


Antigone (1952)



ST. OLAF THEATRE MAJORS
CARRY THE COLLEGE'S MESSAGE
OF CREATIVE EXCELLENCE
AROUND THE NATION THROUGH
PERFORMANCE AND
ARTISTIC EXPRESSION.

A DRAMATIC ART

BY SUZY FRISCH

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KAREN PETERSON WILSON '77, BRIAN BJORKLUND, AND THE SHAW-OLSON CENTER FOR COLLEGE HISTORY



Long Day's Journey Into Night (1974)



Medea (1977)



Perpetua (2004)



Eurydice (2009)



Brother Wolf (2010)

It took more than a little moxie for two fresh-out-of-college theatre enthusiasts to pull off a production of *Don't Dress for Dinner* in the theater-rich Twin Cities. But Peter Christian Hansen '97 and Carl Schoenborn '97 were up to the challenges of lining up space for the production, building sets, rehearsing their cast, and attracting an audience to the basement of a suburban Greek restaurant in 1998.

The pair were old hands at stage production. Years of immersing themselves in St. Olaf College's theatre world — on stage, in classes, and behind the scenes — provided Schoenborn and Hansen with the knowledge and experience they needed to stage a student-run show of *Little Shop of Horrors* during their senior year at St. Olaf. It gave them the confidence to pour their proceeds from *Don't Dress for Dinner* into their own start-up company, the Gremlin Theatre in St. Paul.

Hannah Sorenson '10, another Ole active in theatre, is taking her degree on the road to Yale University, where she will pursue a master of fine arts from its prestigious School of Drama. She had the agonizing decision of choosing between the country's top programs at Yale, Harvard's American Repertory Theater, and New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Sorenson finds herself equipped to take on the best in theatre thanks to her St. Olaf education. "The training we get from professors is such a great blend between the intellectual and the artistic, the scholarly approach and the practical," she notes. "So I was well prepared with all the tools I needed for the audition and for the experience at Yale."

Hansen, Schoenborn, and Sorenson represent the full spectrum of what St. Olaf offers students who are interested in theatre: a liberal arts education paired with hands-on theatre experience. Hansen pursued his passion for history and Latin while Schoenborn studied speech, theatre, and fine arts; both immersed themselves in acting and stage production, dually preparing themselves for lasting careers in the arts. Today, Hansen serves as the artistic director of the Gremlin Theatre while also appearing frequently on Twin Cities stages; Schoenborn is the Gremlin's technical director as well as a working actor. Sorenson started off as a pre-med student before switching to theatre. She played the title role in *Eurydice* and acted in other productions while studying a wide range of subjects — from biology and mathematics to philosophy and Norwegian.

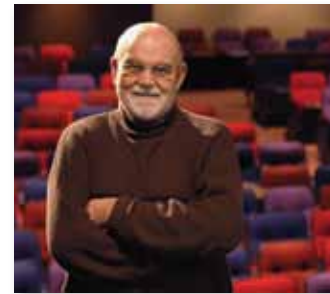
For nearly ninety years St. Olaf has enabled students to develop their craft on stage and behind the scenes. Simultaneously, students earn a solid

liberal arts education that makes them excellent communicators in fields from the ministry to law, and avid patrons of the arts.

This two-pronged approach helps the college develop smart people, not just smart actors. Gary Gisselman thinks there is a world of difference between the two, and he should know. St. Olaf Theatre's artist-in-residence and a longtime director at the Guthrie Theater, Gisselman has directed more than 200 plays during his career while serving as founding artistic director of the Chanhassen Dinner Theatres and artistic director at the Arizona Theatre Company and the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis.

"Theatre is not about theatre — it's about everything else. And the 'everything else' is what students learn at St. Olaf," says Gisselman.

"The more you know about life, the more you know about how to represent it. And to live up to our motto at St. Olaf, we prepare students not just for careers as artists but for lives as artists."



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Though St. Olaf has a fruitful history of matriculating well-educated, talented students who work across the country in all aspects of the performing arts, it wasn't always the case. The dramatic arts actually took a while to succeed in any serious fashion on the Hill — nearly fifty years to be precise.

From its earliest days, St. Olaf shone most of its fine arts limelight on music. There was a brief window from 1889 to 1899 when student groups staged a handful of plays, including the farce *The Mouse-Trap* by W. D. Howells and *Rip Van Winkle*. Students also performed an occasional pageant or dramatic reading in the early 20th century, while Norwegian students stuck to their native language when performing.

