



A view of the Irish coastline taken in Glencree. Above, drama students touring Dublin pose in front of Trinity College.

# DRAMATIC DIFFERENCE

Students changing the world one play at a time

BY MICHAEL PATRICK • PHOTOGRAPHY BY REBECCA ABBOTT

**T**his isn't your everyday student theater troupe. No one belts out "Oklahoma!" No one screams "Stella!"

The students who regularly perform in Quinnipiac stage productions are after a different theatrical experience. A group of those students spent spring break in Ireland doing research for their May production. While reflecting upon their experiences there, a number of them burst into tears.

This didn't surprise their professor at all. In fact, Crystal Brian cried along with them. Her students had learned. They didn't just gain the kind of knowledge that comes from books and lectures. They had grown and become deeper, more understanding people as a result.

That, Brian said, is what theater for social change is all about.



Students and their tour guide on a hillside in Derry/Londonderry.

Since she joined Quinnipiac in 2000, Brian has grown the theater studies program from humble beginnings into a thriving drama minor. Students learn that drama can be used to enrich their lives and improve the world in which they live.

Many universities graduate theater students who expect their diplomas to be tickets to stardom, only to find an unforgiving industry with most of its stage doors closed. Brian's philosophy is not to turn out Broadway wannabes, but well-rounded professionals who see theater as a way to educate, to heal, to change.

A student trained in traditional theater arts, she said, is often limited in the number of ways those skills can be applied. An actor can act, a singer can sing, but students who approach theater as a tool to achieve a greater good can open far more doors. They can go into counseling, pursue psychology or medical training, become educators or social services workers and still be able to apply their drama training.

"Teaching theater in order to use it for something, I think that's the way things are going," Brian said. "That's the future of academic theater—drama therapy."

## Brian strives not to turn out Broadway wannabees, but well-rounded professionals who see theater as a way to educate, heal and change.

Quinnipiac drama students, unlike those at many other universities, immerse themselves in all aspects of theater. This, Brian said, improves their awareness and increases their employment marketability once they graduate.

"A lot of students come here having done high school theater," Brian said. "I don't think a lot of them have an awareness that theater is a powerful tool for articulating the concerns of a community and asking questions that need to be asked."

But a few of them did ask, and that's how the minor program found its focus. A few years ago, Brian said, some civic-minded students who had been involved in one of her productions attended a lecture on campus by actress Anna Devere Smith, who urged them to use their stage talents to make a social statement.

"They said, 'We want to do the kind of theater she's talking about; to make people want to make things better,'" Brian said. "I decided that would be the thrust."

What Brian has accomplished with the program since adopting this focus has been, well, dramatic. In adapting the play *The Antigone Project* in June 2003 to make a statement about war, the students interviewed local veterans, then invited them to view the result. Some of them were angered; others wept; a few shut their eyes against the horrors they were witnessing.

In March 2004, Brian and her students re-wrote Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to take place during Ireland's violent fight for independence. *The Troubles of Romeo and Juliet* used the violence and struggle for peace in Ireland to explore issues of civil conflict around the globe.

That was the first Quinnipiac production ever to open in a professional venue—New Haven's famed Long Wharf Theatre. That's not only testament to the quality of the university's productions, Brian said, but it allowed students to experience a professional theater setting.

*The Troubles* was a team effort. Brian wrote it with several students who since have graduated.

Brian led the group to Ireland to research another show the students were creating, an adaptation of the Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, which they later titled *The Walls*. At one stop on the trip, a little storefront peace mission called The Junction, the students had a chance to perform a sit-down reading of *The Troubles*.

The Junction didn't appear at all threatening, nestled between tourist shops in the quaint shopping district of the Northern Ireland town of Derry, but this may have been the portion of the trip that intimidated Brian's students the most. The reading was before an audience that included people who had lived through some of Ireland's most violent history. Not only were the students nervous about performing in rehearsed Irish accents, but they worried the content of the show might offend in other ways.

"During the reading, knowing they were there and went through this, I felt reluctant, but the way the play was written, it did show both sides," said senior Allison Clark of East Setauket, N.Y., who played Juliet. "It was intriguing that while I was reading the monologues, the subtext changed because I knew these people were in the room."

