Spotlight on Stratford

When the curtain went up on this season’s Stratford Shakespeare Festival, it revealed the rarest of sights – five graduates from the same university theatre program working the festival at the same time. These aren’t graduates of the University of Toronto, UBC or McGill. No, the quintet are University of Regina alumni and whether on the stage or behind the scenes, each is delighted to be contributing to the success of one of the most popular theatre festivals in North America.

By Sue Bowness

Photos by Don Hall, University of Regina Photography Department, and courtesy of Globe Theatre and Stratford Shakespeare Festival.
A n actor’s life, it seems, is a series of ever-changing roles, moments spent stepping in and out of the spotlight. For actress Andrea Runge BFA’04, a recent career highlight was receiving the University’s Department of Theatre 2012 Distinguished Alumni Award. “I was really fortunate and I appreciate the recognition a lot,” says Runge, who was so busy in rehearsals at Stratford that she had to accept her award via Skype.

After graduating from the University in 2004, Runge did an MEA at Penn State University, graduating in 2007. She then moved to Toronto, and got her start at Stratford when she read for the part of Cecily Cardew in The Importance of Being Ernest. This year she plays Minnie Fay in Thornton Wilder’s The Matchmaker and Ursula in Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing. She’s now in her fourth season and clearly thrilled. “Stratford is a great place to work: it’s a terrific job, and you’re surrounded by great artists. I consider myself very lucky to be here,” says Runge.

Alden Adair BFA’08 is another actor to have landed at Stratford. Graduating in 2008, he and his girlfriend (now fiancée, actress and University grad Trenna Keating BFA’00) decided to move to Toronto. From there he followed the hallowed actor career path of auditioning for parts while doing other jobs (the words “call centre” were mentioned) to support himself. His favourite recent parts include Bard in The Hobbit, a role he describes as a “nerd fantasy,” Mr. Collins in a production of Pride and Prejudice (both at The Grand Theatre in London, Ont.) and Sergeant McPhee, a Canadian paratrooper in a 2010 docudrama called Storming Juno. He also played a terrorist on the hit TV series Flashpoint, along with other small roles in Canadian television.

After his agent set him up with an audition at Stratford, Adair became one of 12 actors to join the festival’s Birmingham Conservatory for Classical Theatre this past season. Intended to hone actors’ skills, the conservatory program runs from September through February and includes a contract for the season at Stratford. This summer, Adair is playing Jupiter in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, an understudy in The Matchmaker, and a role in Sophocles’ Elektra.

University of Regina grads lurk behind the scenes as well. The most seasoned is Janine Pearson BA’83, BMus’83, BAHC’87 who arrived at Stratford in 1990 and is in her 23rd season with the Festival. Starting out as assistant voice and text coach, she’s now head of voice and coaching. Over a nine-month season, she and her team facilitate approximately 3,200 individual and small-group tutorials on subjects from voice production to dialect to speech to movement.

Pearson started out at the U of R in the music program doing piano and then voice before moving into theatre. After graduating, she studied music and language at the Humboldt-Institut in Ratzenried, Germany. Returning home to Saskatchewan, Pearson taught music and acted. She was then encouraged by mentors at the music and theatre department to go to the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, England where she met and studied with Patsy Rodenburg, whom Pearson identifies as probably the most eminent voice teacher in the English-speaking world. Indeed Pearson, who has also taught at the National Theatre School and Ryerson University in Toronto, notes that it was Rodenberg’s recommendation that got her the job at Stratford.

While patterns are already emerging among the career trajectories of these interconnected U of R grads-turned-Stratford-co-workers, Heather Hill BFA’93 and Janine Pearson are probably the pair whose careers have had the most overlap and connection. For starters, Pearson taught Hill in a voice class during her stint at Regina and helped her to realize her passion for theatre. “She was inspiring. That’s when the penny dropped for me,” says Hill.

After graduating in 1993, Hill worked as an actor in Regina and then followed her same path to the Central School of Speech and Drama in 2001. “It was daunting at first to move from Regina to London, England, with two children under age five, but it was wonderful.
to study in that city in that particular program,” says Hill. After returning to Ontario, again a University of Regina connection came in handy as former Regina instructor Andy Houston enlisted Hill to give voice workshops at the University of Waterloo where she now teaches.

