

TAKING CHARGE: Sage of the Stage

A chat with Robert Benedetti, Nevada Conservatory Theatre's new artistic director

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From New Mexico, with Love.

Toss in some XOXOXOs as well in a postcard to Nevada Conservatory Theatre from its new artistic director, who often is artistically directing from 500 miles away.

After helming several Nevada Conservatory Theatre productions in past seasons, Robert Benedetti now supplies the grand guiding vision for the theater troupe at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, a responsibility he inherited from ex-director Robert Brewer last summer. (Brewer is the theater department's graduate coordinator.)

Qualified? The man's resume has run out of room: Emmy- and Peabody-winning producer, author of six books on acting and ex-head of the acting program at the Yale School of Drama are just a few entries. Expressing admiration for Brewer's leadership, he still has new ideas for the UNLV troupe.

Here, Benedetti discusses Nevada theater from his Santa Fe, N.M., home:

Question: Why did you accept this position?

Answer: Someone needed to step into the void Bob's resignation created, otherwise we would have been in bad shape. It's not that there were things wrong that needed to be fixed. What attracted me was the opportunity to be more involved. I'm interim and hoping I'll be able to see this season we're planning now through. After that I hope somebody full time will take over.

Q: How do you handle long-distance managing of Nevada Conservatory Theatre?

A: My situation with UNLV is that I'm only on campus eight weeks of the year, half a semester, usually in the spring. I felt I could make a contribution with e-mail and occasional visits to campus and have a stronger, ongoing relationship with the department. I try to see dress rehearsals of the major shows and I have all the rehearsal reports e-mailed to me. I'm as involved as I can be, being this far away. It's worked out rather well. I can direct a show (this season's finale, "A Midsummer Night's Dream") and teach a class that has a beginning, a middle and end, so it would be a body of time that would have some coherence for students.

Q: Are student actors at a disadvantage, not having constant access to you?

A: I don't think it's appropriate for the students to have a lot of access to me. We've set up a very good auditioning procedure. Once they're cast, they're under the aegis of their director. It's dangerous for artistic directors to insert themselves between directors and actors. The director is Daddy and you don't want kids playing Mommy against Daddy.

Q: Did you make any immediate changes?

A: I determined that "The Women," which had been announced for the January/February slot, was logistically impossible, with a huge cast and scenic demands. I replaced it with "All My Sons," which is a smaller cast and a single set. But I would like to see more diverse, challenging seasons both for the actors and the audience and I

thought the season needed more gravitas. Everything else was pretty light. There's nothing wrong with that, but there needed to be at least one major American classic. It's about war profiteering, which the Iraq incursion brought into sharp focus, something more immediately relevant than "The Women."

Q: Do you lean toward socially relevant plays?

A: Yes. But I recognize that our audiences have gotten used to lighter fare and I'm not going to turn everything dark, that wouldn't be fair to the students, either. We need to bring younger people into our theater, but we can't risk alienating people who have been our core for a long time.

Q: How do you walk that fine line?

A: I'm really enjoying the play selection process and there's a committee being very active to name next year's season -- but now we're even going to put out an audience poll in the "Christmas Carol" program asking the audiences to vote on the 15 plays we've narrowed down to, for what people want to see and we'll take those seriously.

Q: Do you have any longer-range goals?

A: We want to have a body of artists (Equity actors and directors) who are in residence for one semester or maybe a whole year who will play the older parts that are not appropriate for students, but who will also teach and be integral parts of the faculty, and be kind of the core of a repertory company. Our guest actors come and go show by show now. They're here for four weeks of rehearsals and then the run. They have sometimes visited classes but never been integrated into the teaching of the program. There are a lot of actors who would love that kind of arrangement but the economy is going to have to get a lot better to do it.

Q: How would you evaluate the student actors NCT is working with now?

A: I'm very satisfied. There's only two places, us and ... the University of Delaware that take a group of actors and stick with them for three solid years. We get to know them and they get to know us in a way that's more intimate. The class graduating this year is as good a group of actors as those I encountered at Yale. They've been very well-served.

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