



'Speech & Debate'

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by Gary Black

Theatre UAF goes on edge for today's teen

Do not let the soporific title "Speech & Debate" fool you. It's much more than you think it is.

"Speech & Debate" is the spring mainstage production being put on by Theatre UAF, opening tonight at the Lee H. Salisbury Theatre in the Fine Arts Complex. The play is a black comedic romp tackling some prevailing social issues facing today's society, a theme that's a favorite of director Carrie Baker, an associate professor of theater at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

When she saw it performed in Seattle a few years ago, she knew the play was one she wanted to bring to Fairbanks.

"What attracted it to me at first was, when I became a mom, I wanted to produce something that would mean something and help change the world," she said.

"I want my kids to live in a world where people can love whomever they want and be accepted."

"Speech & Debate," written by Stephen Karam, centers around three misfit teens — the openly gay Howie, the geeky Solomon and the wannabe chanteuse Diwata — who uncover a dark sex scandal plaguing their Salem, Ore., town. The scandal and ensuing fallout encompasses city and school officials, and brings the teens, all of whom are struggling with their own identities, to come together and learn from each other. It's comedic, fast-paced script is a mishmash of current events, some song and dance, and even some modern technology such as texting, instant messaging and online surfing used to help relay a tale of acceptance and the angst of teens coping with adult problems. It's a serious topic tackled in an in-your-face funny way.

"It's very edgy, very contemporary. It's very real world," Baker said. "Our students who are in it are excited about it because it is so real world. It's what teens are dealing with."

Nicole Cowans is the newcomer to Theatre UAF's stage who landed the role of Diwata, a high school student obsessed with musical theater but who can't get cast in any roles. Cowans graduated from Lathrop High School — where she starred in plenty of roles — and "Speech & Debate" marks her debut carrying

the lead on stage. Like her character Diwata, theater is Cowans' passion, but that's where the similarities stop. Diwata is a loner and repressed; Cowans is vivacious and outgoing. Merging the two was a task.

"I was thinking, how am I going to pull Diwata off? I'm not like that, that quiet, shy type," Cowans said. "She's an outsider, but she's very bold. She believes in herself, and for me that's something I can relate to in that as an actress I'm having to believe in myself when other people don't."

Thomas Petrie is filling the role of Howie, the out and proud teen harboring one of the play's many secrets. The role is great in that it's a different perspective for Petrie, and the play is something he's priding himself in.

"Theatre UAF isn't afraid of pushing the envelope a little bit as far as theater in this town," Petrie said. "It's a play and a musical but it's not a musical. I love the spectrum it goes. The closet case is Solomon, the gay big brother is Howie and the wannabe diva is Diwata. I get the feeling people will come see the show and say, hey, I was one of them in high school. It was a different role for me as an actor, but it's fun to throw myself out there like that."

Filling Solomon's shoes is Sambit Misra, who wasn't familiar with the play until he read the script. "And then I read it four times and fell in love with it," he said. It's written well and presented well.

It's a coming of age story with a lot of tweaks. It's probably one of the hardest plays I've worked on."

The play, with its current event-related themes, such as sex scandals, online rendezvous and sexually questioning teens coming of age, is one that will resonate with the audience, Baker said, and the topic is not one she shies away from.

"I'm really lucky with having a super supportive group of colleagues who all come on board," she said.

"What I love about the play is it has all this political stuff in it, but it's not a political play.

It taps into how kids live and how this generation lives."

CAST AND CREW
Nicole Cowans as Diwata
Sambit Misra as Solomon
Thomas Petrie as Howie
Rachel Blackwell as teacher/ reporter
Carrie Baker, director
Ariadne Wattum, costume designer
Chris John George, sound designer
Andrew Cassel, assistant director
Jaunelle Celaire, music director
Fiona Zachel, stage manager



From left, Sambit Misra, Nicole Cowans and Thomas Petrie star in Theatre UAF's production of "Speech & Debate," opening tonight in the Lee H. Salisbury Theatre on campus.

Photos by Kade Mendelowitz, Theatre UAF



IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Speech & Debate"
WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through March 30; 2 p.m. Sunday.
WHERE: Lee H. Salisbury Theatre in the Fine Arts Complex on the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus
TICKETS: \$14 for adults; \$12 for UAF faculty and staff, military and seniors; \$7 for all other students.
FYI: The play deals with some adult themes and should be considered a PG-13 rating.