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## SVU professor designs set for Smithsonian play

### *Staff Reports*

LEXINGTON — David Dwyer, an associate professor of theater at Southern Virginia University, designed and built a set for the Native Hawaiian play, “The Conversion of Ka’ahumanu” — produced by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

Dwyer first learned about the opportunity through a posting by the play’s producer and director Vincent Scott on the DC-Theatre Tech Yahoo Group. He emailed Scott a letter of interest and a copy of his resume.

Several weeks later, Scott called Dwyer expressing that out of all the applicants, he was the most qualified, although he was apprehensive because of the distance. Reassuring him that it would work out fine, Dwyer received the job, becoming the set designer for “The Conversion of Ka’ahumanu.”

“I was delighted,” Dwyer said about his new project. “Anytime you can work with an institution as reputable as the Smithsonian, on any project, you jump at the opportunity.”

Set in Hawai’i during the early 19th century shortly after the first European contact, “The Conversion of Ka’ahumanu” delves into the complex relationships between two Christian women missionaries and three aboriginal women. Over the course of the play, the women evolve as their relationships within their own culture and between cultures are affected by religion, friendships, personal trial and cultural conflict and collisions. Honolulu-based writer Victoria Kneubuhl is a recipient of the prestigious Hawai’i Award for Literature.

Though the set only took a week to construct and paint, Dwyer had been working on the project for several months.

“The biggest challenge I faced was my limited knowledge of Hawaiian history,” he said. “I spent a great deal of time gaining inspiration through researching early Christian missionaries in the Hawaiian Islands, Queen Ka’ahumanu, and 19th century western and native architecture. Overall, I think I spent about 30 to 40 hours researching.”

With help from several stagecraft students and his son Garrett, Dwyer created a set that portrays the world of 1820s Honolulu. On one side of the stage, there is a 19th century mission house. On the other side stands a traditional Hawaiian house. Outlining the stage are a bamboo fence and tropical plants. Because of the play’s religious themes, Dwyer focused on constructing the elements of the set in a way that would draw the audience’s eyes upward to the heavens and ultimately to God.

Not only does he create magnificent sets, Dwyer also creates opportunities to mentor his students by having them work alongside him.

“Working with Professor Dwyer is always a pleasure,” said Darla Boyer, one of the students who helped build the set. “He was the person who first inspired me to be a technical theater major. I think it’s great to have a professor working with different schools and institutions that help him define his amazing craft. Professor Dwyer works miracles with each set, including his Smithsonian one.”

Dwyer holds a bachelor’s degree in theatre and an oral communication certificate with distinction from Marietta College, and a master’s degree in production design from Michigan State University.

Dwyer is a professional scenic and lighting designer with more than fifty designs to his credit. His designs have been seen at the Boarshead Theatre, Theatre Winterhaven, Dance Ocala, Gemstone Productions and the Gorilla Theatre. He has served as technical director for the Showboat Becky Thatcher, Northern Michigan University and Santa Fe Community College.

He is also a member of and frequent presenter at the United States Institute for Theatre Technology. At Southern Virginia, he is the principal theater designer and technical director, a teacher for theater classes and a director of theater productions. He resides in Buena Vista with his wife and four children.

“The Conversion of Ka’ahumanu” was performed May 15 and 16 at the Rasmuson Theater in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

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