

# AND ALL THAT JAZZ

OU's School of Musical Theatre is setting box office records, but its biggest success is in the quality of students it produces and sends to Broadway and beyond.



BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

# CHICAGO

## **F**ive, six, seven, eight . . .

To the accompaniment of buzzing saws and pounding hammers, Rich Taylor makes his way across the stage at Rupel Jones surveying the progress of the latest University Theatre production, *Chicago*. Since being named interim dean of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts in July, Taylor has made such visits a regular part of his day, from the music rooms at Catlett to dance rehearsals at the Reynolds Center.

On this night, students are everywhere—building set pieces, adjusting lights, warming up voices and stretching muscles. Taylor seems at home in the milieu. The path he traveled since leaving Norman as a student in the 1970s included nearly four decades in the entertainment industry—27 of them in top management at Walt Disney World—before returning, full circle, to the University of Oklahoma.

There is poetic justice in the destination.

Taylor would have majored in musical theatre at OU had such a major existed when he graduated from Enid High in 1967. Instead he put together his own program, pulling what he needed from each department.

“I majored in voice and [professors] Bruce Govich and Tom Carey told me fairly early on ‘You’re not going to be an opera singer,’” he remembers. “They sent me off on a course that was really uncharted at the time.”

Taylor took acting lessons, built sets, directed *Sooner Scandals* and even started his own talent agency, booking acts like the OU Student Entertainers, of which he was a founding member. Nothing from his “do-it-yourself” degree went unused.

After 10 years of learning the ropes on the road with Fred Waring’s *Pennsylvanians*, he sent a résumé to Disney World and was hired immediately as stage manager for the park’s college-aged and slightly rowdy entertainers known as the “Kids of the



Simon Hurst Photography

Former Disney World executive Rich Taylor now oversees another kind of Magic Kingdom. As interim dean of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts, Taylor takes the raw ingredients of young talent and potential, mixes them with seasoned faculty and turns out stellar productions with a cast of 18- to 22-year-olds.

OU all over again,” says Taylor. “I’m like a kid in a candy store. I love coming to work every day.”

Components for a musical theatre program had been floating around since Taylor’s time at OU and probably before. The pieces did not come together, however, until Greg Kunesh, current interim director of musical theatre and former director of

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Kingdom.” Taylor honed his leadership and business skills at Disney, ending his tenure as vice president of live entertainment and costumes, responsible for a \$260 million annual budget, a 4,000-member team, and all the shows, spectacles and special events produced at the resort.

In 2007, the Disney exec was presented an opportunity that seemed Taylor-made for his experience. The University of Oklahoma was seeking a director for its Musical Theatre Department—the very program he had sought as a student.

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the School of Drama, and Max Weitzenhoffer, an OU alumnus and award-winning producer of London and New York theatre, sat down one night at Kunesh’s kitchen table.

“Max asked the question, ‘What is the most useful thing I could do for the University?’” recalls Kunesh. “We decided that would be a musical theatre program—not just any program—but a really competitive one.”

With start-up capital from Weitzenhoffer, now vice chairman of the OU Board of Regents, musical theatre set up shop, initially under the umbrella of the School of Drama. When musi-





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Hartleigh Buwick, as Roxie Hart, finds herself surrounded by “her boys” during the musical number “Roxie” from *Chicago*. Cast members of any OU musical theatre production have to be triple threats, equally skilled at singing, dancing and acting, to rise to the challenges of delivering a full-scale Broadway-calibre performance to expectant audiences.

cal director Paul Christman came on board, and later choreographer Lyn Cramer, a strong curriculum began to take shape. The program became the Weitzenhoffer Department of Musical Theatre in 2001, with Kunesh its first director. In December, the Regents upgraded the department to the Weitzenhoffer School of Musical Theatre, the first of its kind in the country.

At a time when Broadway producers are facing the real-life drama of a shrinking economy, OU’s musical theatre productions are packing the house. All seven performances of *Chicago* were sell-outs.