According to a historical account written by 1912 alumna and St. Olaf Dean of Women Gertrude Hilleboe, two factors worked against those whose passion was theatre: the college didn't have a facility fit for staging plays, and students battled an attitude that theatre was not appropriate at a college of the church.

That didn't stop a one-woman show named Elizabeth Walsingham Kelsey, who studied dramatic arts at Northwestern University and taught at the Minneapolis School of Oratory and Dramatic Art before joining the St. Olaf English faculty in 1920.

"St. Olaf Theatre really was developed by Elizabeth Walsingham Kelsey," says St. Olaf Professor Emeritus of Theatre Patrick Quade '65, former chair of the Speech-Theatre Department and director of International and Off-Campus Studies. "She taught in the English Department, and she was adamant that theatre needed to be part of the St. Olaf experience. She single-handedly built the program of theatre productions each year starting in the 1920s."

From 1889 to 1899 student groups performed a handful of plays outdoors, in Norway Valley. The first major play staged at St. Olaf was Kelsey's *The Merchant of Venice* (1921), beginning a long-standing tradition of staging Shakespeare productions. Before St. Olaf renovated the old gymnasium, plays were held in the basement of the old Ytterboe Hall, known as the Cellar Stage.



A Midsummer Night's Dream (1924)

Attitudes toward the dramatic arts also began changing with the hiring of several new St. Olaf professors from the East Coast, including Ivy Leaguer George Weida Spohn, who became chair of the English Department. Kelsey happened to live next door to Spohn, who shared her belief that theatre was a worthy pursuit. Eventually Spohn convinced college administrators that theatre was an important part of a St. Olaf education.

After St. Olaf built its gymnasium in 1920, students finally had a place large enough for theatrical productions. Kelsey directed the first major



Fashion (1976)



The Merchant of Venice (1921)



English professor George Weida Spohn believed theatre was an important part of a liberal arts education.



The most critical ingredient for getting St. Olaf Theatre off the ground was a one-woman show named Elizabeth Walsingham Kelsey.



Ralph Haugen joined the St. Olaf faculty in 1949 as the first professor dedicated solely to theatre.



In addition to staging dozens of productions, theatre professor Patrick Quade '65 launched the St. Olaf Children's Theatre Institute and an annual one act play festival.

play at St. Olaf — *The Merchant of Venice* — in 1921, establishing not only an early tradition of offering annual Shakespeare productions, but also opening participation in productions to the entire student body.

St. Olaf was typical of colleges and universities in Minnesota at that time, when many schools first introduced theatre through productions, adding courses when the art form became recognized as an integral part of a liberal arts education.

During the theatre program's earliest years, Kelsey taught courses in theatre history, dramatic expression, and production. The classes, geared toward future high school drama teachers, covered the fundamentals of acting, sets, lighting, makeup, and the staging of one-act plays. It wasn't until Ralph Haugen joined the St. Olaf faculty in 1949 — becoming the first professor dedicated solely to theatre — that the department began to take shape.

Charged with taking the college's theatre productions to another level, Haugen exceeded expectations. Throughout his 41-year tenure as a teacher and master director, Haugen championed work by new playwrights, brought fresh insight and analysis into classic productions, and worked tirelessly to advance the theatre curriculum. He was also determined to get theatrical productions and classes into a more suitable building. For years students had been lobbying for a theatre, even launching a petition drive in 1948 to "fulfill a long-felt void in the educational background of the speech major or minor who has previously been at

a disadvantage due to the lack of experience."

Despite inadequate performance space, theatre students at St. Olaf still managed to do great things with their productions under Haugen's leadership. In addition to staging productions in the old gym, students also performed in the basement of the old Ytterboe Hall, known as the Cellar Stage. It wasn't an ideal spot for plays, recalls Quade. "We had all the students living upstairs, and if they decided to have a party on the night of a performance, there would be all sorts of noise coming from up there."

It wasn't until 1968 that St. Olaf, reflecting a growing student interest in the performing arts, evolved the Department of Speech into the Department of Speech, Communication, and Theatre Arts. Haugen also got some much-needed help in 1968 when alumnus Quade joined the theatre faculty. A speech and history education graduate who was active in theatre, Quade played a critical role in the development of theatre at St. Olaf.

