

Regional

Lyman teaches importance of scriptwriting

There is an old saying in theater and the movie industry that “scripts are king,” meaning that if a play or film stands a chance of being successful the foundation must be a great script. But scriptwriting is a delicate and complicated craft that requires talent and study.

“I have seen too many great scripts done in a terrible fashion,” said Elizabeth Lyman, an assistant professor in the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, who added that it oftentimes is the lack of good directing that ruins the script. “Terrible movies are made out of beautiful scripts because the director was not there to make sure everything was in rhythm.”

Lyman obtained her bachelor’s degree in music from Stanford University and her master’s and doctoral degrees in English from the University of Virginia. She said that she feels that her degrees in both music and English have helped her to be a better theater professional, to have a more holistic approach.

“Theater is a fantastic interdisciplinary art,” she explained. “A number of different arts go together to make what we call theater. So when you create theater you are using many different elements. You need to understand the use of words and language, metaphor and the rhythm of a line. So literary study is very helpful for understanding the textual aspects of theater. I think an art degree would also be helpful in thinking about the visual appearance of the stage and actors.” As a person who teaches and studies scriptwriting as it has been done throughout history, Lyman has a deep understanding of the evolution of the craft. And the role of the scriptwriter, she acknowledged, has changed dramatically.

“I think the biggest change is simply who is responsible for that script and how many people end up getting credit for it,” Lyman said. “For instance, in the medieval world many hands might be in that pot, but the idea was that what they were doing was a work in which they celebrated God. In ancient Greece, they were having



Professor Elizabeth Lyman at leisure.

competitions with prizes, so that kind of changed the idea of the script’s purpose. I love the fact that themes are cyclical, because we are cyclical in our interests and our tastes.”

Today, the use of electronic media has also provided tools to directors and screenwriters to more easily manipulate scripts, making it possible to provide multiple storylines and endings.

“I think the first famous case of that

was with the movie ‘Thelma & Louise,’ Lyman said. “They were not supposed to drive off the cliff at the end of the film, but the audience didn’t like the alternative ending. They tested various versions and they liked the driving off the cliff one.” Of course, technological developments are not alone in changing the nature of scriptwriting and of the kinds of stories that are told. Some are on a much more human – and sometimes personal scale.

“I lost many friends from AIDS and in one strange circumstance I lost two directors and most cast members I’d been working with,” Lyman said. “It was a strange time in theater and people were frightened.” She compares the impact of the AIDS crisis on screenwriting with that of other societal traumas.

“The pattern with AIDS and writing follows the pattern with most trauma of all kinds, whether it is the trauma of vet-

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

erans returning from war, or after 9/11 or whatever it is,” she said. “You have some impulse to write. But the great work usually doesn’t come out until after a period of years. It seems to take time to settle before we can really reflect on it. With AIDS, the difficulty at first was that the only people writing about it were those in the community who were affected by the disease. It wasn’t until works started to use a little bit of humor that other people started to pay more attention. Is it just too hard to go to the theater and watch something that always ends badly.”

Of course reading a script and seeing it performed is not always the same experience. For Lyman, this is the reason why learning to read scripts is so important.

“I believe we all read scripts fantastically differently,” she said. “I believe that everyone should learn how to read a script. I guess that’s one of my deepest educational beliefs – to learn how to read a script with a particular active perspective and with the attention of having to do something with it.” Lyman said that one’s perception of a script is influenced by the way one reads it, which is true she said even for professionals.

“If you are thinking, ‘Oh I have to play this role,’ suddenly you think, well, would the person be pacing, hot, restless?” Lyman said. “If you are thinking, ‘I have to choreograph,’ or ‘I have to do the lighting,’ all of it changes the way that you think and it is also the case that part of that means reading like a literary reader, because it is simple to miss metaphors, to miss quite subtle patterns in words.”

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SIUE Photo by Elizabeth Lyman