



Theater program gives students creative outlet

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALLISON RUEF

On a recent Tuesday evening, the Seelig Theater at SUNY Sullivan is bustling with activity. Students rehearse songs, help each other with costumes and go over dance moves. It doesn't seem to phase any of them that there is a full-sized pickup truck parked in the center of the stage.

The truck, graciously loaned to the program by I-86 Motors in Rock Hill, has been stripped of its engine and any other parts that add weight, and is the main prop for the musical "Hands on a Hard Body" that students of the SUNY Sullivan Performing Arts Program will present this month (April 18, 19, 25 and 26). In addition, they will also be performing "Marisol," a play by Jose Rivera.

"Hands on a Hardbody" is the story of what happens

when ten lives intersect over the quest to win a piece of the American Dream – a pickup truck; and 'Marisol' is the other end of the spectrum – it's kind of deep," explains theater teacher and director Jessica Barkl. "It's an apocalyptic urban fantasy. But it's really amazing. The students chose both plays, and they made some great choices!"

Barkl is the force behind the rebirth of an in-house theater program at SUNY Sullivan, and in her inaugural year as the Assistant Professor of Theater and Speech, has breathed new life into the Seelig Theater.

The Seelig Theater has always been, unfortunately, one of the best kept secrets in Sullivan County. The auditorium is a gem – acoustically rich, not too small – yet still intimate, there's not a bad seat in the house, which was designed by the firm of Edward Durell Stone, famous for

his work on the Museum of Modern Art, Radio City Music Hall and the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

It always seemed a shame that the college, surrounded by thriving local theater scene, Borscht Belt pedigree and proximity to New York City, didn't offer a theater program. Until now.

Under the leadership of Barkl, students can take classes in production, theater history, play production practicums (where students actually participate in producing a play/musical), stagecraft, and theater design elements.

The admiration for Barkl by her students is obvious, mostly because they take every opportunity to tell me personally how great she is. "Awesome" is the word used most frequently, and it's easy to see why. From making adjustments in the sound booth, to fixing a tear in a costume, to listening to her students talk about their day, Barkl is by all means a hands-on educator.

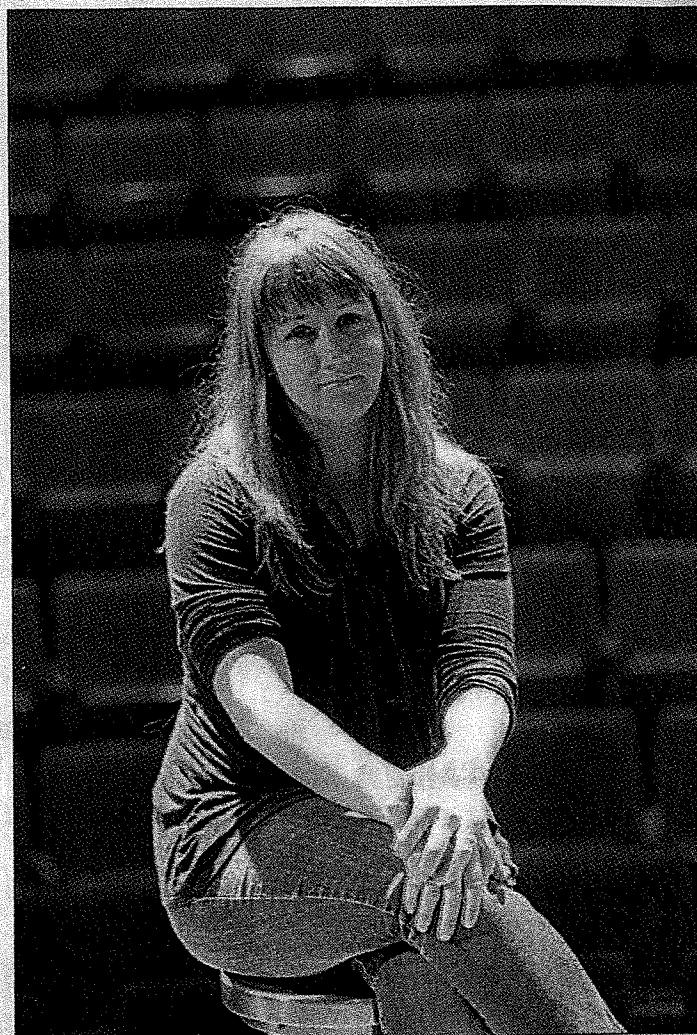
The performers are vivacious and chatty, eager to get on stage in costume and begin. The chatting ends when Barkl warns them sternly that they need to pull it together – today. "We have a performance to do next week, guys. It's now or never," she says. Suddenly all eyes are on her and focus and concentration take over.

