

# Chicago playwright watches West students perform his play

By Sam Hickman

Tuesday, October 28, 2014 at 4:25 pm

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SHALLOTTE — Students in Jennifer Negron's Theatre II class had their hearts set on performing Bryan Renaud's "Twelfth Night of the Living Dead" as Halloween approached during the fall semester.



Staff photo by Sam Hickman

Zach Shropshire, Brooke Herring and Kristen Simmons perform a scene from "Twelfth Night of the Living Dead," a play written by Bryan Renaud and performed by West Brunswick High School's Theatre II class on Thursday, Oct. 23. Simmons, who plays a gothic character in the play, smiles as the zombie apocalypse begins.

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Some elements of the Renaud's play were altered to make the show high school appropriate and, with the playwright's help, theatre students performed the play at the Little Theatre on the school's Shallotte campus in front of family, friends and Renaud himself.

When Negron's students told her which play they were interested in performing, the teacher emailed Renaud, a Chicago resident, and asked if they could adapt the play to make it age appropriate. Not only did Renaud agree, he corresponded with Negron and the students for several months on ways they could improve the show.

Last Thursday, Renaud was able to witness the finished product as the students took the stage under the bright lights.

"Watching someone else do your work is a very evocative experience," Renaud said. "The play premiered professionally only about a year and a half ago, and I was very involved in the process. This was the first time that I kind of stepped back and saw what could become of something without me hovering over it."

Renaud said it watching the play was difficult at times.

"There were moments where I'd think, 'They're doing it wrong!' and I'd have to remind myself of the many times I've presented someone else's words in a new way," he said. There were just as many times were I thought, 'Wow. I never thought of doing it like that.' So, it's not like (the students are) doing anything right or wrong. They're just doing the play in a way that works for them. That's the beauty of interpretation."

Although junior Ashlee Downey knew Renaud would be there, seeing him in the crowd made her anxious.

"I think it went really good," she said. "I was definitely, definitely nervous. What made us feel comfortable was that we (adapted) parts of the play so we could play the parts the way we wanted to. But it was so cool meeting (Renaud). It was so cool that he actually came for the play. It was more special because he was here."

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Not only was Renaud in attendance for the play, he came to West Brunswick the Monday before the show to watch a rehearsal. Then he offered constructive feedback, junior Kaci Patterson said.

"He gave us tips on how to make it better and other feedback," she said. "He told us what we did well and what we needed to work on. It was hard to collaborate because he's in Chicago but we made it work."

Patterson said there were only a few minor hiccups, some which were unavoidable.

"We told people this would be a scary show. We told them that and they still brought their babies," she said, laughing.

During one scene, zombies enter from the Little Theatre's back door and "attack" members of the crowd. A couple of infants didn't take too kindly to that portion of the play, Negrón said.

Brynn Spencer, who played Helen in the show, said the show went well, but there were some challenges. Spencer was in a group of students who started the play outside the classroom, so they had to listen closely so they entered their scenes at the right time.

"I think it went pretty good," Spencer said.

Senior Jyquan Green didn't speak to the overall success of the play, but was certainly confident in his own abilities.

"I can't speak for everybody else. You'd have to ask them," he said. "But I know I did good. I don't get nervous. I never get nervous."

Green said it was a good experience to meet the playwright and perform the show with Renaud in the crowd.

"It's the first time performing (a play) in front of the writer," he added.

The play centered around two rival groups of students — a group of jocks and cheerleaders pitted against drama students — and the interruption of their school activities by a zombie apocalypse.

"This version is vastly different from what went up in Chicago last year. We essentially pulled elements from the original and are presenting it in a new way to fit this community," Renaud said. "The original script takes place in a professional Chicago theatre. It was always about making the audience feel like it was really happening, and they were really there. Adjusting the language and situations came naturally to the new setting, and we were able to add additional parts so more students could be involved."

Negrón actually played a role in the play — that of the drama teacher. She said she was most excited for her students and their opportunity to walk off the stage feeling proud of themselves. She also enjoyed seeing them perform the play in front of Renaud.

"Bryan was just the nicest, humblest guy," Negrón said. "He's such a sweet guy. Every time (we step on the stage) the nerves have an impact. For me, I'm nervous for the students because I want them to do well."

This was an advanced show for a Theatre II class, Negrón said. The Theatre II and IV classes collaborated with Renaud for months leading up to the show and rehearsed once on Monday with Renaud watching. The opportunity to work with Renaud presented itself and the classes ran with it.

"They stepped up and did great," Negrón said.

According to his biography, Renaud has performed with American Theater Company, Pride Films & Plays, The Music Theatre Company, Provision Theater, Greatworks Theatre Company, Prologue Theatre and Oak Park Festival Theatre.

His newest play, *The Hole*, will have its world premiere in 2015 with The Other Theatre Company. He is also working on a pseudo-sequel to *Twelfth Night of the Living Dead*, entitled *Ladies' Night of the Living Dead*.

Renaud also was pleased with the overall performance.

"As far as strengths, I think Mrs. Negrón did a great job of staging the play in a fast and furious way, making everything seem very live and organic," the playwright said. "The play flies, which is exactly right. Once you tease a zombie apocalypse, you can't take your time getting there. And this production doesn't."

"I think these students did a great job of handling a demanding and exhausting show, and I hope they are having fun with it."

Cast members included Zach Shropshire, Carly Koblitz, Angel Williams, Kacie Fisher, Sydney Stephens, Rylee Graham, Kristen Simmons, Lucas Tate, Christian Tate, Richard Adduce, Koty Wilson, Brooke Herring, Katelyn Pottenburgh, Brandon Simmons, Jade Wilson, Harley Wilson, Rhea Denton, Amy Holden, Zoe Resz, Tyler Scott and Jonathan Winston. Lights were operated by Takerá Stothart and sound was managed by Lindsay Jones.

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