

Tuesday, Jan 02, 2018

OU's 'Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet' invited to perform at prestigious theatre festival

Send-off performance scheduled for 8 p.m. Jan. 6 in Varner Studio Theatre

The Oakland University [Department of Theatre's](#) production of *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* has been invited to perform at the Region III Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, which takes place January 9-14 in Indianapolis.

"Being invited to perform at KCACTF is a testament to the believability of our actors, and to the hard work of everyone involved in the production," said director [Karen Sheridan](#), professor of theatre at OU.

Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet is the provocative, poignant and sometimes humorous story of 16-year old Marcus Eshu confronting his sexual curiosity and a dream that haunts him. The play brings us to just days before hurricane Katrina and follows Marcus on a journey of self-discovery after the funeral of his best friend's father triggers a need to know more about his own. Those who knew his father only toss Marcus crumbs of information. He feels there is a secret — he wants to unravel the secret of sweet.

"It's a story that's important to tell right now," said Jordan Taylor, a junior at Oakland University who plays Shaunta Iyun in the production. "I think everyone who sees it will be able to take something away from this performance, and that's really important to me. We're storytellers on stage, and being able to perform at KCACTF gives us a unique opportunity to finish telling Marcus's story."

Now in its 50th year, the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival is a nationwide theatre program involving 180,000 college and university students from eight geographic regions in the United States. Region III includes Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin.

"The goal of the festival is to encourage, recognize and celebrate the finest and most diverse work produced in university and college theatre programs around the country," Sheridan said. "It provides opportunities for participants to develop their skills and insights through workshops, scholarship opportunities, feedback sessions and productions."

All five of Oakland's mainstage Department of Theatre offerings are KCACTF associate productions and have a response session with an outside adjudicator. OU's theatre faculty also serve as adjudicators and regularly respond to productions at other Michigan universities.

Once every two years the department selects one production to be considered for participation in the regional festival.

"The decision to participate is made when we select our season — about a year before production," said scenic designer Jeremy Barnett, assistant professor of theatre. "All we know the time is the title, who's directing and that the scenery must be built to come apart and tour."

Participating productions have a response session with two members of the KCACTF regional selection committee. In December, the committee meets to talk about all the production being considered and chooses seven productions to be presented at the festival. This year three productions are from Michigan, three are from Wisconsin and one is from Illinois State University.

"It's not cheap to bring everyone to the festival," Sheridan said, noting that approximately 90 students will be making the trip this year. Forty-two students are directly involved in *Marc* while the others are joining for the workshops, auditions, presentations and competitions.

To help offset the cost of the trip, the School of Music, Theatre and Dance will be hosting a special send-off performance of *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Jan



The Oakland University Department of Theatre's production of Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet has been invited to perform at the Region III Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, which takes place January 9-14 in Indianapolis. (Photo courtesy The Oakland Post)

“This will be the last chance to see *Marcus* at Oakland,” Barnett said.

Tarell Alvin McCraney, who won this year’s Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar for *Moonlight* wrote *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*. Many of the same themes are present in this New Orleans story.

“The play is very contemporary,” Sheridan said. “It’s also very topical because Marcus is a young man questioning his sexual identity.”

Because of the strong language and suggested sexual content, *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* is for 18 year olds and above.

Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet will be performed twice at the festival — at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 11 at the Marian University Theatre on Marian University’s campus in Indianapolis.

“These actors are doing incredible work, and they’re telling stories that need to be told,” Sheridan said. “And where better to tell an edgy, contemporary story like *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* than on a university campus where these types of conversations are already taking place? We’re very excited about this opportunity.”

In addition, Oakland University will have seven students competing in the Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship Competition, which awards \$500 scholarships to outstanding student performers at each regional festival. The scholarships are made possible by the generosity of the late Irene Ryan, who is best remembered for her portrayal of Granny in television’s *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

“The KCACTF Irene Ryan nominees are selected from our productions by the adjudicators,” Sheridan said. “The Ryans then select a partner.”

This year, the nominees from OU include: Lily Talevski, nominated for her work in *Rumors* (with partner William Dunn); Emily Hadick, nominated for *A Chorus Line* (with partner Andrew Barikmo); Olivia Ursu, nominated for *A Chorus Line* (with partner Doran Berger); Tony Sharpé, nominated for *Wiley and the Hairy Man* (with partner Jordan Taylor); Hannah Faith Stever nominated for *Bullets Over Broadway* (with partner Emily Grossutti); Stephanie Gettings, nominated for *Bullets Over Broadway* (with partner Paige VanSickle); and Brandon Santana, nominated for his portrayal of Marcus in *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet* (with partner Alaina Whidby).

Student designers also present their work for honors at the festival. This year, OU designers include: Shelby VanOrphem for her costumes for *Rumors*; Krystal Smoger for scenery for *Bullets Over Broadway* and costumes for *Wiley and the Hairy Man*; Emily Christenson for costumes for *Bullets Over Broadway*; Anita Holsey-Banks for lighting for *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*; Madison Walby for props and Emily Stoddard for painting, both on *Bullets Over Broadway*. Brenna Birr, Christenson and Smoger are also bringing conceptual projects.

To learn more about the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, visit www.kennedy-center.org.

For more information on Music, Theatre and Dance programs and performances, call (248) 370-2030 or visit Oakland.edu/mtd.