

Artist-in-residence has a hand in puppetry arts course



Benedictine University senior studio art major Christina Schrott of Oswego hams it up Tuesday with hand puppets she made in an artist-in-residence puppetry course offered this semester at the Lisle university. (Handout / Benedictine University)

By **Suzanne Baker**

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Tapping the "Real Housewives of Beverly Hills" as a muse for a class assignment might seem unconventional. It's all par for the course for one student at Benedictine University.

This semester the university brought in artist-in-residence Kat Pleviak to teach a class not found at many colleges: puppetry for adults.

For the first assignment, students were tasked with developing an original performance using hand puppets they would have to sew from scratch.

"I was looking for a storyline and just happened to be watching 'Real Housewives' at the time," sophomore Stephanie Saghafi said.

Instead of people, her parody of the reality television show featured an orange-faced puppet and one all bandaged up to look like it just had plastic surgery.

A marketing and history major, Saghafi said the creativity and public speaking skills she applies to develop her imaginary world easily translate into real-world experiences.

"In marketing you really need to think outside the box. I definitely have done that," she said.

Saghafi said she wanted more of a hands-on course to fulfill her fine arts requirement and was intrigued by the puppetry offering.

"I'm the only person I know who's ever taken a puppetry class," she said. "I thought, if anything, it would be fun."

The course's instructor Pleviak, a professional puppeteer, said it was kismet that brought her to Benedictine.

As the founder and artistic director of Sea Beast Puppet Co. in Glen Ellyn, Pleviak was looking to promote upcoming puppet slam events. Because the adult-themed slams are popular with college students, Pleviak said she reached out to Benedictine only to be asked if she'd be interested in serving as an artist-in-residence.

Her semester-long class meets for three hours once a week for eight weeks, and she said students learn everything they need to know to put on their own puppet performance. That includes building puppets, writing a script and performing.

Puppetry courses on college campuses are fairly unique. The Puppeteers of America lists only about a dozen U.S. colleges and universities and artists-in-residences as offering programs that have made an impact on American puppetry.

The Benedictine puppetry for adults course focuses on three styles: hand puppets, shadow puppets and American tabletop.

While hand puppets are self-explanatory, Pleviak said shadow puppets are silhouetted figures back lit on a screen.

She said American tabletop is form people most recognize on television and is a style that draws inspiration from the Japanese art of puppetry known as bunraku. Puppeteers dress in black to mask their presence on stage, or in green while performing against a green screen for television or movies.

"So far I think we're all having fun," Pleviak said of students, who have their first two performance

pieces under their belts.

Her 16 students will perform a piece they made for class at a free show at 7 p.m. Thursday, May 5, in the Goodwin Hall Auditorium of the university. The show is recommended for grown-ups.

With the popularity of Broadway musicals like "The Lion King" and "Avenue Q," Pleviak said the demand for skilled puppeteers is high.

Most colleges offer puppetry through a theater arts program, but Benedictine's artist-in-residence is unique because the school doesn't have a theater major, she said.

Her students, she added, are mostly marketing or graphic design majors.

Brenda Valente is one of those pursuing graphic design.

The senior, who will graduate next semester, said the 3-D design course she wanted to take was not offered this spring so she opted for the puppetry class to fulfill those 3-D credits.

"Being super creative is important. As in graphic design, you have to sketch out ideas and think outside the box," Valente said.

Like Valente, Pleviak's foray into puppetry came under similar circumstances.

An undergraduate finishing up her last semester at the University of Illinois, Pleviak signed up for a course on puppetry because a class she was supposed to take was canceled.

That sparked a passion for puppetry that led her to the Renaissance Artist Puppet Co. and the Puppeteers of America and her earning a master's degree in youth theater and puppetry from the University of Hawaii in Manoa.

In 2009, she founded the Sea Beast Puppet Co., which creates touring productions and offers workshops for students of all ages.

"An important part of the mission of Sea Beast Puppet Co. is to provide opportunities for audiences of all ages to see puppetry," she said.

"I can think of no better way to serve this mission than to share the form with new artists who can help spread my craft. The Artist-in-Residence program is a great chance to do this and I am truly excited to be a part of it."

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