In the meantime, Hill had kept up with Pearson. “I’d always been in touch with Janine,” says Hill. “She’s quite a lovely person, and she’s always been generous about including me. A couple of years ago I called and asked if I could shadow Janine. She was in previews and warm-ups, so I could see how the voice person worked in a large program.” Pearson invited her to apply for the professional development program at Pearson. “I’d always been in touch with Pearson. “I’d always been in touch with Janine,” says Hill. “She’s quite a lovely person, and she’s always been generous about including me. A couple of years ago I called and asked if I could shadow Janine. She was in previews and warm-ups, so I could see how the voice person worked in a large program.” Pearson invited her to apply for the professional development program at Pearson. “I’d always been in touch

Kenilee Kehler BEd’07, BFA’09 is another U of R theatre grad behind the scenes at Stratford this summer. Originally pursuing an education degree, Kehler credits her mentor Bill Hales with inspiring her theatre trajectory. “He kept drawing me back in, and once I was finished my education degree I went back into theatre,” says Kehler. After completing her theatre degree in 2009, Kehler worked as a technical and lighting director for the New Dance Horizons dance company in Regina, a stage manager for Dancing Sky Theatre in Meacham, Sask., and at Regina’s Globe Theatre. She also taught a stage management class at the U of R for her mentor.

Kehler’s connection with Stratford came when she was hired at the Globe as an apprentice stage manager for a touring show from Stratford called Shakespeare’s Will by Vern Thiessen. After working with that team, stage manager Marylu Moyer suggested that Kehler interview for a position, and she successfully landed a spot as production assistant to the stage managers. “It’s fabulous because I get to work with six people in an office who have decades of experience – and I get to be a fly on the wall,” says Kehler. After her contract ends in early August she’s slated to return to Regina for more contracts with the Globe and Dancing Sky Theatre. She has her fingers crossed to be back at Stratford next year.

Beyond the University, these theatre professionals have learned to pursue lifelong learning as well as take on mentoring roles themselves. While Kehler soaks up knowledge informally at the production office, Adair is refining his skills through the more formal conservatory program. He laughs as he recalls the enthusiasm of the team when he revealed he was unfamiliar with scansion. “I said I didn’t know what they were talking about and people got excited because they didn’t always get to teach things like scansion.” He’s also intrigued by his first opportunity to be an understudy. “That’s a challenge, a very big new thing for me. You get one or two blocking rehearsals and a run of it, and you’re expected to be ready to go at a moment’s notice,” says Adair.

The ultimate mentor, Pearson both oversees a team of coaches and works on her own track of shows. Unlike the actors whose talents are on display every night, the work done by Pearson and Hill gives the shows their polish and refinement. This season, for instance, they are working with the actors of The Matchmaker to make the dialogue more neutral, less “Canadian” by flattening out their sound. This constant practice also helps actors to finesse their craft. “Directors come and go, but the thing that you are privileged to witness as a coach is the development of the acting company,” says Pearson.

Yet, in spite of the constant training and development, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival is no mere instructional academy but rather an internationally acclaimed festival that employs over 1,000 people with an annual budget of just under $60 million. Started in 1953, the Festival began with a mandate to produce mostly the Bard’s work but has evolved to include a range of classical and contemporary theatre. Shakespeare is still a strong focus, and today the festival features a “who’s who” of the theatre world. Stratford’s season runs from April to November, and this year’s shows include Shakespeare’s
As one of Canada’s most renowned theatre festivals, Stratford is the type of place that theatre aspirants spend their student days dreaming about. As one of Canada’s most renowned theatre festivals, Stratford is the type of place that theatre aspirants spend their student days dreaming about. And yet by all accounts the focus is more on doing than daydreaming in the U of R theatre department. Besides acting, movement and technical classes, students work on an annual program of shows, where they take on roles from acting to stage management.

Grads are pretty quick to respond when asked about their favourite shows as students. Runge remembers playing the Marquise de Merteuil in Christopher Hampton’s Dangerous Liaisons. Adair remembers his role as Algernon Moncrieff in The Importance of Being Ernest, a show that Kehler also remembers for her role as stage manager. Hill recalls playing Helena in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream. While most students recall their fourth-year show as a highlight, Pearson remembers her first: Howard Richardson and William Berney’s Dark of the Moon, directed by Gabe Prendergast. “I’ll never forget that,” says Pearson. “In that moment I realized what it was to be on stage, the potential and power to tell a story. Every actor talks about that moment, and that was the moment for me.”

The grads also remember their mentors. Kehler says she speaks with her mentor Bill Hales on a regular basis. “He was always available in his office at the end of the hall,” says Kehler. “You could go in and chat about anything. Even after when I was working with Dancing Sky Theatre, I constantly went to Bill for career advice.”

Pearson calls the department “amazing” and remembers the influence particularly of Robert Armstrong, who taught her voice and acting along with voice teacher Philip May, yet she also rhymes off the names of many other professors, including technical instructor Gabe Prendergast, theatre historians David Savran and Michael Scholar, set designer George Fathers, costume designer Denise Ketcheson, as well as Gerald Lenton-Young and Jake Roberts. Hill remembers being very fond of Gerald Lenton-Young and Kelly Handerek. Runge recalls the overall friendliness of the atmosphere. “I was pretty close with all the pros,” she says. “They always had their office door open; they had a good variety of insights for me.”

