed me in two shows at the Circa ’21 Dinner Playhouse more than 10 years ago, and we’ve been friends ever since. (Now I get to *interview* her. Talk about loving your job)

My first audition for her, in fact, was also my first audition at Circa ’21 – for a production of *The Three Little Pigs*

– and she was much of the reason I

continued

performing there for another decade-plus. After working with her that first time, I thought, “If this was what professional theatre can be like, why would anyone want to do anything

else

?”

At rehearsals, Johnson establishes a playful, positive atmosphere, offering guidance to her

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performers but never dictating their portrayals, and welcomes experimentation while subtly encouraging the best possible choices. And when she laughs at your on-stage shtick, the delight with which she does so sends you to the moon – you want to make her laugh all the *more*.

Johnson understands actors, and understands theatre, and it turns out she became involved with this art form for the same reason many of us do: for the attention.

“I’m afraid to say that, but it’s the truth!” she says with a laugh. “Cause through high school, I went to where the audiences were the biggest, and that was not always theatre in my high school. It was sports. So I was a cheerleader, I was a gymnast, and I did plays when I could, knowing full well that was what I was gonna do for a living. But in the meantime, I went to the full houses.”

Occasionally, the full houses *were* at the plays, and in her Hutchinson, Minnesota, high school, Johnson appeared in *Our Town*, which she would later direct at St. Ambrose, and a comedy entitled *No, No, a Million Times, No*. (“I played Birdie Seed. My sister’s favorite role that I have done *to date*. For which I disdain her.”) She went on to study theatre at St. Peter’s Gustavus Adolphus College before transferring to, and graduating from, the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, and earned a master’s degree in acting from the University of Minnesota.

Upon graduation, Johnson took some time off from academia to pursue acting, a decision that she believes might have been premature.

“I went Equity too young in life,” Johnson says, referring to the actors’ union that puts severe restrictions on where its members can perform professionally. “At 23. If I were to do it over again, I certainly would have waited, and I’m not certain I would have *gone* Equity, as there were a lot of opportunities that I feel I may have had, had I not gone that route.”

She admits, though, “it looks good on your résumé, to be an Equity actor when you’re looking for a teaching job.”

Returning to school, Johnson received a Ph.D. in theory and criticism from the University of Oregon, and in 1989 – “fresh off my Ph.D.,” she says – found employment at St. Ambrose. “I interviewed at four places,” she says. “Northwestern, SMU, Alfred University, and St. Ambrose University. A *very* wide range of schools. I did get a couple offers, which was nice. But at that time my father had heart trouble and was ailing quite badly, and I wanted to be within a day’s drive [of Minnesota], thinking I would be here for a year, or two at the most.”

Her father, Johnson says, “rallied and was fine” (although he has since passed away); she opted to stay; and she still laughs at the memory of those early days at St. Ambrose.

“Poor Mike Kennedy,” she says, shaking her head. “What a dear he is. I had more ideas than

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I'm sure he wanted to hear, and he just said, 'Have *at* it.'

Johnson refers to St. Ambrose's assistant professor of theatre, speech, and mass communication, a much-admired director and actor who interviewed her for her current position. (He also portrays the Friar in *Much Ado About Nothing*.) Their introductory meeting, Johnson admits, was an inauspicious one.

"The first interview with him, he was asking me questions, and he saw that I was Equity. And he went on a Mike Kennedy tirade," Johnson says, beginning a good-natured approximation of Kennedy, "on how 'You don't have to have a *god-damned card* to be a professional *actor*! I've seen a lot better actors who were considered

amateurs

!' And he went on. This was the *interview*

! And I was thinking, 'I cannot *work*

for this man.'

"And now?" she says, smiling. "I consider him my dearest friend. And the day he retires ... I will cry like a baby. I love him."

The feeling appears reciprocated. "She's a very, very hard worker," says Kennedy with an almost paternal warmth. "She's got that Minnesota Swedish background, and she just hit the ground running. She did wonderful work right from the start."

Kennedy, though, believes the key to Johnson's success – what makes her as admired as she is liked – doesn't just lie in her work ethic. "She cares more about the work than she does about herself," he says. "She is really selfless, which is really a good thing to be from the standpoint of theatre work."

Initially, Johnson's St. Ambrose duties had her teaching acting, directing, and theatre history, as well as directing one show per term, a schedule that has changed significantly in the 17 years since. "There were two [theatre] majors in the whole university when I started," she says. "Now we have 30. And it has been a fantastic and wonderful growth period. We've really expanded our classes ... Current Dramatic Literature, Classic Dramatic Literature, Shakespeare, Improvisation, Music Theatre."

Johnson regards the additions to the curriculum – made by Kennedy, Department Chair Kristofer Eitheim, and herself – as welcome ones. "I *love* Current Dramatic Literature!" she says. "Hands down, my favorite class, 'cause I love reading plays. It's like Oprah's book club! We read plays, and we come back and we sit down and talk about 'em.

"And *paid* to read plays and talk about 'em? What's *that* about? Good Lord!"

Although, as any educator knows, the pay isn't the *reason* for Johnson's enthusiasm. "You don't figure out what you get paid an hour," she says. "It's too sad. It's

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way

too sad. You gotta be there 'cause you love it, 'cause it's almost certainly not for the money.

"But, you know, it's not 'Oh, poor, poor, pitiful me' at *all*. It's real easy to get up in the morning and like to go to work."

What helps make the job a pleasure, Johnson says, is the chance to work – and in a fully collaborative manner – with her actors and students. "I think a good director pulls the ideas from the actors and doesn't ask questions with the answer already in mind for them to guess at," she says.

"Performances, for me, are thrilling because I get to see the actors reap the fruits of their hard work," she continues. "But to tell you that I enjoy the performances more than the *process* would be a lie. Going to rehearsal, and working, and discovering, is really what it's about. I enjoy rehearsals where we can, at the end of the day, be better because of the sum of our talents."

She likens the collaborative process to "when you can plant a little seed and it grows into a plant that you weren't expecting, one that is far more lush and exciting and thrilling and unique because you've never seen that plant before.

"Man, things would be boring if everyone just took what I *gave* them. Because we'd have a whole lot of Corys out there. And as thrilling and exciting as I think I

am

," she laughs, "too much of anything is too much."

Johnson relishes the collaborative opportunities theatre affords her, and for someone who has long had a "wish list" of works she'd like to one day direct, her position at St. Ambrose allows her to make many of those wishes realities.

"Oh my *God!*" she exclaims. "I get to do whatever I *want!* Most of the plays that I get to do are ones that are on my list, because you get to turn the students on to them in class. So you can kinda spike your own drink, if you will. Because you get them excited about it in class and then they go, 'Oh my gosh, we get to do that on the main stage?!' And then, hopefully, they'll come on board and participate in the show."

Many of the plays Johnson had always wanted to direct – "*How I Learned to Drive*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Streetcar Named Desire* ...

," she lists – became, at St. Ambrose, shows she

did

direct. "And I'm directing

Threepenny Opera

next fall," she says, "and that's one that was on my list. So loadin' the dice is something that I

clearly

do and without

any

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apology.”

Which reminds Johnson of a wonderful, often unspoken perk to her career in educational theatre: minimal box-office concerns. “It’s nice when we have butts in seats,” she says. “It’s lovely when we have a full house. It’s not *crucial*.”

She grins. “Ivory tower.”

For tickets to Much Ado About Nothing, call (563)333-6251.