

UNH Tackles Climate Change, Culture Clash With Production of “Sila”

Tuesday, February 18, 2014

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"Sila," opening February 19 in the UNH Johnson Theatre, is the first winning play from the Woodward International Playwriting Competition to be produced by the UNH

Department of Theatre and Dance. Part of Cultural Stages: Woodward International Drama and Dance Initiative, the project is funded by Ellis Woodward, UNH Class of '74.

"Sila" was selected from more than 149 submissions and written by NYC based Canadian playwright, Chantal Bilodeau. The play examines the competing interests shaping the future of the Canadian Arctic and local Inuit population. Set on Baffin Island in the territory of Nunavut, it follows a climate scientist, an Inuit activist and her daughter, two Canadian Coast Guard officers, an Inuit elder and two polar bears as they see their values challenged and their lives become intricately intertwined. Equal parts Inuit myth and contemporary Arctic policy, "Sila" uses puppetry, projections, spoken word poetry and three different languages; English, French & Inuktitut.

Behind the scenes, the "Sila" production team has been at work for months. Because of the subject matter and its educational implications, Director Professor Deb Kinghorn partnered with the UNH Sustainability Institute and the Discovery Program to extend the play's reach across campus. The creative team also worked with Cambridge based professional theatre company, Underground Railway Theatre (URT), on the creation of several puppets, among them, two life-sized polar bears, which URT will use in their professional production of "Sila" following the UNH performances.

Though mounting a new and original production can be challenging, it also has its rewards. "As for my role as the director," Says Kinghorn, "I have now worked on this play for over a year and a half, and I still love it. I love what it says and how it says it. I love that the play is not just about climate change; it is about people coming together, honoring other cultures, respecting nature, and learning that no one has all the answers, which makes sharing and working together vital, if we are to progress without further damage."

In keeping with the sustainability theme, Professor Szu-Feng Chen designed and constructed a set using recycled plastic bottles. "I wanted to create a pure and clean world that represents the home of the polar bears," says Chen, "and in the meantime, keep it abstract to serve as a backdrop for the different layers of the Inuit's world. The keywords for the overall visual are "light, translucent, and layers." I decided to use recycled materials to represent the human world. It hints at the impact of the choice we (humans) make may have upon nature and ourselves."

Kinghorn reflects that working on "something like this, something that is close to your heart and in which you believe, there is always the feeling that you need to give everything extra attention, because it deserves it, and you don't want to let down the play, the playwright, and all the people who are investing their time in creating the production. As director of the play, I feel this acutely. It is more than just putting on a play; it is creating an experience, which I hope will educate on many levels, make people feel, think, and debate, and also entertain and enlighten."

The collaboration with the Sustainability Institute and the Discovery Program will provide opportunities for education and debate. There is a scheduled talk back series following every performance. The creative team has invited scientists, activists, and artists to join them on the stage on various evenings to explore the questions raised by "Sila" and to learn what we can do to create the change we wish to see in the world.

"It's what theatre does best," says Kinghorn, "and I think we are going to do it well."

The production and collaborations are made possible by Cultural Stages: The Woodward International Drama and Dance Initiative with support from the UNH Sustainability Institute. Cultural Stages is designed to promote a greater understanding of world cultures through drama and dance.

Written by Chantal Bilodeau
Directed by Professor Deb Kinghorn
Set design by Professor Szu-Feng Chen
Lighting design by Megan Reilly
Costume design by Sara Demos
Puppet design by Carol Jo Fisher and David Fichter

February 19 – 22, at 7:00 pm, and February 23, at 2:00 pm in the UNH Johnson Theatre. Tickets are \$8 for youth aged 17 and under, \$14 for UNH students, ID holders and seniors and groups of 15 or more, and \$16 for the general public. Tickets can be purchased through the PCAC Ticket Office located in the Johnson Theatre lobby of the Paul Creative Arts Center. This full-service ticket office is open Monday through Friday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and one hour before curtain. Tickets purchased online will incur NO ADDITIONAL FEES. Call 603-862-7222 or visit <http://unharts.com>.

For more information about our season, our programs or to book a tour, visit <http://www.unh.edu/theatre-dance> or call 603.862.2150.

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