



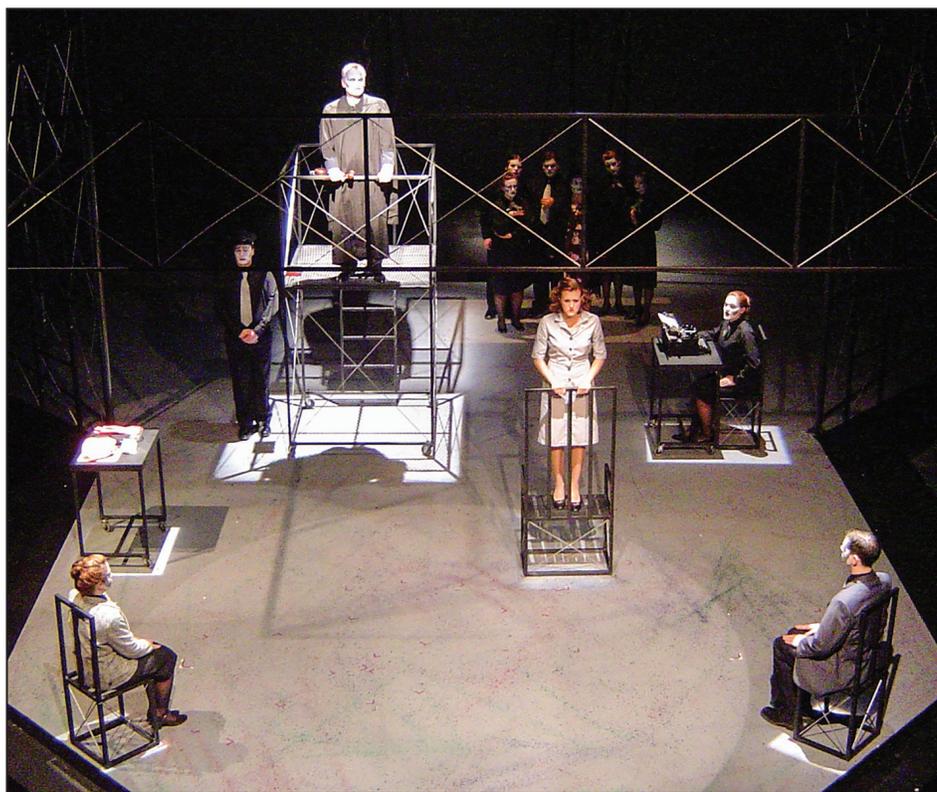
“It’s a philosophy of participation”

Dr. N. J. Stanley, or simply J. to anyone who has known her for more than 20 seconds, wears lightly and with melodic grace, the accent of her native New Orleans. “I am very much a deep Southerner,” Stanley remarked. “We are an effusive people. I embrace the heritage.”

Stanley, associate professor of theatre, now in her 13th year of teaching at Lycoming, will retire at the end of the academic year this spring.

Spending her formative years in the most festive and flamboyant of American cities was not lost on the young Stanley. “Mardi Gras, the music, the second line—the city shaped me. I love the place and all of its theatrical public shenanigans,” she said. “Deep down we all have an urge to be in the spotlight. I’m sure that New Orleans influenced my love of theatre.”

Her family helped things along. At the instigation of eager older siblings, Stanley’s performing career began where they all begin—and where most mercifully end—in the family living room. “I was the youngest of five children, and I always credit them with planting the theatre bug in me,” Stanley said. “They literally put the Rogers and Hammerstein LPs on the record player and taught me all the musical theatre classics. I loved it—the singing, the dancing.” Soon her gift was obvious, and she was traveling with her family, scouring the region for bigger challenges and developing her craft. “I was in every talent show and tried out for all the plays,” she said. “There never seemed another path.”



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Though she loved performing, Stanley quickly found an affinity for directing at Louisiana State University, where she majored in theatre. “One of the reasons I tried directing was that I wasn’t being cast as much as I wanted in the productions in college,” she recalled. “Plus, the bossy side of me loves being a director.”

