

Bizarre old horror film serves as unique play for Theatre UAF

By Erica Goff

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A silly old horror film; “as silly as silly can be.” That’s what director and University of Alaska Fairbanks theater professor Anatoly Antohin said of the story “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” during a taped rehearsal for the show in February.

While Antohin does maintain the story, based on a 1919 silent horror film, is silly, it is obvious after speaking with him about the show he is cognizant of the many elements within his stage version that are not so silly.

“One of the things we’re asking is, ‘What is fear?’ We show the graduation of fear, from fear to panic to horror, to terror, to murder. It is what we see today,” the Russian-born director said, referencing a connection to modern day issues such as the War on Terror adhered by the Bush Administration. “How long do we keep taking our shoes off to fly and all this? It is senseless fear.”

“It is a childish idea, like being afraid of the dark. It was FDR that said, ‘We have nothing to fear but fear itself,’ and I think people forget that. They get wrapped up in this fear and talk of ‘terror.’ What terror?”

Antohin said his purpose is “not political; I’m not directly commenting on politics.” But he makes a clear connection between the analytical look his production takes on fear and the progression of fear within society. To understand the connection, some explanation of the story is necessary:

The narrator of the play, Francis, tells the story of a small German town that has suffered a plague of unexplained murders. Francis and a friend, Alan, visit a fair in town and come upon a hypnotist, Dr. Caligari, who seems to be in control of a sleepwalker, Cesare. Caligari claims Cesare can tell the future, and, despite warnings from Francis, Alan requests a foreshadowing fortune: “How long do I have to live?” Cesare replies he’ll be dead by morning.

When his friend’s fortune proves true, Francis suspects Caligari and Cesare, suspicion that proves true after Cesare kidnaps Francis’ fiancée, Jane. A mad search for the doctor and the somnambulist (sleepwalker) ensues.

The fear connection? In Antohin’s production, the townsfolk become enthralled with the chase, overcome by the fear, and set out to murder Caligari because of their “fear of the unknown,” Antohin said. The plot and action development were, he said, quite advanced for the time period in which the original movie was made.

“It is a simple story, based on that old film, one of the first full length movies, but it was also a concept movie,” Antohin said.

Prepared for the inevitable question — Why this story, originally created for film, and why now — Antohin said there are many reasons. For one thing, he said, it’s fun as well as chal-

lenging.

“I wanted to do something that was not script based. I wanted to see if I still have that director’s language,” he said, noting because the original story was silent, it is left to the director to make creative choices to fill in the silence. “It is easy to hide behind Shakespeare and such classics, but when you’re doing a silent movie show you have to see if you can do what a director is supposed to do, which is to create the characters and images on stage.”

There are practically no words in the script, so “the stress is on real acting, being creative, inventing the characters, not memorizing the lines,” Antohin said. He also was drawn to the interesting story, as well as the convenient fact it is copyright free so he can be “as creative as I want.”

Going after that special story with specific challenges was important for the long-time veteran of theater because this will be his last show at UAF. After 20 years with the university, he will retire and move to Africa, where he plans to open his own theater. It is a perfect time, he said, to examine his ability to speak that universal language of real theater.

“Theater is theater. It is a common language, and this story is representative of that concept. ‘Caligari’ is movement based, not literal language based,” he said.

His universal understanding of theater, his life’s ambition, helped the Russian-born director to adapt to his home in Alaska after years traveling around Italy. In Italy, he said, he was a foreigner, “still a Russian.” But in America, he was “an American with a Russian accent.” He found this to be especially true in Fairbanks.

“I feel like I understand things here. I understand the people I am working with, the University, the people in town,” he said. “I hope this can be true in Africa.”

For now he’s enjoying his final project at Theatre UAF. His enjoyment of adapting the story for stage is apparent when he talks of the uniqueness of it — “It is often to be adapted from stage to screen, but not often done from screen to stage,” he explained — and the various quirks of production — “We ran exactly the same length, 70 minutes, as the original film, so it was meant to be,” he said with a grin. His excitement cannot be contained when he talks about his new take on the twist ending that captured so many viewers since the film’s release 90 years ago. But, this article will not give away the surprise.

“I’m taking the twist ending to another level,” he said, promising at the end of the play the audience will “understand they all have fear inside them, as we all do.”

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(Top) Anna Gagne-Hawes and (above) Jey Johnson poses with fellow cast members of Theatre UAF’s production of “Dr. Caligari” Sunday afternoon, April 12, 2009, in the Salisbury Theatre.



All photos by John Wagner
The cast of Theatre UAF’s production of “Dr. Caligari” poses together Sunday afternoon, April 12, 2009, in the Salisbury Theatre.