Written by Mike Schulz
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For his first directorial effort at St. Ambrose University, Daniel Rairdin-Hale in April staged the ancient-Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. This month, however, finds the school's assistant professor of theatre tackling a tragedy that hits much closer to home.

"I remember where I was when Columbine happened," says Rairdin-Hale, referring, of course, to the April 1999 massacre at Colorado's Columbine High School. "It was right between my junior and senior year [at Pleasant Valley High School]. So I got to experience how everything changed. My first three years of high school were *one* way, and then this happened, and in senior year, everything was different. You couldn't have backpacks, doors were locked, you couldn't leave the building, we had bomb drills ... . It was very strange to be there during that transition.

"I mean, I'm sure there are things that high schools do now," he continues, "where students just assume, 'This is how it's always been.' You know, cameras, metal detectors – whatever. But there was a time *before* that."

It's the time period directly before and after the Columbine killings that Rairdin-Hale and his student actors are exploring in *Columbinus*, being performed at St. Ambrose University's Galvin Fine Arts Center February 18 through 20. Written by Stephen Karam and P.J. Paparelli, first produced in 2005, and including Columbine High School shooters Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris among its featured characters, the play has been called "an ambitious examination of the suburbanization of evil" by the *Washington Post* and "a stark new work that compellingly captures the turmoil inherent in today's teenagers" by CurtainUp.com.

As those quotes suggest, *Columbinus* is hardly two hours of feel-good fun. And that suits its director just fine.

"This is true academic theatre," says Rairdin-Hale, who graduated from St. Ambrose with a theatre degree in 2004 and began teaching there in 2009. "And what I love about academic theatre is that you get to see things that might be a little more edgy, or a little more impactful, or

have a bigger message, or explore something that wouldn't necessarily be *commercial*. We get to explore themes and ideas. It's good for us, and I think it's good for the community."

Rairdin-Hale first encountered *Columbinus* while earning his 2007 MFA in acting from DePaul University. "This was a play I had auditioned for," he says, "and they were calling me back for a role. I had to drop out of the running because of another gig, but it's just kind of been in the back of my mind since then. I was startled by how much it impacted me just *reading* it."

Describing *Columbinus*' dramatic arc, Rairdin-Hale says: "The first act could happen anywhere. It's basic archetypes and cliques. So you've got your nerd and your jock and your cheerleader type and your goth kid – all of these basic types that you might see in any high school. It kind of explores high-school life in all of its detail, and it doesn't shy away from [profane] language, it doesn't shy away from bullying – stuff that's still happening, right now, in high schools across the country.

"And then the second act," he continues, "shifts to Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, and to Dylan and Eric specifically. The loner and the freak from the first act become Dylan and Eric, and we see the specific details of that day."

For some audiences, this will prove disturbing, as might *Columbinus*' second-act employment of documentary-like facets. "A lot of the lines," says Rairdin-Hale, "are directly from interviews with people who were actually there. There's a whole scene that's the transcript from one of their [Klebold's and Harris'] basement tapes. And we use actual audio from a 911 call, [and] there are images from the high school projected on a screen during part of the play. It's going to be a ... a chilling experience, I think."

Though not, he stresses, a horrifically brutal one. "There's no blood, we don't fire any guns on stage – yes, there's a TEC-9 that we'll have on stage, but we don't actually fire it. We use theatrical devices to symbolize the shootings. It's *implied*. Staging it would, I don't know, be too *real*, and we're trying to be respectful as we tell the story."

Plus, he adds, “there is some humor. High school is tragic, but it’s also funny, and in the first act, there are some pretty funny things. It’s the second act that turns on you. I mean, you see it coming, but you still can’t quite prepare for it, you know?”

Prior to staging the play, Rairdin-Hale says that he and his eight-person cast – who portray not only students, but also teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and other adult figures – gathered to discuss both the show’s themes and the Columbine High School massacre itself.

“Columbine means something to me,” says Rairdin-Hale, “because it changed my high-school experience. And with our set designer [Aaron Hook], it was the same situation. He was a junior in high school when it happened, so it’s something that affects him, as well. So at our first rehearsal, we all sat and talked about our experience with this. And for many of the students, it didn’t really affect them, because they were in elementary school at the time. You know, their moms might have been crying when they got home, or they saw something about it in the paper, but they didn’t really understand what it *meant*.

“That had a big impact on me,” he continues, “hearing that no, Columbine didn’t have a huge effect on these students. But there were similar events that *did*, and for many of them, the Virginia Tech shootings [of 2007] are a lot more present in their experience. They have that to draw on.

“I think that’s why this play is worth doing. It’s about something that still affects us today. It’s about something that’s still *happening* today. I think, now more than ever, it’s important to analyze what’s happening in our high schools. I mean, the rise in suicides, the bullying in the gay community ... . We need to question why things like this [the Columbine massacre] happen, and what we can possibly do to *keep* them from happening.”

And Rairdin-Hale’s hope for close analysis of *Columbinus*’ themes will also be reflected in St. Ambrose’s presentation. “We’re doing something different with it,” he says, “by putting the

[audience's] seats on stage. I mean, we're still going to respect the aesthetic distance that's needed to be comfortable with the guns and that kind of thing, but we do want to put them closer to the action. To make the experience more intimate.

"I don't know that I have a specific charge for people to go out and *do* anything" after watching *Columbinus*, "but I do hope it starts a discussion. There's the type of theatre that we use to escape from things, and there's the type we use to *ask* things, and get a dialogue started. And this is the latter. Whether people like it or don't like it, I hope that it at least starts some conversations."

Columbinus *will be staged in St. Ambrose University's Galvin Fine Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. on February 18 and 19, and at 3 p.m. on Sunday, February 20. Tickets are $7 to $11, and can be reserved by calling (563)333-6251 or visiting SAU.edu/galvin .*