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LAUNCH PAD Previews a Black Comedy About the American Dream

Immigrants in search of the American Dream find it isn't all it's cracked up to be in Yussef El Guindi's "The Talented Ones," a play currently in production by UC Santa Barbara's LAUNCH PAD.

A program of UCSB's Department of Theater and Dance, LAUNCH PAD offers professional playwrights the opportunity to fully produce a new original work with faculty members, guest artists and students eager to participate. El Guindi is in residence at UCSB, continuing to rewrite and tweak the play even as the actors are in rehearsal rapidly approaching the first public performance.

"With LAUNCH PAD, our students work with a living writer on the very first production of his or her play," said Brainin, professor and chair of the Department of Theater and Dance at UCSB and LAUNCH PAD's artistic director. She is directing what LAUNCH PAD refers to as a "Preview Production." Every performance is a preview allowing the playwright to continue working on the play while it is being played in front of an audience. "One of the unique opportunities presented by this process is that our students are actually creating the roles," Brainin continued. "The playwright often rewrites according to what he or she learns from working with the actors."

Through the process, she added, students develop important skills. "For example, they learn to be extremely flexible with text," Brainin said. "They have to be

responsive to the writer when he or she is trying out a new line or a new scene. Sometimes they have to learn a new scene on the fly – sometimes even between performances. When they graduate, it is likely that new plays will be their bread and butter. LAUNCH PAD prepares our acting students for life after school.”

“The Talented Ones” features a cast of five, all roles for young actors. “The roles are rich and difficult,” said Brainin. “The play opens with a substantial scene between Cindy and Patrick, two characters who are very attracted to each other. But Cindy is married to Omar, and Omar is Patrick’s best friend. So the complications begin immediately.

“I like that the play’s characters have very high stakes,” Brainin continued. “Every play has its own world and its own challenges. In the 10 plays we’ve worked on since LAUNCH PAD began, there have been no two alike in terms of style, content and form. I love that.

She added that “The Talented Ones” is extremely challenging to cast as the play finds the characters at different stages in their lives. That meant double casting both Cindy and Omar. “Also, the characters are immigrants, so that imposed certain parameters on the casting,” Brainin noted. Playing Cindy, younger and older, are junior Jore Aaron-Broughton and senior Emily Newsome. Junior Rigoberto Sanchez is Omar at age 22 and senior Roberto Tolentino plays the same character at 30. Patrick is played by sophomore James Reisner.

With emotion-packed scenes laced with wicked humor, the play’s tone is unique. Brainin said she finds this an exciting directorial challenge. And other interesting challenges present themselves as well. “From a director’s standpoint, there are multiple realities in the play that must be addressed and made clear to the audience: present, past and fantasy,” she said. “How we move seamlessly between them is a fun, collaborative effort. Our design team of Greg Mitchell, Ann Bruice, Michael Klaers, Randy Tico, our choreographer, Christina McCarthy, and I all work together closely to create the distinctive world of the play.”

An award-winning playwright, El Guindi is best known for his play “Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World,” which received the Steinberg/American Theater Critics Association’s 2012 New Play Award and the Seattle Times’ Footlight Award for best world premiere play. His most recent play, “Threesome,” originally produced at Portland Stage Company, is moving to Off-Broadway this spring. Other plays include

“Language Rooms,” which earned El Guindi the Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award as well as A Contemporary Theatre’s New Play Award; “The Review,” a short Internet play performed via Skype with actors in Cairo and San Francisco; “Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes”; and “Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat,” which was among six finalists for the 2009 American Theater Critics Association’s Steinberg/New Play Award.

The first preview performance of “The Talented Ones” is Thursday, May 21, at 8 p.m. in UCSB’s Hatlen Theater. Additional performances will take place at 8 p.m. on May 22, 23 and 28-30, and at 2 p.m. on May 30. Tickets are \$17 general, and \$13 for UCSB students, faculty and staff members, alumni, and seniors.

More information about the play and about LAUNCH PAD can be found at <http://www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/launchpad>.

About UC Santa Barbara

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