

From high school to Robinson Hall

See theater professor's work Oct. 4-8

By Zacch Estrada-Petersen

It's not hard to meet someone who has never stood under the lights of New York City's Broadway in North Carolina. At UNC Charlotte, however, one professor has spent the last seven years bringing a little bit of Broadway to University City.

Yet, James Vesce wasn't always a connoisseur of the center stage. "I really got into theater by accident," he said.

Vesce, an assistant professor of theater who lives in University Heights on N.C. 49, earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Loyola University and a master's degree in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School. He began his career by teaching religion at a Catholic high school, but educating teenagers about the Bible soon turned to more creative endeavors.

Blending theater and dance

Vesce was teaching religious studies at Pope John XXIII High School in Boston when an opportunity presented itself. He was called upon when a musical director was needed for a drama production.

"The principal twisted my arm and threw me a little money," he said with a laugh. The experience was one that took his life in a new direction.

"There was a very specific moment on opening night when I realized, 'This is what I want to do,'" he said.

After the run of the musical, Vesce continued to teach religious studies at the school for a few years before enrolling at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst to earn a master's degree in Fine Arts, with a concentration in directing from.

Since then, Vesce, who was born and raised in southern California but considers Boston his home, has continued to make his mark everywhere the stage leads him. In Boston, he co-founded an inner-city performing arts company called Dimock Street Voices, and he also served as its artistic director.



James Vesce, an assistant professor in the theater department at UNC Charlotte, talks with a student. A director and playwright, Vesce took an original musical production to New York City in August.

Photo by Wade Bruton.

In Charlotte, he created Twilight Repertory Company in 2001, which, according to his Web site, was conceived as an outreach program to provide theatrical training and performance opportunities for underrepresented area youth.

Aside from being a director, musical director, composer and sound designer, Vesce on many occasions has created and developed his own original plays. One of his more recent works, "Requiem for New Orleans: A Hip-Hop Eulogy," was one he created while pioneering a hip-hop theater class that only a small handful of colleges across the country offer.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Vesce developed the play, along with choreographer and fellow faculty member, Donell Stines. The piece, which painted a portrait of New Orleans before, during and after the storm, blended theater, dance, hip-hop, video footage and spoken word.

Following the debut of "Requiem" at UNC Charlotte last December, Vesce submitted the play for entry in the 10th annual New York International Fringe Festival. He learned of their acceptance of his play in May.

After a few cast changes and modifications to the show, Vesce, Stines and the cast members traveled to New York City in August

to present the play to an even greater audience.

Bringing cutting-edge to U. City

His current project, directing the play "Stop Kiss" by Diana Son, runs Oct. 4-8 at UNC Charlotte's Robinson Hall. The work, which follows the lives of two women after a hate crime, is one that Vesce chose himself and presented to the department.

"I came across the play five or six years ago," he said. "The storytelling in the play is very innovative and interesting, and the subject matter deals with various levels of relationships. It's a relatively recent work that I think is important on a college campus."

Some of Vesce's many theatrical influences include directors Peter Brook, Julie Taymor and Andrei Serban.

"I like cutting-edge, experimental work," said Vesce. "I'm kind of interested in where theater's going, rather than where it's been." ❧

More info

For tickets to "Stop Kiss," call the Robinson Hall box office at 704-687-2599. For more information about James Vesce's work, visit www.jamesvesce.com.