

Kennedy Theatre sets built with meaning

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Splinters, paint, fumes, dust, sore hands and weary eyes - the work of a crafter is challenging. Few people find it rewarding enough to want to make a living out of it.

Chesley Cannon understands the sacrifices made to create the sets, props and atmospheres for the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's theater program.

The program surprised Cannon, a second-year graduate student going for an MFA in theater with a focus in design.

"(It is) certainly more involved than ... what I had anticipated in terms of class work and design," said Cannon, who was born and raised on O'ahu. "You're always designing, which is great, but that means you are here. This is your home away from home. I sometimes dread this building."

Cannon's current fear is part of the emotion involved in creating Kennedy Theatre's newest attraction, "When the Cassowary Pooped!," which debuts Oct. 2. The theater Web site describes the play as a "humorous tale of how the cassowary's (a puppet bird) 'poop' helps create the New Guinea rainforest." Magical effects and puppets come together in what Cannon says is a "kid-friendly" play.

Accomplishment trumped dread, however, after Cannon helped to create the set of the upcoming play, which Cannon said has a "Papua New Guinea feel."

"What's wonderful is that, at the end of the day, you have something that shows you did something; something that was bare plywood is now beautifully colored," Cannon said. "I'm not punishing myself for nothing."

For Cannon, the bare plywood is the puppet that plays the cassowary in the show. The puppet, which has moving parts, like a tube in its neck that makes it move around and a separate set of legs that can move backward like a bird's, is fashioned so that the puppeteer can be seen in the background along with the puppet.

all in a day's work

Part of a scenic designer's job is having a constant stream of work.

"I've had to turn down design jobs that I would have really liked to do because I've had to do so much, which is really encouraging," Cannon said.

After taking a design class as an undergrad, his focus has been centered on the sets of the university's different plays.

One play Cannon worked on was "Macbeth," which required constructed lava on the set to glow.

"... We put these strip lights under the lava and plugged it in, and it worked fantastically," Cannon said.

Set design, however, has its downs.

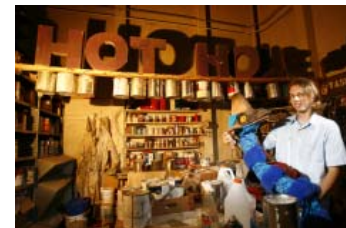
"I had someone fall off my set during a dress rehearsal," Cannon said. "It was a 9-foot tower."

The actor suffered a broken foot and some bruising.

"I built him special crutches, and he did the rest of the show in post-apocalyptic crutches," Cannon said.

At present, Cannon isn't quite sure where his future will take him.

"I would love to go back to England," Cannon said. "I stayed there for a while after I got my bachelor's ... it would be great to find a way to split my time between



Kent Nishimura

Chesley Cannon poses for a portrait backstage with a puppet he designed at Kennedy Theater on the UH Mānoa Campus on Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2009.

here and there.”

As for Hawai'i, he isn't quite sure how his old friends can stay here and work in theater with the current economy.

There's not a lot of money in theater, especially at the university level; Cannon says that "what drives the vast majority of our professors is the love of (theater)." That love resounds in his appreciation for faculty like Joseph Dodd, director of the design program, to whom Cannon attributes much of his development.

It may seem like a worrisome future, but Cannon, who is a film geek by nature, says there is plenty of work in the world of set design, ranging from jobs in Australia to Washington to northern England, places where his student-friends have gone off to work.

"It's interesting to see the way (theater) is becoming decentralized," Cannon said. "It's not too definite that you have to go to New York or LA anymore the way it used to be."

"When the Cassowary Pooped!"

Kennedy Theatre

1770 East-West Rd.

Showtimes

Oct. 2 and 3 at 7:30 p.m.

Oct. 4 at 1:30 p.m. and 4 p.m.

Ticket Prices

UH Mānoa student \$5

Seniors, military, UH


faculty/staff \$14

Children, students \$12

Regular \$15

Tickets on sale at etickethawaii.com, or call (808) 944-2697

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