After finishing her bachelor’s degree at LSU, Stanley went on to earn a master’s from Florida State University and a doctorate from Indiana University. From there, she began a peripatetic professional career.

“It wasn’t by choice,” Stanley said. “I had landed a great teaching position at Agnes Scott College in Georgia, but was lured to California by a friend in the movie business to take an almost dream job with Walt Disney Feature Animation. It was at the height of their success; they were riding the crest of “The Lion King” and those other lucrative animation features. They decided to open their own school to train the kind of artists and technicians they needed, and I was sort of the principal. As corporate life goes, it was ideal, but it wasn’t for me. I deeply missed teaching.”

So Stanley soon returned to the academic world, teaching at Bucknell, Franklin & Marshall College and St. Lawrence University theatre departments until finding a home at Lycoming in 2002.

When she landed at Lycoming, Stanley brought an inclusive and eminently practical approach to theatre with her. “My belief is that everyone in the entire class should be involved in the production. Not just on the backstage crews, but hands-on, major stuff,” she said. “Undergraduate theatre should be about getting real experience but also building up your resume. That’s why students come here. I can guarantee you that you’ll be involved, and that the faculty are fully engrossed, working right alongside you. That’s something really important that we offer here. It’s a small, big, theatre program, and by the time students leave, they have learned about every aspect of bringing a production to the stage. I want my students to have that ‘Let’s do this!’ attitude.”

She takes her own advice. While maintaining a rigorous schedule of four productions annually at the Mary

L. Welch Theatre, she has upped the number of shows at the black box theatre, known as the Dragon’s Lair, which is exclusively devoted to student productions.

“My first year here, there was only one student production, and it was because a student came to me and asked if I would mentor him doing a one-person play,” Stanley said. “Now we have from five to seven student shows per year, and we created a senior project that requires all seniors, whether they are in acting, directing or design, to do a full-length play. It’s a philosophy of participation.” That philosophy perhaps finds its roots in the spirit of her hometown, not just in the spontaneity and unbridled creativity of its celebrations, but also in its response to misfortune—a second line is, of course, a parade of all-comers that typically follows a funeral procession, comprising those who join in to walk and dance behind the first line of mourners and musicians.

Or catastrophe. Stanley returned to visit New Orleans the Christmas after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city. “There were areas that looked is if the

storm had hit yesterday. It was deeply emotional,” she said. “But theatre can speak to people, and in the aftermath, there were manifestations of theatre everywhere. You would see, for instance, a coffin labeled ‘New Orleans’ being carried in a mock second line for the city, a dummy propped up in a front yard with a ‘FEMA where are you?’ sign. These were popular displays, where people were finding an outlet to express their sadness and rage through these natural channels.”

Like the improvisations of her hometown, Stanley’s own work in theatre hews close to the bone. She has directed several plays written by Neil LaBute—most recently last October, when she directed “The Distance from Here” at the Welch—and published a scholarly article on his work. LaBute’s plays are frequently controversial and part of the reason is that he has a penchant for slipping a cold blade into the soft tissue of society. “It’s part of my makeup to ruin a perfectly good day for people,” he once said.

“LaBute has absolutely fascinated me for more than a decade. His willingness to attach himself to subjects we don’t want to talk about, his obsession with exposing the dark side of human nature and the underbelly of America are deeply powerful,” Stanley observed.

“Listen, I go to theatre to be moved,” she continued. “I’m personally attracted to serious work that stimulates audiences to think and look at our world in new ways. When I teach undergraduate theatre, I talk about Aristotle. He was the first to analyze and examine what makes theatre tick. When he discusses the great tragedies, he speaks of catharsis. The great buildup of emotions that can happen in a play and the release—laughter, tears, the purging of all that emotion.”

Speaking at an accelerating clip, Stanley’s voice rises as she rounds to her own peroration. “I’m passionate about every play I direct, but I am totally committed to the themes and messages of plays that have an impact like this on everyone who sees them and performs them. Theatre is the closest art form to reality. I’ve spent my whole life devoted to it, and found it to be the most complete expression of humanity.”



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