Barkl hails from the west coast and has taught theater at Walla Walla Community College (Washington state) and in private schools in New Mexico. Her extensive and impressive resume lists her professional credits as a freelance actor, director, dramaturge, producer and designer. Locally, she lives in Jeffersonville and is a part of the Weather Project with the NACL Theater and is also involved in the Liberty Free Theater, founded by her former professor, Paul Austin.

When Barkl began her job at SUNY Sullivan, she was tasked with creating a theater program from the ground up. "It was exciting and scary at the same time," she admits. From figuring out which classes could be offered that would transfer within the SUNY system, to researching and learning about the resources available to her in the local theater community, to planning classes and creating the syllabus, Barkl embarked on a mission and hasn't looked back. That was a mere seven months ago.

When creating the performing arts program, Barkl says she followed the basic tenants of the SUNY Sullivan mission of cultivating a multicultural, sustainable learning environment.

"I think in our first year we've definitely lived up to the mission through the plays the kids chose to perform, which represents a cross-section of culture through theater. We have borrowed sets and props – sharing and reusing resources to promote



Assistant Professor of Theater and Speech Jessica Barkl has breathed new life into the SUNY Sullivan Seelig Theater with a full slate of theater classes this year.

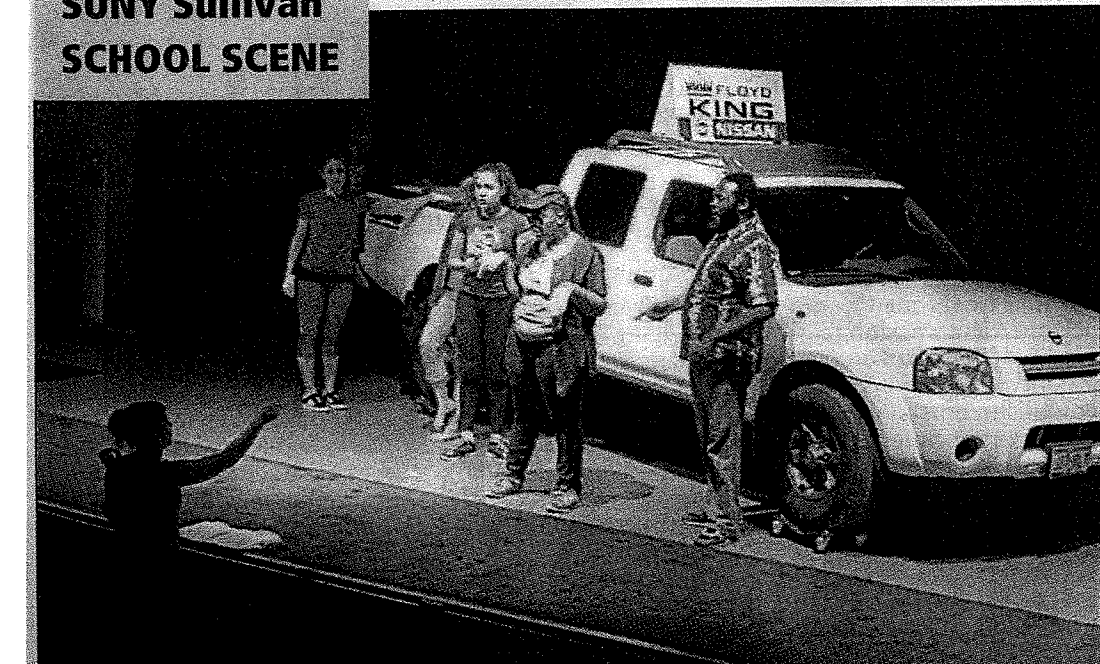
sionate about their work and committed to the mission."

"Providing students with choices and opportunities for new, creative programs contributes to making SUNY Sullivan dynamic and attractive," says President Dr. Karin Hilgersom. "The students adore Jessica – she gives them a wonderful opportunity to learn and grow in an environment that, by its very nature, encourages teamwork, collaboration and communication. While it's not a degree program, at least for now, it certainly helps students succeed in all other areas be-

valuable because it opens the door for wider discussions about issues and topics that affect students and communities. "I always say: musicals and puppets – both fool us into talking about the bigger issues and encourage us to have that human moment. It helps us to deal with the drama of life and deal with reality by suspending reality – if only for a couple of hours."

To learn more about the SUNY Sullivan Performing Arts Program, visit www.sunysullivan.edu. To learn more about Theater Professor Jennifer Barkl, visit her website at www.sunysullivan.edu/~jbarkl/theater

See more in today's SUNY Sullivan SCHOOL SCENE



Theater students rehearse "Hands on a Hardbody," one of two end-of-semester offerings by the new SUNY Sullivan Theater Department. From left to right: Beatrice Ann Amato, Alysia Watts (legs), Deanna