

The Campanil

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Back by Popular Demand: Theater Returns to Mills

By: Amanda Polick

It's time to dust off the old props and costumes that have been hiding in the depths of Lisser Hall — theater has returned to Mills. As part of a new collaboration with the [American Conservatory Theater](#) (ACT) in San Francisco, Mills will now offer a major and a minor in Drama beginning in the fall of 2014.

For Associate Professor of Dance Sonya Delwaide, this has been the final piece in a long journey to get theater back at Mills. When Delwaide arrived at Mills in 2003, the drama department was just collapsing.

“I thought, ‘Oh, great! Just as I arrive, the theater department leaves,’” Delwaide said.

The Tony Award-winning ACT has one of the most prestigious MFA programs in the country, producing such talents as Denzel Washington, Annette Bening and Danny Glover. ACT has many programs including their Young Conservatory and Studio ACT which can be taken for college credit or even as a stepping stone to other ACT courses. However, ACT wanted to expand and reach out to undergraduate schools across the country (including Mills) and invite students to spend a semester in San Francisco. As Conservatory Director Melissa Smith explained, the San Francisco Semester would be an intense and deep exploration of the Bay Area theater community and the area as a whole.

The 17-credit San Francisco Semester would be completed in 15 weeks if students decide to do the entire course load at once. But Smith emphasized that students may take individual classes if their schedules did not allow them to take the entire semester. If students did complete the entire semester at ACT, they would have finished their Drama minor and only need six more classes at Mills to complete their Drama major.

In the past, Delwaide brought in teachers from Berkeley Repertory Theater to teach acting. Students loved it so much that they wanted to take acting classes at Berkeley Repertory. Delwaide knew that she needed to do something to bring theater back to Mills.

“I don't know what happened before with the drama department, but I'm only looking to the future,” Delwaide said. “I'm not interested in going back.”

To Delwaide, it seemed that Mills and ACT were meant to find one another — Delwaide's husband has worked at ACT on occasion and in the Bay Area theater

scene for a number of years. Part of the attraction also came from ACT's passion for advancing women in leadership positions in the world of theater.

This fall, three of the six core courses needed for the Drama major will be offered including History of Theater, Acting Fundamentals, and Embodied Movement. Delwaide hopes that even students outside of the dance and theater Department will try a class or two. Classes such as Body Movement can be beneficial in terms of learning about body language and how people interact with one another.

"It's good experience for life," Delwaide said.

Delwaide hopes that with students from other departments taking classes in the Dance and Theater Department, it will encourage more collaboration between departments. Many courses on campus already have some overlap into the world of theater, such as Shakespeare taught in the English department.

Even though Delwaide is currently on sabbatical, she and the rest of the dance and theater Department will be on hand to answer any questions or assist students with upcoming registration. Delwaide can be contacted at sdelwaid@mills.edu.