

Eric: 'It's the people - that's what makes this job the best'

By David Lias

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"The best..." That's how, in the simplest of terms, Eric Hagen describes his job as professor and chair of theatre at the University of South Dakota where he coordinates the graduate (MFA) directing program and serves the department as managing producer.

This fall marked the beginning of his 25th year with the Department of Theatre.

A product of the Midwest, Eric was born in St. Paul, MN, and raised on a farm outside of Minot, ND.

"In high school, I was active in theatre even though one of my main points of focus at that time was basketball and track. While I was in college, I knew by the end of my freshman year that I wanted to major in theatre," he said. "I ended up double-majoring in theatre and English, and got a teaching certificate, and I taught high school after that."

"My mom was a teacher, and I actually had her as an English teacher one year," Eric said, "and she was one of the best teachers I had. I think that influenced me as well."

After teaching high school English and theatre in Minot for four years, Eric attended graduate school at the University of Minnesota, where he obtained his

master's and Ph.D degrees.

"I taught at a small college in South Carolina for four years, and then came up here to USD 25 years ago," he said.

When Eric arrived at the USD campus in the fall of 1987, he was hardly assured of a long career here.

"I came as a one-year replacement for Bob Twitchell. He was the choreographer/movement teacher, and the person who did the publicity and the box office," Eric said. "My wife, Priscilla, who is head of the acting program here - she actually got a job as a tenure-track faculty member, and I came on a one-year appointment."

Bob Twitchell extended his leave of absence for second year for medical reasons and then retired.

"There was a national search for the position I had at that time, and I ended up getting it," Eric said.

He is especially pleased

with some recent changes in the Department of Theatre, and the quality of its programs.

"We have professional training programs, because it's a bachelor of fine arts program, so students can take really concentrated studies in theatre. We have 78 and 88 credit hour degree programs, where a lot of majors might be 40 or 45 hours," Eric said. "Our students are able to get really in-depth training, and that's something that as a faculty we pride ourselves on, and we've really sought to continually upgrade the curriculum."

"We strive to make it as contemporary and immediate as we can for our students so that when they go out into the profession," he said, "they are getting the most recent training that they can."

"The other big thing that we did in just the last five or six years is we introduced the

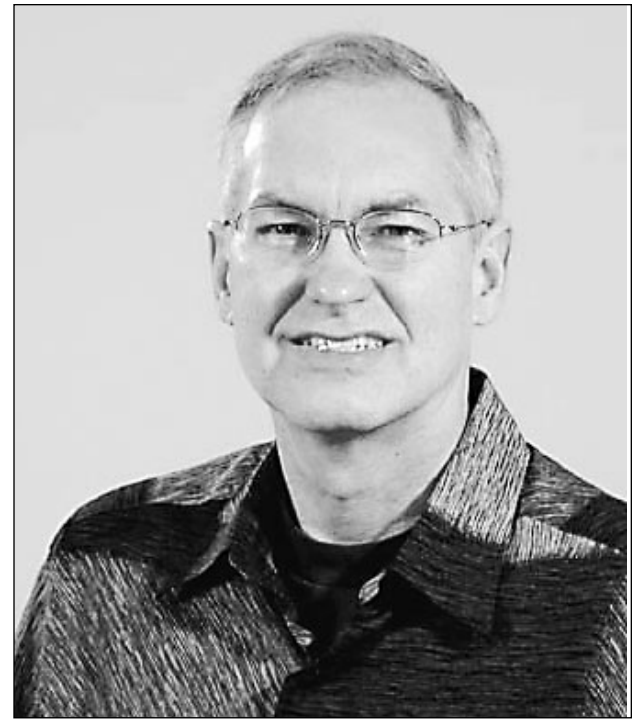
musical theatre program. That was a huge change to our culture, and who we are as a department," Eric said. "We always have prided on ourselves on doing a lot of contemporary plays and classical plays, and every other year we would do one musical. Now, we do two musicals a year."

The musical theatre program has been great for USD Department of Theatre, he said.

"There is a lot of interest and demand for musical theatre from students out in the state and around the area. Our department had an enrollment of 50 to 55 students for many, many years, and we added musical theatre and it jumped up to 80 to 85 students," Eric said. "That was a really positive influx of talent and energy into the department, so that's been really great."

The students have been putting that talent to good use. This fall, the Department of Theatre's season premiered with the staging of "God of Carnage." This last weekend, the department's students presented the Tony Award-winning comedy musical "Avenue Q."

