Written by Mike Schulz
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Augustana College opens its 2010-11 theatre season with the student/faculty collaboration *Wrestling with Angels & Demons*, and true to its title, the play will find its performers doing a fair share of wrestling. Yet rather than physical (or *meta* physical) beings, the production's student actors will actually be grappling with questions: What is democracy? What is the American Dream? And a question that many of us have contemplated this year: Is Rod Blagojevich *really* blacker than Barack Obama?

"The basic structure of the play," says *Angels & Demons* creator/director Scott Irelan, "is that there's individual monologue work, there are group scenes, and there are film clips and multimedia projections," one of which includes the former Illinois governor's notorious quote in *Esquire* magazine ("I'm blacker than Barack Obama") comparing his upbringing to the president's. "We sort of rotate between those three [elements], and it's their accumulation that gives us our story."

That story, as audiences will discover with *Angels & Demons*' October 15 debut, involves an examination of democracy and diversity in modern America, with the show's six-person, ethnically diverse cast sharing their own personal thoughts on, and experiences with, subjects such as politics, race, and identity.

And as with Irelan's two previous directorial efforts at Augustana – *Omniscience* and *The Big Funk* , both produced in 2009 – the show will incorporate a wide variety of multimedia effects created by Augustana's Adam Parboosingh and the students in his lighting- and sound-design course. "So," says Irelan, "we're sort of pulling from all our resource areas here."

An assistant professor in Augustana's theatre department since 2007 and the recipient of a Ph.D. in theatre from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, the 34-year-old Irelan says his idea for *Angels & Demons* originated "almost three years ago now. I came on campus and there was a lot of talk about diversity. A lot of students were talking to me about not being comfortable with not being white on campus, and what that meant for them in the Quad Cities. And that led to thinking about us as a democracy, because we're also battling these issues on a larger scale. What does it mean to be part of a democracy? What does it mean to have a debate about identity?

"Then, over the last couple of years, I zeroed in and focused on Obama-mania," continues Irelan (who is white), "and the idea that we're 'post-racial,' and all of these silly things in the news. I thought, 'We can get some voices of twentysomethings *now*, dealing with what it means to be a college student wrestling with these types of issues.' And that led to creating a piece that sort of questions, 'Are we really post-racial? Are we really in a place that's better than where we were, or is just that we're *talking* about it more?'"

Irelan says his "hardcore writing" for *Angels & Demons*' structure began this past February and lasted through August. Much of the show, however, only took shape through collaboration with his six cast members – Siara Cooper, David Etheridge, Macy Marie Hernandez, Jeremy Hoffman, Vicki Owoo-Battlet, and Rachel Stearns – at the beginning of Augustana's fall semester.

"The students have written their own personal narratives," says Irelan. "I'd help them *frame*

them – ‘Get us into the scene, get us *out* of the scene’ – but the content is theirs.” And he adds that beyond the monologues, the students have been instrumental in the creation of *Angels & Demons*’ group sequences.

“There’s a scene early in the play,” Irelan says, “where the cast acts as if they’re students on a playground, and they come up with words about race and diversity for every letter of the alphabet. Then, *inside* of that, we have stories about when they first realized race was an issue in their lives. And then there’s another scene where they talk about things they hear in their daily lives that aren’t really PC things to say – we wrote that as a sort of game-show scene, a satire about things being said even *though* we’re ‘post-racial.’

“We’ve done about four drafts of the show since week one of the term,” he adds. “Four drafts in about six weeks. So we’re flying at it pretty hard.”

Yet while *Wrestling with Angels & Demons* is certainly a play of ideas, Irelan was also determined to make the production an interesting *visual* experience, one formed through collaboration with fellow Assistant Professor Parboosingh.

“Adam’s focus is projected scenography,” says Irelan, mentioning the practice of employing digital imagery to create scenic background – as with the moon that crossed the Chicago skyline in last year’s *The Big Funk*. “And what’s really great is that our students are now being exposed to that, and getting trained in how to integrate themselves into that world.”

Regarding the blending of performers with film and video images, digital projection, and other multimedia effects, Irelan says, “In general, the United States is really slow coming to this. Canada, Germany ... several other places have been using techniques of multimedia for *years*.”

Recently, he says, “Andrew Lloyd Webber tried it a few years ago with *Woman in White.* The show was a miserable failure in terms of the storytelling, but the technology sort of catapulted him and his whole industry; they learned a lot about rear-projection. Robert Lepage from Canada has been doing this stuff for years. And Disney, even on their cruise ships, is figuring out how to use this type of technology, and integrating it with performers.

“There seems to be a trend in the larger world of theatre,” Irelan continues, “of moving in that direction. So this year, we’re asking, ‘Where can we solve problems using projected scenography? How can we get performers to *interact* with the technology?’”

Irelan admits that *Angels & Demons*’ melding of original material with multimedia enhancements is both challenging and, for both participants and audiences, somewhat risky. “But that’s the great thing about academic theatre,” he says. “We’ve got a safety net. So even if it doesn’t sell, or even if it doesn’t really work all the way through, we’ll be able to say, ‘Okay, dear students, we tried this, and it didn’t work, and here’s why – so now you go off and do this and *don’t* do that.’

“It’s a workshop,” Irelan adds. “So we’ll see what we come up with.”

Wrestling with Angels & Demons *will be performed at Augustana College’s Potter Hall October 15 through 24; performances are at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, and 1:30 p.m. on Sundays. For tickets and more information, call (309)794-7306 or visit* *Augustana.edu/academics/theatre/department*
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