Their Irish audience seemed indifferent at first. Most didn't seem to grasp the blending of the play with Irish issues, and a few wondered aloud why the playwrights decided to keep the Shakespearean names instead of adopting Irish ones.

Then, one man admitted he indeed was offended by portions of the show, especially one that labeled a character unwilling to take part in the Irish resistance a coward.

"I'm feeling very tense about this. I don't usually get involved with this stuff, but the story brought it all together for me," said Terry Doherty, a Junction trustee, adding he considered joining the IRA, but didn't. "The reason I didn't was I couldn't kill anybody."

That interaction sparked a dialogue between the Irish people and the students about the nature of war, conflict and forgiveness. Brian's "theater for social change" concept was working.

"That's what it's about. That's why we went, why we did the reading—to make students aware of how complicated the world really is," Brian said.

**T**he students got the message. "What we're trying to do is to find out why. You can't really find an answer to why without talking to people," said senior Shawn Grindle, who read the role of Romeo. "It's good to hear what they think about it. You don't want to be untruthful about anything, because that defeats the purpose."

Seeking the truth about civil conflict was the main focus of this trip. Brian felt the dozen or so students working on *The Walls* needed firsthand knowledge of civil war. They toured Belfast, Northern Ireland, with a former member of the Irish Republican Army. They spoke to a man stricken blind by a policeman's rubber bullets, and to a woman who dove for cover when the bombs burst on "Bloody Sunday," the day in 1972 that British troops fired on civilian demonstrators in Derry, killing more than a dozen.

They learned how each of these people has found some level of forgiveness in their hearts, and how some are still working toward that goal.

This idea of working to repair the bad feelings stemming from con-

flict is what was missing from both *The Troubles* and *The Walls* scripts, because that's what was missing from the students' experience—until this visit abroad.

"I was expecting a lot more conflict than there was," said Katie Myers, a freshman English major from Stratham, N.H. "It's a lot more understated. It's deeper feelings. People talk about their feelings just like we talk about Iraq. It's more emotional than I thought it would be."

"It's one thing to watch CNN and pretend you know everything about everything," said Mark Medaglia, a freshman communications major from Groveland, Mass., "but it's another to go and talk to the people."

They didn't just speak with them, they lived with them. The troupe stayed in both the Centre for Peace in Downings, Republic of Ireland, and at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in Glencree, County Wicklow. The mission of both centers is to explore the long process of healing that follows conflict.

## WHEREFORE ART THOU, AUDIENCE?

**K**evin Daly '04 thought working for the U.S. Marshals Service would be exciting. But, as the criminal justice major and student actor shuffled papers in a courtroom as an intern, he thought more and more about the stage and about the power it holds to create the kind of positive changes in society he thought a career in criminal justice could.

"I went into that internship saying, 'This is what I want to do, it's a window into my future.' But I found myself doing paperwork 9-to-5 and found out the other marshals do a lot of sitting in on court cases the majority of the day," he said. "While I was sitting there, I would work on my play."

Daly ended up co-writing *The Troubles of Romeo and Juliet* with Professor Crystal Brian, and played Romeo when it was staged at the Long Wharf Theatre in April 2004.

"Working on Romeo and Juliet was the biggest decision-maker for me. By the end I was adamant that it was so important that anytime you have an audience, you use it for something important," Daly said.

Theater for social change is now Daly's life path. After graduation, he applied for and received a full tuition scholarship and generous stipend from the MFA playwriting program at the University of Indiana, Bloomington.

