

Theatre graduate shines spotlight on homeless

by Sheryl Hanson - Wednesday, July 23, 2008

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When Jana Hoglund '04, arrived at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., for graduate school, she noticed the poor and homeless populations living among the students, faculty and other city residents.

She also noticed how easily most people ignored them.

“I observed huge discrepancies between the predominantly white, middle- and upper-class citizens and the ever-present poor community downtown,” she said.

At first, Hoglund tried to help, offering pocket change. But with every passing day, she found it easier to walk past the poor — like nearly everyone else did.

“I quickly fell into the habit of looking straight ahead and ignoring them,” she said.

But she didn't forget them, though. In fact, she couldn't stop thinking about them.

“I started recognizing how people — including myself — ignored them, and decided that I needed to address it,” she said.

In order to bring their humanity into the spotlight, she wrote an opera about New Haven's poor.

The idea originated after Hoglund wrote a research paper for a graduate theatre history class. She compared two productions featuring the poor and homeless as a theme – John Gay's “The Beggar's Opera” (1728) and Bertolt Brecht's “Threepenny Opera” (1928).

Hoglund's production, “Sidewalk Opera,” was performed at Yale in April.

“I decided that, in order to attempt to be as effective today, I would create a production that was specific to New Haven today,” she said. “The characters were based on recognizable people around New Haven and much of the set was taken from construction sites downtown.”

Hoglund said the crew — and particularly the cast — believed in the work and wanted to be as truthful as possible with these people's stories.

“That felt amazing,” she said. “There was some fear going into performances, with such a fragile subject and with little rehearsal time, but everyone was so committed to the show, I felt confident.”

Before writing the opera, Hoglund interviewed six people living in poverty — one selling flowers on the street and five eating at a soup kitchen downtown. Two of those individuals attended the opening night of “Sidewalk Opera.”

“They had wonderful things to say about it,” she said.

The words for “Sidewalk Opera” originated from Hoglund’s verbatim transcription of the interviews.

“I transcribed everything that was said exactly the way it was said, preserving every stutter, pause, repeated word, broken sentence and grammatical error. We really believed that this was the most truthful and faithful way of telling their stories,” she said.

Finally, she composed music to accompany the stories.

“I started to become in tune with the musicality of speech,” she said. “I recognized patterns in rhythms, intervals, meter, etc., and was completely fascinated.”

The production featured audio clips of the interviews.

“We originally intended not to use recorded playback of the interviews during the performance, but this idea also changed while I was composing the piece,” Hoglund said. “It was difficult for our sound designer to clean up the recordings, but it proved to be very effective during the production.”

The audience’s response was everything Hoglund dreamed of and more.

“One individual said we were changing people and that she realized how arrogant she has been,” she said.

Most fulfilling for Hoglund was a response from David Harris, who was formerly homeless in Washington, D.C. Visiting New Haven for a panel discussion on homelessness, Harris took in “Sidewalk Opera” while in town.

“There’s a lot of pain in the lives of the homeless, and I got that through those actors — not just the words, but even their body language” he said of the play. “That’s how people I know move and talk and live. So I congratulate everybody involved in that, especially the composer. Everyone did a beautiful job.”

A 2008 graduate of the Yale School of Drama, Hoglund now lives in New York, where she is pursuing a future production of “Sidewalk Opera.” She also is the sound designer for “King is Dead,” produced by Highwire Theater and opening in August as well as for “Eurydice” at Montclair State University, opening Oct. 9.

A native of Appleton, Hoglund is the daughter of UW Oshkosh Theatre Department chair Roy Hoglund.

PHOTO CREDITS:

Paul Gelinas – Jana Hoglund at the sound board (upper left)

Erik Pearson – Sidewalk Opera photos (upper right and lower left)