Beyond their professors, the classes and equipment also stood out to these actors. Adair remembers his favourite was a movement class with Shaun Phillips. “It was really great to do a lot of ballet and mask work,” says Adair. “I learned to use my body in a way that was demanding, and it’s always nice to get out of your head.” For Adair, who had discovered the theatre as a high-school student at the very theatre-oriented Sheldon-Williams Collegiate in Regina, the university offered an opportunity to explore both academic and practical aspects of the theatre. “It got your head working in a different way, taking classes on Shakespeare and also doing directing and writing,” says Adair. Ever the stage manager, Kehler praises the department’s technical facilities. “The theatres I got to learn in were state of the art, including a full fly house with 300 lighting dimmers,” says Kehler. “I don’t
know many theatre programs in the country as technically advanced.”

Of course, their profs also remember these students with great fondness. Professor Kelly Handerek has been at the U of R for 20 years teaching mostly acting and voice. His own voice is buoyant as he recalls the trajectories of each of the U of R alumni, starting with Adair’s and Kehler’s acting and stage managing in The Importance of Being Earnest.

“It was great to see how both of them came up to the challenge of a very dense and difficult Oscar Wilde play, and see how each of them succeeded in marvellous ways – Alden with a sense of panache in his acting that embraced Wilde’s intent for Algernon to be roguish but fun-loving. And the joy of having a stage manager as intelligent as Kenilee in the room – she loved the play with a wonderful intellectual curiosity about the work,” says Handerek.

He also recalls Hill’s role as Antigone, calling her “marvellous about being a shape-shifter.” He describes helping Runge prepare for her grad-school audition and recalls her “burning desire” to do well. “It is a joy to work with people who have a passion that is fire,” says Handerek in describing her. He says being around these students inspires him to keep trying new things in his own career – he just finished a sabbatical in England, and this summer he’ll direct his first opera.

Wes D. Pearce BA(Adv)’88, BFA’92 is another longstanding faculty member in the theatre department. He did his BFA at the University of Regina, graduating with Heather Hill. Since joining the department faculty in 1997, he’s seen many other students pass through his design classes, although less so now that he is in a more administrative role as associate dean. He recalls in particular seeing Runge at various points in her career, first as an intern at the Globe Theatre where he was doing design work, and then at Stratford where he saw her in Shakespeare’s As You Like It. “To be there on opening night when she played Rosalind, it was an amazing moment to watch her journey,” says Pearce.

Beyond their shared U of R connections, the tie to the Prairies more generally is also strong for these actors. “I still consider Saskatchewan home,” says Pearson, in spite of her many years at Stratford. “If I could do what I do at home I would do there in a minute. It’s hard to do the thing you’re supposed to be doing and not do it at home.”

Runge agrees. “It was moving away from Saskatchewan that taught me what it was to be from Saskatchewan, that old thing about having to leave home to appreciate it. The fun thing is that when you run into someone here you’re bound to figure out five mutual friends.” Pearson echoes Runge’s experience of finding a sense of community with expat prairie dwellers. “You recognize your tribe very easily,” she says.

So what’s in the future for these grads? It seems that the U of R has also taught them to embrace living in the theatrical present. “It’s hard to look too far ahead in the future, things have to come up in the present so I don’t know where I’ll be later,” says Runge. Adair echoes her attitude of waiting to see where his experiences take him. “I don’t think I’ve had a plan and that has worked for me,” says Adair. “When I say I have to accomplish A, B and C, I never get there, so I just move forward and be persistent. It’s hard to know where you are in your career – right now everything’s open, so where I go will depend on the experiences I have.” For the summer at least, it seems that all of them are happy right where they are, in a small town in rural Ontario that just happens to be host to one of the most prestigious theatre festivals in the world.

Sue Bowness is a dedicated writer and editor with over 10 years of experience. Her articles have appeared in publications such as The Globe and Mail, University Affairs, Profit, Chatelaine, Homemakers, Publisher’s Weekly, and many others.

Left: Members of the company in Kiss Me, Kate at Stratford’s Festival Theatre. (Photo: Erin Samuell, courtesy of Stratford Shakespeare Festival.)

Right: This summer, U of R alumnus Alden Adair is playing Jupiter in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, an understudy in The Matchmaker, and a role in Sophocles’ Elektra. Adair is seen here in a still from Globe Theatre’s 2009 The Alice Nocturne (Photo by Cam Koroluk, courtesy of Globe Theatre.)