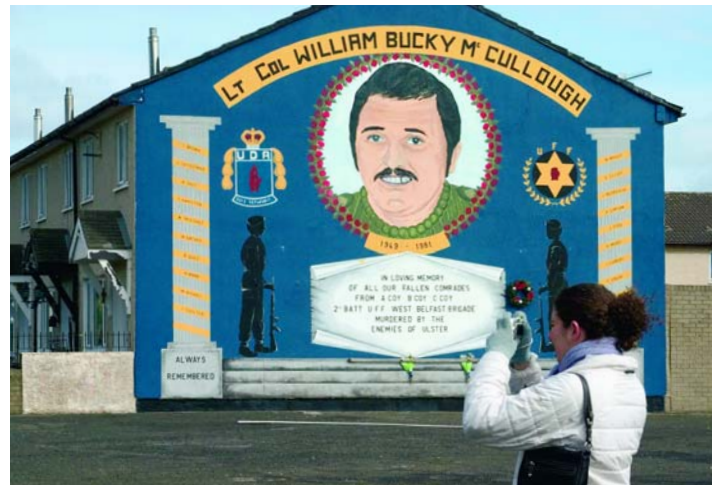
"Working with the Quinnipiac theater program helped me understand my passion is writing and my passion is the theater," Daly said. "But more important, it helped me understand there's a larger world that each individual lives within, and everything we do affects it."



Kevin Daley '04 in *The Troubles of Romeo and Juliet*.

This mural in the protestant Shankill Road area in West Belfast demonstrates one way current political struggles are portrayed in public spaces. At right, a scene from *The Walls*, with Kimberly Griffin '05, Richard Williams '07 and Emily Flinter '06. Far right, junior Kathryn Grassi snaps a Loyalist mural in Belfast.





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At both centers, students learned that Brian’s concept of theater for social change was already in practice. “Drama allows voices to be heard that wouldn’t be heard otherwise, in a safe way that is seen as acceptable. It’s a very liberating mode of working with people,” said Kate O’Dubhchair, director of the Centre for Peace in Downings. “We use it particularly with victims’ groups. We use it to break silence; that’s one of the hardest things we’re dealing with.”

**W**hen the students returned from Ireland, they worked on their adaptation of Stephen Crane’s classic novel, integrating elements of the American Civil War along with their personal experiences in Ireland, which were recorded on video by Rebecca Abbott, associate professor of communications.

“I think they came back changed. They have a new perspective of the world, which I think is an important thing we can offer our students,” said Sean Duffy, associate professor of political science and coordinator of the university’s core curriculum committee. He accompanied the students to Ireland to help them understand the politics behind the civil conflict there.

“This is new territory for me as a political scientist. My tendency is to look at structural factors and not really get involved with human beings,” Duffy said. “Since Crystal got here, she’s really been doing sociological theater. I’m fascinated at the potential.”

This fall, the theater studies program has been made part of Quinnipiac’s new Department of Visual and Performing Arts, of which Brian is chair. The department includes music, theater and art disciplines, while foreign languages have been moved to the new Department of Modern Languages.

“What strikes me as remarkable about theater at Quinnipiac is that Crystal Brian has created a theater that is a learning community. In a way that is appropriate to the ideals of Quinnipiac, and particularly to its College of Liberal Arts, the plays are productions of ideas and thinking and learning,” said Hans Bergmann, dean of the College of Liberal Arts.

“Because the drama students help research and write and rewrite the plays, the productions are then themselves occasions for thought, for rethinking, for putting new ideas into action, involving students and members of the local community in discussion and debate,” Bergmann said.

Just before the students left Ireland, bound for home where they would write and produce *The Walls*, they gathered in a room at the Glencree Centre and took part in the aforementioned tearful discussion about what they’d learned.

During this, they revealed aspects of themselves—their fears, desires, regrets and other intensely personal issues.

“Don’t you wish we could take this room home with us?” Brian asked the group.

“We do have a room like this back home,” Grindle told his classmates. “It’s called the Buckman Theater.”

With that, everybody cried and smiled at the same time.

## COMING ATTRACTION

**D**rama students will present *Dead Man Walking*, a stage adaptation of Tim Robbins’ movie, in late March in a show co-produced with the Schweitzer Institute.

Robbins and Sister Helen Prejean created the Dead Man Walking Play Foundation to spur conversations on campuses about capital punishment. The play is based on a true story of a nun who comforts a convicted killer on death row and empathizes with both the killer and his victim’s family.

The foundation asks universities who produce the play to include discussions of capital punishment in courses taught during the same semester. Director Crystal Brian is working with political science, sociology and criminal justice professors to plan a weeklong conference, to which Prejean has been invited as a speaker.

Earlier this month, drama students presented John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, a political/social satire about political corruption in 18th-century England.