Setting the stage

It’s no act—professors take the stage in NYC, networking with alumni and bringing their experiences home to share with students

In his years of acting and leading Baylor University’s theater department, Stan Denman hadn’t come across the answer to this question in any of his texts: What do you do when you’ve cut yourself onstage and are visibly bleeding? Nor had Thomas Ward, his onstage co-actor, found how an actor should react when his speech is so horrific that audience members turn their heads away. Lisa Denman, who directed the two and Steven Pounders in Craig Wright’s “The Unseen,” encountered different questions in the same production: Where does the director fit in when the playwright is changing the script days before opening night? And how do a director and a producer make decisions in territory criss-crossed by Actors’ Equity and Teamsters union rules?

University professors bring a living textbook of their experiences to their classes, and for six Baylor theater faculty members, the latest chapter of their textbooks was written off-Broadway. The six—theater department chairman Dr. Stan Denman, his wife and theater lecturer Lisa Denman, assistant professor Ward and associate professor Pounders, dramaturg Dr. DeAnna Toten Beard and audience development administrator Sherry Ward—produced and performed Wright’s three-man prison drama “The Unseen” at the 179-seat Cherry Lane Theatre in West Manhattan for a two-week run in March.

The Baylor production arrived in a New York theater season chilled by the cold wind of economic recession. Reviews were mixed, though generally favorable. But the project honed a sizable part of Baylor’s theater faculty with the real-life challenge of mounting a production in the hub of the theater universe and gave a handful of Baylor alums a rung up on their career ladders.

“It was like a crash graduate course for six faculty members,” recalls Stan Denman.

Baylor’s “Unseen” project began at the 2007 Humana Festival, known for introducing new plays and fresh work. Pounders, Lisa Denman and Toten Beard attended the new play by Craig Wright, a playwright and television writer with a growing following for his work on HBO’s “Six Feet Under,” ABC’s “Lost” and his plays “Orange Flower Water,” “Recent Tragic Events” and “The Pavilion.”
In Wright’s play, prisoners Valdez and Wallace, held in nearby cells and tortured for 10 years without knowing why, try to construct what’s happening in the world they cannot see outside their cells. A guard named Smash occasionally drops in to abuse them or to talk, but is starting to feel the strain of torture. As the darkly funny play progresses, Wright shows he’s more interested in how people find hope and meaning in the worlds they assemble from limited observation than the nature of torture.

Intrigued by the play’s spiritual thread and provocative tone, the Baylor theater faculty secured performance rights to “The Unseen” for the 2008 Out of the Loop Festival at WaterTower Theatre in Addison, an annual Dallas-area festival known for fresh, edgy and occasionally experimental fare. They pulled together a production team: Pounders (Wallace), Ward (Smash) and Stan Denman (Valdez) as actors, Lisa Denman as director and Toten Beard as dramaturg. While staging was minimal, due in part to festival requirements, the play impressed Dallas-area critics.

After the festival, Lisa Denman figured they were done. “We got good, good feedback and thought we should do it again. Stan thought big, but we all scoffed,” she says. Stan’s big thought: What if Baylor took Wright’s play to New York and staged it off-Broadway?

Baylor had done something similar in recent years, re-forming Horton Foote’s the American Actors Company to bring his “The Traveling Lady” to the off-Broadway Ensemble Studio Theater. That production, directed by associate professor Marion Castleberry, won a Drama Desk nomination for Outstanding Revival of a Play. Denman outlined the case for a Baylor-produced off-Broadway play and landed an Undergraduate Research and Schol-
feature several Baylor graduates in its cast.

The spring visit to New York enabled a strengthening of the relationship with Rachel Reiner, managing director of Resonance Ensemble Theatre and a staff member of the League of American Theatres and Producers. Pounders and Castleberry worked with Reiner during the RET’s 2007 production of “The Coffee Trees” by Arthur Girton, and that connection has opened the door to several League internships for students in Baylor’s Entrepreneurship program. “There were lots of seeds planted with Baylor’s investment, not just classes, but in careers helped,” the theater chairman said.

Back home, the Baylor company found their students eagerly awaiting the details of their time in the Big Apple. How do I find a place to live? What’s the sound and lighting equipment like in the smaller theaters? How do I network, and with whom? Pounders informed students not to take their Baylor facility and training for granted and assume New York theater is rich in resources and technology. “It’s a bit of a wake-up call for them to realize that professional theater is often running on a shoestring,” he says. Lisa Denman agrees, noting the real-world experience helped provide context for the opportunities her students have at Baylor. “It was an invaluable experience to tell them, ‘You’re spoiled here at Baylor. In New York, you’ll probably have a small space. The (lighting) board may be antiquated. You have Equity rules, Teamster rules,’” she said. “You could just see them all soaking this up.”

Ward said much of the Baylor company’s off-Broadway experience reinforced what they had been teaching all along, to their satisfaction. “It wasn’t like we returned with a big bag of secrets,” he says. “I tell my students, ‘I’m teaching you the stuff I do.’” At the same time, faculty members did learn some new twists in theater marketing to share in their classes, from papering services to social media. Papering services negotiate tickets from productions that they then distribute free or at reduced prices to their members; what a production loses in discounted ticket prices it may gain in larger audiences and increased word-of-mouth. Baylor theater professors also got first-hand experience in how to integrate the social media application Facebook into a play’s formal marketing plan.

Baylor theater students will get their own time with playwright Craig Wright this fall when he comes to Baylor as the 2009 winner of the Horton Foote American Playwrights Award. Wright intends to bring some of his Los Angeles acting colleagues to the festival and the Baylor company will reprise “The Unseen,” although likely for a limited audience due to language and subject matter, Stan Denman says. Pounders plans to use Baylor’s history with “The Unseen” as a real-world example of a script that changed not only from production to production, but rehearsal to rehearsal. “Working with a play this mal- leable is both exciting and frightening—Will I remember the line changes from the last rehearsal?”—and I’ll certainly be discussing the process in acting class,” he says.

Will Baylor try to stage another off-Broadway production in the future? Perhaps, but not anytime soon. “It gives back to students, but it takes a toll on students, too,” the department chair explains. Still, in an art form that traditionally has transferred much of its information in personal interaction, there’s no substitute for experience. “As most of us on the downhill side of 40 know, experience is the best teacher,” says Stan. “I think that all of us will be using these real-world examples for many years to come.”


This year’s Horton Foote Festival, Nov. 5-7, will feature a performance of “The Unseen” by Baylor’s American Actors Company. For details, visit www.baylor.edu/hortonfootefestival.