"Play selection involves asking for ideas from all of the students in our department, and the faculty also submits ideas. The people who are tapped to direct each season - they, in particular, submit a list of



ERIC HAGEN

plays and musicals for consideration for their own directing of the projects," Eric said. "Then faculty narrows that list down to a season that has some kind of diversity in it, and an interest to different audiences."

"Avenue Q" was presented to appeal to the university student population.

"Whereas, 'God of Carnage,' our first show, had more of an adult, general community focus," he said.

"We also take into consideration the talent pool, the technical demands of the shows for costumes and scenic, and what kind of labor pool we'll need to build those costumes and scenery. We also look at what students need particular acting projects and design projects. When we select a season, there's actually an awful lot involved in it before we make that determination."

The past quarter century has been rewarding, Eric said, and he's looking forward to continuing in his present role.

"I really enjoy meeting the new students and integrating them into the department, and I'm coordinator of the graduate directing program," he said, "and I really enjoy getting to know and guiding those graduate students through their program of study and getting them out into a career in the theatre."

"We have a really great track record of getting graduate directors placed, usually in small colleges teaching. And we have a great faculty," Eric said. "I really enjoy working with everybody, so being here has been great. We have a really supportive dean in Larry Schou. It's the people - that's what makes this job the best."

FOR THE RECORD

Cases Disposed 11/18-23/2011

Allison Marie Duba, 700 E. Drake #P8, Fort Collins, Colo.; Reckless driving, recharged; Open alcoholic beverage container accessible in vehicle, recharged; Careless driving, \$54.00 plus costs

Gina Elizabeth Spanton, 520 Prentiss #6, Vermillion; Failure to stop, \$60.00 plus costs

Kenneth L. Ellison, P.O. Box 134, Gayville; County speeding, \$59.00 plus costs

Benjamin J. Cooper, 1305 Lincoln St. #102, Vermillion; Driving with suspended (not revoked) license, \$204.00 plus costs

Samuel Martin, 713 W. Chestnut, Vermillion; No drivers license, \$54.00 plus costs

Michael Andrew Walker, 1926 S. Summit Avenue, Sioux Falls; Speed on four-lane in rural areas, \$79.00 plus costs

Aaron Dale Long, 833 E. Duke St. #55, Vermillion; Disorderly conduct, \$54.00 plus costs

Blake Shewmaker, 411 Hunters Cir., Greenville, S.C.; Speed on four-lane in rural areas, \$19.00 plus costs

Michael Miles, 208 E. Elm Street, Bloomfield, Neb.; Speeding on state highway, \$150.00 plus costs

Christopher Weber, 107 Church St., Vermillion; Purchase/receive/consume/possess tobacco under 18, dismissed

Tanner Oman, 1516 Lewis St., Vermillion; Disorderly conduct, \$100.00 plus costs

Jetta Uehling, 104 Dace, Volin; Passengers between 14-18 required to wear seat belts, \$25.00

Randall Lamie, 30834 469th Ave., Burbank; Speeding other roadways, \$19.00 plus costs

Dawn Jeanette Skjonsberg, 316 Prentiss Ave., Vermillion; Renewal registration during assigned month, \$54.00 plus costs

Brian Lewis Kribell, 48097 Red Rock Dr.,

Brandon; Flashing red/yellow light, \$54.00 plus costs

Benjamin Kramer, 5912 W. 27th St., Sioux Falls; Renewal registration during assigned month, \$54.00 plus costs

Nicole A. Leuttel, 3200 Halley St. #2, Yankton; Speeding on state highway, \$39.00 plus costs

Jane Marie Grant, 712 Walnut St., Springfield; Seat belt violation, \$25.00

Dion Price, 1017 James St., Vermillion; Open container, \$57.00 plus costs

Jeannie M. Pickett, 833 E. Duke Street #38, Vermillion; No drivers license, \$54.00 plus costs

Mary S. Ulatowski, 31396 479th Ave., Akron, Iowa; Throw match or burning object from vehicle, \$54.00 plus costs

Robert Rexford Parnell, 1307 Berrys run, Marion, Iowa; Speed on four-lane in

rural areas, \$59.00 plus costs

Paul Raye Balderston, 75760 CR 5, Bird Island, Minn.; Urinating in public, \$104.00 plus costs

Harvey W. Driesen, Jr., 3220 340th St., Hull, Iowa; Violations of safety requirements, \$104.00 plus costs

Eileen Turner, 1318 Lewis St., Vermillion; Left turning vehicle failing to yield right of way, \$54.00 plus costs

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