

Faculty Focus: Jody McAuliffe



As a child, Jody McAuliffe danced professionally and was on track for a career in ballet. That is, until she got to her teens. “I discovered I had a brain in high school and realized I wanted to go to college,” she remembers. Along with her ballet, she had performed in musical comedy and went to Northwestern University determined to leave the stage behind. “But I drifted over to the theater department and ended up with a superb education.”

Today McAuliffe is Associate Professor of the Practice of Theater Studies and Slavic Languages and Literatures at Duke. Scholar, award-winning director and teacher, she joined the Duke faculty in 1988. She is the author of *David Mamet* (Scribners American Writers), *Reflections on a Director’s Process* (*The New Trial* by Peter Weiss, Duke Press), *The Imaginary Letters of Heinrich von Kleist to the Poet Holderlin* (Literary Imagination), *Plays, Movies, and Critics* (Duke Press), and *Standing on End* (Southwest Review). Currently she is at work on an adaptation of the novel *Mao II* by Don DeLillo, which will be produced by Theater Previews at Duke in April (article, page 3), and she is co-authoring a book with Frank Lentricchia, Professor of Literature and Theater Studies, titled *The Criminality of Art*, under contract with the University of Chicago Press. She and Lentricchia team teach a course with the same title. A recipient of Duke’s Trinity College Distinguished Teaching Award, she also teaches directing and the senior seminar.

As an undergraduate, she began to explore politically themed work. “I performed in a work by Austrian playwright Peter Handke and my consciousness got reshaped,” she says. “I loved his work – his play was shattering in its brilliance.” After graduating with a major in theater, she studied in Russia for six months before returning to the U.S. for graduate school at Yale, where she studied with Lee Breuer, Richard Gilman, Stanley Kauffmann, and founding director of Yale Repertory, Robert Brustein.

Awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Directing Fellowship, McAuliffe directed several productions for the Mark Taper Forum, where she found another mentor. “Gordon Davidson did plays about political and social problems, daring, issue-driven plays. Gordon with his populist approach and Bob Brustein at Yale with his metaphorical approach were great bookends for me.”

While in Los Angeles, McAuliffe was selected for the Directing Workshop for Women at the American

Film Institute to write, produce, and direct a video, *My Man Ray*, which went on to further screenings and won a Certificate of Achievement at the N.C. International Film and Video Festival. While making the video was a good experience, she has no aspirations to be a filmmaker. “To be a filmmaker, you have to be obsessed with that one thing. I like film and I like writing about film, but I’m more interested in theater,” she says.

“I tend to gravitate toward work that’s challenging and highly theatrical and not commercial in its intent,” explains McAuliffe. “Work that’s not repeating what’s already out there, work that demands a new form, work that has something to say about the world we live in.” Recent productions that she has directed include *Somewhere in the Pacific* (Manbites Dog Theater), *Mystery of Attraction* (Pacific Playwrights Festival at South Coast Repertory), *The New Trial* by Peter Weiss (English language premiere, Duke University), *Hortensia and the Museum of Dreams* (Theater Previews, Duke University), and *Orpheus Descending* (Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, Duke University).

“Helping to shape someone’s aesthetic, shaping someone’s consciousness through exposure to art is a great opportunity,” she says. “I spend a lot of time trying to teach students to read. Whether you are directing or teaching, you note what grabs you on a first reading and then you explore everything else about a piece, the culture that produced it, the historical and political context – all the things you need to know to take your audience or students deeply into the experience. That’s what makes theater perfect for interdisciplinary study.

“And there’s a reciprocal relationship,” she continues. “My students reshape me as well. They come in with their own ideas and experiences and are open to dialogue. We really listen to each other. That’s why what goes on in a classroom is as creative and inventive as what goes on in a rehearsal venue. It’s all about learning to read and think and communicate.

“University life is an opportunity for change and growth, and to be in a position to speak to a generation in transition is a great privilege for me,” she concludes.

-Miriam Sauls