Much of that success lies in the intimate nature of the department. Students say they are treated like family. And like a proud parent, Kunesh has a bulletin board in his office filled from corner to corner with head shots of each of the 52 students currently enrolled in the program. “Dr. K.,” who has been helping them make the leap from Rupel Jones to Broadway for decades, knows each student’s name, classification, hometown and production record.

### **Choosing the Cell Block Tango**

From its inception, the department has taken on ambitious projects, from the world premiere of *Jack* in 1995 to the perennial favorite, *Anything Goes*, in spring of 2008.

Choosing shows for University Theatre is somewhat of a balancing act, weighing carefully the values of entertainment and education. “We are an academic institution first,” Taylor says.

“We want to do things that stretch our kids, that are high quality, but not high expense. *Chicago* was just the right size.”

An important component of nearly every production is the addition of guest artists, industry professionals who are brought to campus to coach, choreograph or direct. For *Chicago*, actor/director Ron Kellum and choreographer Randy Slovacek spent six weeks with cast and crew.

Although Kellum regularly wrangles a cast of thousands in mega-events like the halftime shows for the NFL Pro-Bowl, *Chicago* was his first experience directing university theatre.

“I was really impressed by the talent, the set, the wardrobe, lighting,” he said during a break in rehearsal. “I have worked in professional productions where the resources were not as good as what you have here.”

Kellum is something of a *Chicago* expert, having appeared in the musical a number of times, both in the U.S. and Europe. His directing style is low-key and positive, the kind that comes from a confidence in himself and his cast. He observes, takes notes, fine tunes.

“She’s hitting that on seven, eight, one,” he says, conferring with Christman on the timing of a dance number. “Can I get a horn accent on that? Yeah? That should work.”

Kellum said *Chicago*, with its minimalist set and nearly all-black wardrobe, poses special challenges to performers. “There is nowhere



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ABOVE: Students from all disciplines in OU's College of Fine Arts contribute to University Theatre productions. Here Carolyn Bailey, a freshman majoring in drama with an emphasis on acting, gains experience and appreciation for the work that goes on behind the scenes as she builds a set piece.

LEFT: Ryan Koss embodies the attitude of the 1920s jazz era in a scene from *Chicago*.

BELOW: Velma Kelly, played by musical theatre major Lindsay Schwak (seated), has her turn describing to fellow inmates the unfortunate circumstances leading to her incarceration in the song and dance number, "He Had It Comin'."

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to hide,” he says with a smile. “The performers have to be triple threats: great actors, singers and dancers. These kids can do it, and they support each other in the process.”

Some of that support comes from people never seen on stage. People like set designer Barbora Nejedlikova, a senior from Kosice, Slovakia, who had to conjure a speakeasy, a prison and a courtroom from the same black quadrangle that also accommodated a 13-piece jazz band throughout the performance.

Or costume designer Jennifer Cozens, a second-year MFA candidate. While distributing fabric one night in the basement costume shop of the Fine Arts Center, Cozens drops what looks like a four-inch square of black mesh in front of a seamstress.

“What’s that?” the student asks.

“It’s going to be a shirt,” answers Cozens. The *Chicago* seamstresses were affectionately dubbed “The Bedazzlers,” for their ability to manufacture micro-costumes from sequins and thin air.

The group also made 13 pairs of men’s trousers, custom-fitted for the movement of the each dancer—the same with each shirt. Such attention to detail runs across the board, with students taking seriously their roles, whether in front of the curtain or behind it.

### I Can’t Do It Alone

Tom Orr, director of the School of Drama and producer of University Theatre, says he believes productions like *Chicago* set an incredible standard for collaboration at OU.

“I don’t think anyone works across boundaries like the partnerships of University Theatre,” he says. “We support one another. We are directly involved in one another’s works every day of the academic year. Even the curricula cross.”

Both dance and musical theatre students must take acting and design courses. Drama students take dance. “Every day in our college is a journey of solving problems in a collaborative fashion,” says Orr.

Taylor agrees. “In one production, it will be the drama kids who are set-building, making costumes, running the lights, sound, props. The next, it will be the drama kids onstage and the dancers doing the stagecraft. If you just take classes in your sliver of focus, you won’t understand the broad spectrum of the business.”

