

5-2008

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Liberty University

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Recommended Citation

Liberty University, "Curtain rises on booming theater program" (2008). *May/June 2008*. Paper 3.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj_2008_may/3

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Curtain rises on booming theater program

June 25, 2008 | Mitzi Bible

If you've been to a theater performance at Liberty University lately, you can call yourself one lucky person — and that's just because you've held a ticket in your hand.

“We have sold out almost every single show this year,” said Linda Nell Cooper, chair of the Theatre Arts Department.

For *West Side Story*, the school's last show of the theater season, “We sold it out before we ever got to opening night,” she said. “So we've added even more shows and we're selling them out. We turn hundreds of people away and that's sad. ...”

As is the case for some departments at LU, the buzzword for Theatre Arts is “cramped.” The theater space it now uses for six main stage productions a year is a renovated lecture hall and seats 250. According to Cooper, most college theater programs as large as Liberty's have a theater that seats 500-750 for main productions and a separate 250-seat black-box theater for student productions.

In the Performance Arts Hall behind the DeMoss Learning Center on main campus, it isn't unusual to see theater students rehearsing in the hallways. And the need for more space is evident when students in a production have to arrive as early as three hours before a performance to have enough time to trade space in the small dressing rooms. And once they make it out on stage, the conditions are cramped there, too.

“We have no fly space; we have no wing space; we have no place to push sets on and off — whatever we do, it's the set that's on the stage and it stays there,” said Cooper.

Liberty University Chancellor Jerry Falwell, Jr. said plans are under way for a new theater.

“We have considered several locations for the new theater but have decided to build a 500- to 750-seat theater near the existing Fine Arts Department and black box theater. The most logical

site seems to be attached to the rear wall of Demoss Hall where the small fountain is now located.”

Anyone who is interested in donating toward the project can contact Cooper at (434) 582-2078.

Though under some constraints at the present, the theater program has continued to churn out high-caliber graduates well prepared for a career in the entertainment field.

“We haven’t had much difficulty with them getting professional contracts,” Cooper said. “The first graduate was last year, and she has worked professionally steadily since she graduated.”

She said the two students who are currently working on a [film](#) featuring the younger years of Billy Graham aren’t the first to land major roles.

“We’ve had students in film prior to this; just this is the first time people have taken notice,” she said. “We’ve had students in major motion pictures and in television, like *CSI* and *Law and Order*. Alumni have also been in the films *A Brave New World*, with Colin Farrell; *Miss Congeniality*, with Sandra Bullock; a new film, *Homecoming*, starring Mischa Barton, and an HBO series on John Adams.”

Cooper said LU’s theater students are No.1 among Christian colleges and in the top three for secular colleges with theater programs in Virginia. Students have ranked with superior placement at the Virginia Theater Association, the American College Theater Festival and the National Artistic Teachers of Music competitions.

The Theatre Arts major was established three years ago and offers five concentrations: Acting, Musical Theatre, Production, Drama Ministry and Theatre Arts Education. A minor is also offered. Majors are required to participate in at least eight productions before they graduate.

Cooper said the program stresses biblical principles throughout the curriculum.

“In theatre arts, it’s very important for our students to understand how they can balance their professional work with their Christian walk,” she said. “This means sometimes you say no to a contract, or you say no for what you think might be the ‘big break’ — and God is sovereign and He will open another door for you. ... [Here] we do the classics; we do secular work, but we show them this is how it can be done from a Christian point of view; this is how you can act in it as a Christian, this is where you draw the line.”

For more information on Theatre Arts at Liberty University, go to www.liberty.edu/theatre.