"From the beginning, we felt that theatre arts — both in terms of an academic major and as a performance opportunity for the campus community — was a significant contribution to the liberal arts," says Quade. "It uses critical thinking in approaching texts, equips students to enhance their communication skills, reveals values and truths in ways that often are more effective than 'textbook' study, and provides an experiential opportunity to engage in aesthetics."

The 1970s were arguably the most formative



Godspell (1974)





The Taming of the Shrew (2007)

years in the development of theatre at St. Olaf. Theatre was added as a major in 1973 and there were more co-productions with the Music Department. It was a natural pairing of two strong disciplines, with the first collaboration being the opera *Pirates of Penzance*, followed by *Godspell*, which was named by the Kennedy Center's American College Theater Festival as one of that year's Top 10 college productions in the country in 1974.

"It was a really exciting period of time for us — we had a great cast, and it was a wonderful production," says Quade, who directed the musical. "It established St. Olaf in the 1970s as a college that was doing theatre work that was judged to be at a very high level. And we were still in the basement of Ytterboe at the time."

Godspell's ensemble cast featured Gary Briggles '75, who went on to a stellar career in opera, television, and theater; Nancy Ringham '77, who has made a name for herself on Broadway; Karen Peterson Wilson '77, a veteran St. Olaf theatre professor; and David Ellertson '75, currently the resident assistant scenic designer for the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. The college's small theatre staff and a cadre of very involved students served two purposes, Ellertson believes. Without a professional technical director, costume designer, or scenic director, students took on many of those roles and learned all aspects of play production. Ringham, a flutist who happened to try out for *Godspell* just to keep a friend company, earned a role in the production singing *Bless the Lord*. Ultimately she turned her first musical theatre experience at St. Olaf into a major career on Broadway in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ringham credits St. Olaf's supportive environment, strong work ethic, and high standards for preparing her for the rigors of Broadway. "There's a level of excellence there and people were so sup-

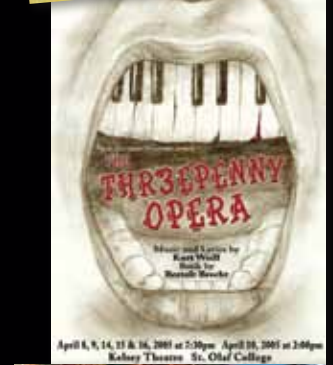
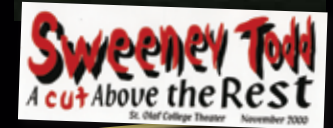
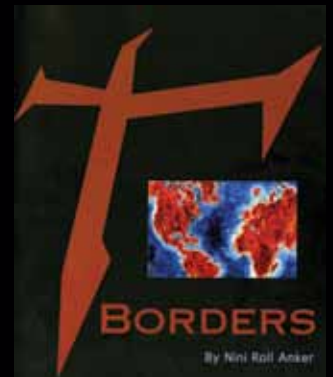
portive," she says. "I had an incredible education and a lot of opportunities. I learned that your life experience and education are the most important parts of what you bring onto the stage."

Haugen and Quade achieved the impossible dream when, in 1977, St. Olaf renovated the old women's gymnasium into the Speech-Theater Building, allowing the department to stage many more productions and better quality shows. It also became an impetus to hire more theatre faculty and staff. In honor of Elizabeth Kelsey, the new proscenium performance space was named Kelsey Theater; in 1990, the flexible-space studio theater was renamed the Haugen Theater.

More recently, St. Olaf's nationally accredited theatre studies program has proven time and again that its approach to the dramatic arts works wonders for alumni. Graduates succeed in all aspects of the performing arts after building a strong foundation in understanding the historical and social context of plays and mastering the art of bringing theatre to life.

"Our goal at St. Olaf was not to train professionals in theatre — although that certainly did occur — but to use theatre to further the aims and mission of the institution in unique ways," says Quade. "We always believed that theatre study needed to be infused with a deep understanding of the collective nature of the art endeavor coupled with a desire for all majors to experience all aspects of the art; in short, to provide a comprehensive and holistic view of theatre as performance."

Put into practice, this well-rounded approach to theatre means that majors take classes in all the disciplines, from acting and directing to scenic design, lighting, and costuming. They also study theatre history and the cultural context ► PAGE 41



St. Olaf Theatre programs, 1999–2005



Theater in London Interim students with Dame Judi Dench (2007)



Playwright Deborah Stein works with students involved in her new play, *The Aerodynamics of Accident* (2007).