



‘No Exit’ provides audience with dual theater experience

By CHRISTI HANG
chang@newsminer.com

Like looking into a mirror, Theatre UAF’s production of “No Exit” will have two audiences at two shows in the same theater with the ability to see the performers and each other.

During “No Exit,” “Huis Clos,” a Butoh dance performance, will be happening.

“No Exit” takes a good look at not taking responsibility for your actions,” said director Ben Coffroth.

He also liked how “No Exit” playwright Jean-Paul Sartre liked mirrors and how they related to people’s self-images. It was the inspiration for the dual productions.

“No Exit” will be performed in Salisbury Theatre, while “Huis Clos” will be taking place in the neighboring Lab Theatre. The latter space is usually considered backstage, but for this production the barrier between the two areas will be removed, creating the mirror effect.

“No Exit” is Sartre’s existentialist masterpiece about three characters — Garcin, Inez and Estelle — who find themselves in a room that represents hell. As the play progresses, Garcin becomes attracted to Inez for her strength, Inez is attracted to Estelle because Inez feels like she can dominate her, and Estelle becomes attracted to Garcin because she needs masculine approval. Eventually the characters realize they are there to torture each other for eternity.

“The audience will leave looking at the world in a different way and taking a step back to judge themselves honestly,” Coffroth said.



On the other side is “Huis Clos,” where Butoh dancers will represent the Seven Deadly Sins. Choreographer and performer Jey Johnson said she found inspiration from medieval imagery and from the punishments doled out for the sins during the era.

“Butoh is a unique form of dance that is of philosophy and meditation that is very different from Western dance,” Coffroth said. “You try to achieve a state of ‘empty body’ where you are no longer coherent, you just move. It’s very Zen-like.”

Coffroth first became interested in the Japanese-based dance form when he was a student at Evergreen State College in Washington. For “Huis Clos,” Coffroth said the dancers will act as a Greek chorus to “No Exit” and will try to achieve the “empty body” state on stage.

“Butoh and existentialism go together well — both were responses to World War II, both take really hard looks at the world, society and the people in society,” Coffroth said.

He also said he wanted to incorporate Butoh into the production of “No Exit” because the play is dialogue-based and the dancing would add more action. “Without movement and flash, people can lose interest,” he said.

Johnson and Coffroth said the dancers have to respond to sound cues at certain points, but that they also have more freedom in this style than most because the dancer’s mental state is big factor in the performance.

The person responsible for the sound cues is Matthew Krell, the sound designer. Krell said he took recordings of sounds such as an earthquake and a train, then distorted them to give “No Exit” a unique feel.

He said the mood of the play is very cold to reinforce the feeling of isolation.

“It is very earthy and wind-heavy,” Krell said.

According to technical director and UAF theater faculty member Kade Mendelowitz, this is only the fourth mainstage production directed by a



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student and the first time that both stages have been used simultaneously for dual performances.

“He is a very creative individual who can look at the big picture,” Mendelowitz said of Coffroth.

Coffroth’s lead actors agree. “I knew Ben would do something outrageous with it and I wanted to be part of it,” said Craig Brookes, who plays Garcin.

Brookes and Coffroth said they hope the audience leaves thinking about themselves and how they judge other people.

In addition to challenging audience perceptions, the production of “No Exit” has been a big challenge for Coffroth but he doesn’t see that as a negative.

“That’s the great thing about theater,” Coffroth said. “You can accomplish something better than your previous work.”