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> news > Courtney



Internationally acclaimed stage director and choreographer Dennis Courtney is serving as the guest director for the Department of Theatre and Dance's upcoming production of "Carousel."

Southeast Students Working Under Tutelage of Internationally Acclaimed Stage Director/Choreographer

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo., Dec. 1, 2009 – Theatre and dance students at Southeast Missouri State University got a taste of working with an internationally acclaimed stage director and choreographer last month when they auditioned for an upcoming performance of "Carousel."

Broadway veteran Dennis Courtney of New York, N.Y., led auditions in November for "Carousel," which will be performed at the River Campus in February. Courtney plans to return to Southeast in January to begin a rigorous rehearsal schedule.

"I love the enthusiasm of the students," he said.

Courtney says directing a performance once a year on a college campus is a staple of his work, a career decision he made in 1992. This is Courtney's second gig at Southeast – he directed "The 1940's Radio Hour" in October 2008 after answering a Southeast ad in *Art Search* for a guest director.

"The Department of Theatre and Dance is thrilled to have Dennis Courtney return as a guest director, said Rhonda Weller-Stilson, chair of Southeast's Department of Theatre and Dance. "His production of last year's 'The 1940's Radio Hour,' was a huge success. The cast found working with him a joy. He was extremely prepared and professional. Dennis knows how to push the students, while at the same time be nurturing. His audition and



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rehearsal atmosphere is always fun and creative, but they are hardworking sessions."

Courtney's impressive resume documents an amazing career as a critically acclaimed director and choreographer of stage, television, cruise ships, corporate and special events. He has won numerous awards as the director and choreographer of more than 150 stage productions, including "Peter Pan" with Cathy Rigby, "Can-Can" with Leslie Uggams, the regional premieres of "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" and "Summer of '69," the premiere productions of "Red Hot Mama" "Beggar's Holiday," "The Beethovens" and numerous other musicals and plays performed throughout the United States, Canada and Europe.

The highlight of his career came earlier this year when he won the Israel Theatre Award for his production of "Fiddler on the Roof" performed for the Cameri Theatre in Tel Aviv – the official production of the 60th anniversary of Israel.

"It was huge," Courtney said of winning the award, which is Israel's equivalent of the Tony Award. "I never expected it. I thought the nomination was really a wonderful tribute," he said, but added he never expected to win. "I was in shock," he said.

Courtney now acknowledges the honor has given his work "a stamp of approval" that no longer requires him to prove himself in the theatre world.

"It was so nice to be affirmed," he said.

Courtney said "Fiddler on the Roof" had never before been successfully done in Israel. The show opened in April 2008 and was to run for 60 performances. Due to its success, it is still being performed today, he said.

Courtney has conceived and staged more than 150 industrial and cruise ship shows for clients, including Disney, Princess Cruise Lines, Sitmar Cruise Lines, Holland America Cruise Lines, Mitsubishi, Nike, Exxon, Bally's, Target and Mattel, working with such performers as Bette Midler, Celine Dion, Quincy Jones, Warren Beatty, Carol Channing, John Raitt, The Bacon Brothers, Steven Cojocar, David Hasselhoff, Edward James Olmos, Peter Marshall and Helen Reddy.

On television, Courtney directed the fifth season opener of TV's "Perfect Strangers." He also has had a successful performing career, including on Broadway, television and in concerts. On television, he appeared in several national commercials, Afterschool Specials and the soap opera "All My Children," and guest starred on "The Wonder Years."

Courtney is a former champion figure skater and is a member of Actors' Equity Association, the Screen Actors' Guild and the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers. He is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music.

He says he is hoping he can share his theatre knowledge with Southeast students, coach them on how to get and keep a theatre job and teach them "how to behave like a professional."

Courtney says students will find him to be "very professional, very detailed, very passionate" about his work. He says he hopes to instill in students "how to work at a professional pace - no excuses."

He also says he hopes to help students "maximize their talent" so they can be "the best people they can be" both on and off the stage.

"Talent without application gets you nowhere," he said.

Courtney says he is very impressed with Southeast's Department of Theatre and Dance, calling it "the up and coming program." In a few years, he predicts it will be among the "big name" theatre schools in America, along with the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music, Boston Conservatory, Carnegie Mellon and the University of Michigan.

Because of the professional roles Southeast students will seek in the future, he says it is important to instill in them "a sense of confidence and respect for the craft and the business. It's a very difficult profession. I want them to be prepared for what it's really like."

Last month's auditions at the River Campus, he said, were conducted exactly as they are on Broadway. The cast for Carousel will include 51 students and nine local children.

Students auditioning for "Carousel" the first day were asked to perform 32 bars of music from an up-tempo or traditional Broadway musical ballad. Callbacks were held the following day, and students were asked to be familiar with the script and to perform a "cold reading."

"This will be the largest show Theatre and Dance has ever done," Courtney said.

Because Carousel is a Rodgers and Hammerstein production, "the singing and dancing will be glorious," he predicted.

Rodgers and Hammerstein, who created a string of popular Broadway musicals in the 1940s and 1950s, called "Carousel" their favorite show they wrote because it changed theatre history, Courtney said.

The characters in "Carousel" are "imperfect people who survive with a lot of hope and support of the community," he said.

He says audiences find it rewarding to see shows like "Carousel" "where (characters) are imperfect, but they are as hopeful as we are."

"As a designer, I find Dennis' direction and concepts to be clear and defined, but they also allow me freedom to play and enhance the production," Weller-Stilson said. " I enjoy the design/director collaboration that he establishes. I have no doubt that Carousel will be a lovely production and a big hit with the community."

Rehearsals will begin in earnest on Jan. 11. Rehearsals will be conducted for three to four hours each weekday evening and for 10 hours on Sundays until the show opens. Performances are scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Feb. 24-27 and at 2 p.m. Feb. 28 in the Donald C. Bedell Performance Hall located in the Cultural Arts Center at Southeast's River Campus.

"I'm just really, really excited about it," Courtney said. "The audience is in for a real treat. It's a very hopeful and inspirational show. I just can't wait to do it."

Tickets for "Carousel" may be purchased at the River Campus Box Office, located in the Cultural Arts Center, 518 S. Fountain Street, weekdays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., or by calling (573) 651-2265. Tickets also may be purchased at any MetroTix outlet, online at MetroTix.com, keyword "Carousel" or by calling toll-free: (800) 293-5949.



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