“For most of the kids, their goal and dream is to end up on



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An integral part of the musical theatre experience at OU is the exposure to industry professionals. Guest artist Ron Kellum, producer, director and choreographer (center), watches as Hartleigh Buwick and Joel Ingram rehearse a scene. Kellum spent six weeks on campus working on the production and said he “was blown away” by the level of professionalism displayed by cast and crew.



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Costume designer Jennifer Cozens (center) gives instructions to M.F.A student Jong Kim, while Ashley Monroe, undergraduate costume crew head, finishes a shirt for one of the ensemble.

the stage, but there are many other viable options,” adds Taylor, who is living proof of his words. “They may end up as actors, but they may also end up as technical experts, composers, writers. We want them to try it all while they are here.”

One student who has already made the most of his short time here is Connor McCollum. The Woodlands, Texas, freshman was one of about 3,000 students from around the nation vying for one of 17 open spots in the department last spring. Kunesh and the faculty narrowed the 3,000 to around 100, who were invited to OU for a requisite on-campus audition.

“I did my audition in February,” says McCollum, “and I fell in love with the place. Everyone was so warm and welcoming. I said to myself, ‘I have to get in here.’ It really is like family.”

McCollum made good on his promise, and within the first few days of his fall semester, auditioned for *Chicago*.

“I realized coming in as a freshman that this was a whole new league I’d be competing against; everyone is so talented,” he recalls. “I thought just getting a callback would be more than enough.”

When that callback came, McCollum says he was “blown away. I wasn’t even nervous when I went back because it was already more than I expected.”

What happened next is every freshman’s dream. McCollum was cast as Amos Hart, one of only four male leads in the production. Within weeks, the 18-year-old found himself juggling a full day of classes and evening rehearsals.

“It’s tough,” he admits. “Every minute you get, you’re either studying or taking a nap, but I love it. It’s what I wake up in the morning wanting to do.”

A veteran of the stage at 21, Hartleigh Buwick is a senior in the School of Musical Theatre. She began dancing at 3, and at 8 told a reporter she was going to be an actor when she grew up. Since then, she has appeared in numerous productions at OU, Norman’s Sooner Theatre and Lyric Theatre in Oklahoma City.



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Connor McCollum made his musical theatre debut as Amos Hart, shown here singing “Mr. Cellophane.” The talented freshman from The Woodlands, Texas, won audiences over with his sympathetic portrayal of the luckless husband. McCollum was one of only 17 freshmen accepted to the highly competitive program in fall 2008.

Although the role of Roxie Hart was physically demanding—she delivers one number atop a 12-foot ladder in four-inch heels—Buwick says she enjoyed every minute of it.

“Playing Roxie was fun for me because she’s kind of spunky and high energy and that’s how I am in real life,” says the petite blonde with the big voice. She, like McCollum, says she gets tremendous support from her fellow cast members during the rigorous weeks of rehearsals and shows.

“We all keep digging deeper and deeper into the script,” she says. “You start with words on a page, build them into a character. It’s such a drive everyone has to keep working, keep getting better.”

Although audiences reap the rewards of such dedication, the real winners are the

students themselves. “We want to get these kids ready for employment when they graduate,” says Kunesh. “And it seems to be working.”

Within six months of her 2007 OU graduation, Annie Funke was on Broadway as the understudy for Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*, a role she has played more than a dozen times since May. Just down the street at the Marquis Theatre, classmate Con O’Shea-Creal, a 2008 musical theatre grad, is featured in *Irving Berlin’s White Christmas*.

“The combination of faculty, curriculum and performance opportunities really puts us into a unique position on the national scene,” says Kunesh. “We draw students from all over the nation.”

“Once they see OU and our program, they are hooked,” adds Taylor. “We have tremendous faculty, a tremendous student talent base. Our product is making competitive talented professionals, and we have great tools to do it.

“I think this is where I’m supposed to be. At Disney, we helped people have fun. Here, we are helping people shape their lives. We are helping talented kids begin their journeys.”

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.