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An Early Curtain Call

Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig is among the most original playwrights of her generation, and a new honor will allow her to bring new works to the stage. Cowhig, a UC Santa Barbara associate professor of theater and dance and head of the playwriting concentration, has been awarded a United States Artists Fellowship. The $50,000 unrestricted award is given to the most compelling artists in the U.S.

Cowhig, whose works have been staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company and in theaters around the world, has for the past 10 years been working on a trilogy of plays set in modern China.

“They represent my attempt,” she said, “to intervene in the field of US/UK theater in two specific ways: to tell stories set in China that do not require a racial ‘other’ that the audience is supposed to follow through the world, and to provide opportunities for actors of Asian heritage to play meaty, complex roles on major stages. The award recognized this body of work, and it is very gratifying to have this work recognized.”

Irwin Appel, professor and chair of theater and dance, said the fellowship is a fitting acknowledgment of Cowhig’s talent and dedication to her art.

“Frances Cowhig is an artist with electric vision and deep imagination, and the Department of Theater and Dance is so fortunate to have her with us,” Appel said. “I had the great privilege to see the thrilling production of her play ‘Snow in Midsummer’ at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, and I

wished I could have gone back to see it night after night. Her craftsmanship and sense of theatricality were present in every moment of the play. The department is overjoyed for her to receive this grant, and we hope to celebrate her work for years to come."

Although the funding is deeply appreciated, Cowhig said the best and most meaningful part of the award was a three-day artist assembly she attended over spring break. Traveling in an Amtrak sleeper car to and from Chicago, she got to spend time with artists from all over the country who work in a range of disciplines.

"One of the highlights was a day where each artist had five minutes to share their work in any way they desired," she said. "We saw film excerpts, slide shows, dance pieces, musical performances and artist talks. It was incredibly inspiring, and the 44-hour train ride to and from the event gave me a lot of much needed reflection and writing time."

Looking ahead, Cowhig said the award will allow her to reduce her teaching load at UC Santa Barbara by one course a year for consecutive years so she can focus more attention on her creative work.

"I am also using it to support an upcoming two-quarter sabbatical next year, my first university sabbatical," she said. "I intend to spend a month of it in London working on the production of my first musical, a short piece for a children's theater there (The Unicorn Theater), and four months based in Taiwan working on my Mandarin Chinese proficiency and doing research for upcoming creative projects."

Cowhig, whose "Snow in Midsummer" was hailed as a "masterpiece" at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival last summer, is currently writing a feature film set in San Francisco in 1852 for Alan Taylor, who has directed episodes of "Game of Thrones" and "The Sopranos." It tells the story of the California Gold Rush from the perspective of two female Chinese immigrants. She is also developing a full-length musical with composer Michael Roth titled "The New Planet," which considers the downstream effects of industrial waste from the point of view of animals living in a sewer.

On campus, Cowhig said her focus for the upcoming spring quarter is on "helping a community of UCSB Theater/Dance undergraduates tell their own stories via the New Works Lab, a workshop production program in which student playwrights, directors, designers, stage managers, publicists and performers work together to

stage original plays written by UCSB students.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.