UC SANTA BARBARA

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An Ingenious Lunacy

Irwin Appel is no stranger to ambitious projects. In 2016 he adapted all eight of Shakespeare's histories into "The Death of Kings," a production of two plays that ran almost six hours. It was, he said at the time, "lunacy."

So what does it say about the professor and chair of UC Santa Barbara's Department of Theater and Dance when he decides to adapt the Bard's "Julius Caesar" and "Antony and Cleopatra" into one play performed over two nights on Zoom?

"I'm a complete lunatic!" he said. "I worked day and night on the script, and I can't believe we actually pulled it off!"

If Appel is nuts, he's made good use of his particular sort of insanity, which others would call genius. The latest result is "Immortal Longings," a Naked Shakes production that will be presented in two acts. Act I will be Friday, Oct. 9, at 7 p.m. Act II will be Saturday, Oct. 10 at 7 p.m. It will repeat with Act I Sunday, Oct. 11, at noon. Act II will be the same day at 2:30 p.m. All performances can be viewed here.

Inspired by a walk in the ruins of the Roman Forum, "Immortal Longings" percolated in Appel's imagination for almost three years before he set pen to paper. The pandemic, the election and the Black Lives Matter movement all lend the production a relevance, he said, that demanded the director, playwright and actor explore. It was not without significant difficulties.

"The biggest challenges were probably what the actors had to face with trying to create everything in their own home environments," he said, "not to mention the

intense technical challenges and stresses of everything from intermittent internet to slow computers. Plus, Zoom itself is not made for theater. It's built so that people don't talk over one another. But in theater, you want people talking over one another!"

Appel and his production crew were undeterred. The department's guiding principle this year, he said, is "Out of adversity, comes opportunity."

"I've done a lot of 'Zoom theater,' since the pandemic hit — many readings and productions, and I've learned a lot with every single one," Appel said. "With 'Immortal Longings,' it was important to have the same amount of rehearsal time as we would for a 'normal' production.

"As always with Naked Shakes, language is at the forefront," he continued. "As we worked, we found dynamic and innovative ways of staging each scene. Our wonderful professor of design, Vickie Scott, joined the production. Along with assistant director Jo Palazuelos-Krukowski and guest artist Daniel Andres Blanco, we created unique backgrounds, environments and video/audio montages."

Naked Shakes, now in its 15th year, is known for its spare staging, attention to language and ambitious casting (a woman played Hamlet two years ago). That suits Appel just fine.

"I believe in actors," he said. "Plain and simple. The job description of 'actor' is to step into the shoes of another individual. Who says they have to be the right 'type' to do that? My goal is always to stretch young actors — challenge them to go out of their comfort zone and give them the opportunity to do things they might never get a chance to do in the 'real world.' "

The cast of "Immortal Longings" features 24 faculty members, alumni guest artists and graduate and undergraduate students, whom Appel described as "dynamic, energetic, having a great sense of humor and willingness to lay it all out there." The role of Julius Caesar will be played by Jared Webb, an alumnus of Theater and Dance's bachelor of fine arts actor training program. He'll perform from Chicago.

Zoom theater can't replicate the experience of seeing a performance in person, but Appel said he expects that remote productions, while imperfect, will have a role to play for the foreseeable future.

“We know that we all long to be in person again,” he said. “But even when we are, I believe this hybrid art form of theater will be here to stay in many ways. And for me, I want everything I do to be a creative act. Plus, I also think this is a great opportunity to invite audiences from all over the world to see our productions!

“I taught Zoom classes this summer in both China and Poland, and the experience was profound,” Appel continued. “I never would have met those students in other countries without us having to be on Zoom. So, the irony is that we may have to be six feet apart, but with a touch of a button, the entire globe is closer than ever.”

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.