

## **Meet the Prof: Merlaine Angwall**

**by Faculty Advocacy Committee - Wednesday, June 17, 2009**

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*The following faculty Q&A was submitted by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Advocacy Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate. Richard Kalinoski, associate theatre professor and resident playwright, wrote the introduction.*

It is my distinct pleasure to introduce my convivial colleague, Merlaine Angwall. She and I joined the UW Oshkosh Department of Theatre faculty in the same year, 1998. Merlaine, a native of Wisconsin, is a gregarious and charming woman, always available to her students and forever bantering with them.

She brings to her work as a director an unusual comic vitality, and she finds moments of humor and glee in even the most moribund of plays. UW Oshkosh is fortunate indeed to have a person of Merlaine's exceptional gifts. And her students are the glad recipients of those gifts.

### **How did you find your way to UWO?**

I was at the University of Toledo and saw the position advertised. It was appealing because UWO was looking for someone to teach acting and directing and musical theatre, which are my specialties. The theatre department at UW Oshkosh has offered me an opportunity to make use of my comic impulses as a director and apply them to both musicals and straight plays. Growing up in Wisconsin, I wanted to come back to this area because I enjoyed it, and I had family here.

### **Why did you choose to go into your field?**

I went into theatre for several reasons: I had done a few shows in high school, and as music major I accompanied some musicals in college. I found I kept going back to the theatre because it encompassed the areas of music I liked (theatre and opera), and I enjoyed the professors and the classes I took in theatre. I am particularly excited about watching young people discover and develop their talent for the theatre.

### **What is the professional accomplishment of which you are most proud?**

I am proud of the UWO students we have helped to launch professional careers. Several of our students have gone on to very competitive, reputable graduate programs and many are working professionally.

I am pleased to have contributed a chapter for a new book in Women's Studies on the theatrical portrayal of mothers. With the help of resources at UW Oshkosh, I am creating a musical inspired by a woman from American history who pioneered in the field of prison reform.

### **What leadership or service activities are you involved in?**

I was a board member for SOAR (Special Opportunities for Artists in Residence) here in Oshkosh, I am on several committees for the University, and I directed and co-wrote a script on domestic abuse for the Winnebago County Bar Association, which won awards from the state bar association and the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

**What is the most common misperception about what you do?**

Some people think theatre just happens. There is a misperception about the amount of work it takes to produce a show.

Many factors go into producing a show: research, production meetings, public relations, generally five weeks of rehearsal and teaching. Each show is different, and each show requires research.

Currently, a misperception may exist concerning the need for theatre and all of the arts. The arts reflect the human condition, past and present. They are a harbinger of the future. Theatrical literature is a reflection of society through time. Those of us in the theatre are impelled to fight a stereotype — that theatre is a sometimes charming hobby, utterly optional. To me it is vital.

**What is the most exciting project you are working on right now?**

I am currently writing a draft for a new musical. It is based on the life of Eliza Farnham, a matron at Mount Pleasant Prison in New York.

**How does what you research help you to be an effective teacher?**

Research in theatre encompasses significant eras of the human experience. Currently, I am researching what prison life was like in America in 1848. Research is specific to project, play and/or genre. Research helps us understand style, author's intent, the culture of the time and the people.

For example, through research we know that Shakespeare did not care about historical accuracy, there was no such thing as realism and a curse was very real to Elizabethan people. These facts are useful in reading and performing Shakespeare

**Describe some ways your department serves northeastern Wisconsin.**

The theatre department provides quality productions at an astoundingly low price. We are the only theatre in northeastern Wisconsin that offers a broad range of shows to the public. You can see everything from Shakespeare to musicals to new plays at the Fredric March Theatre.

We produce plays that you probably won't see at any other venue. We offer costumes, set pieces, props and help to area high schools and theatres. We have an active playwriting program, which introduces audiences to new plays by students and faculty.

**Tell us about your family.**

My husband, John Zarbano, is an attorney in Oshkosh and teaches entertainment law at UW Oshkosh and

hospitality law at Fox Valley Tech. We have two boys: Nick, who just graduated in film studies from the University of Oklahoma, and Tony, who is in his second year of medical school at Oklahoma State University. My father, who is 90, is a retired ship captain and lives in Marinette. We have an elderly dog named Duchess and an even more elderly cat named Stinky.

**What are your hobbies?**

Attempting to grow things in the yard, playing the piano and anything outside — on land or water.

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