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Backstage at the new Guthrie Theatre

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(September 12, 2006)—Sarah Nylander Gullickson ’98 remembers her first experience at the Guthrie Theatre—as an eight-year-old watching with wonder as A Christmas Carol came to life onstage. Several years later, as a junior at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM), another visit to Vineland Place is etched in her memory. There, after seeing A Midsummer Night’s Dream, she made connections that would eventually lead to her life’s work—associate prop manager, backstage at the shining new Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

Theatre at UMM

Gullickson didn’t come to UMM with theatre in mind. Her plan was to major in English, sociology, and pursue secondary education licensure. “During orientation, I had an epiphany,” she remembers. “People got paid to do theatre in the ‘real world!’ The day before classes started, I sat outside Professor of Theatre Tap Payne’s office with Jody Blindauer ’98, who also decided to pursue theatre, and waited to meet him. He helped me re-register, and I was on my way.” She also completed an English major.

UMM’s theatre major exposed Gullickson to every area of theatre: history, technical, directing, and acting. She remembers: “I auditioned for a couple shows and almost made call backs for one. Needless to say, I was much more comfortable backstage—and you can verify that with anyone who took an acting class with me.” She directed Many Moons, based on the children’s book by James Thurber, as her senior honors project. She credits Ray Strand, former scene shop manager and work-study supervisor, with teaching her a great deal outside of the classroom, and a teaching assistant position with Payne’s scenic design class was a good learning opportunity, too.

“My experiences at Morris have helped me greatly at the Guthrie,” shares Gullickson. “I could do just about anything I wanted at UMM—aside from acting. I learned about lighting, how to stage manage, how to use tools, how to design costumes, so even if I’m working in the prop department now, I can relate to people onstage and in the various production departments.”

UMM’s student-led theatre organization was also an important part of Gullickson’s campus experience, especially since a Meiningens’ outing “set the stage” for her future employment. She met Joe Dowling, the Guthrie’s founding director, during a discussion session following A Midsummer Night’s Dream and asked him about working at the Guthrie. She filed that information away until her senior year and then networked with Dion O’Keefe ’85, then Guthrie’s assistant technical director, to connect with Guthrie’s prop master. Her internship began the day after she left UMM in 1998.

A Guthrie internship leads to opportunities

Because Guthrie internships are unpaid, Gullickson also worked part-time in the box office. When her prop shop
internship came to an end, she continued that position, advancing to full-time assistant manager. When a position became available in the marketing department, she sought out the opportunity to learn about this facet of theatre, coordinating the season ticket telemarketing campaign. Then came the opportunity that brought her back to her favorite department—associate prop manager, first in the former Guthrie Theatre on Vineland, now in the newly opened Guthrie Theatre on Second Street.

As associate prop manager, Gullickson’s main role is to be the “conduit between the artistic staff and the prop craftspeople.” Before the season is announced to the public, she is reading and researching plays, determining a prop list and a preliminary budget. She meets with the set designer and other production staff to review models and drawings. The week before rehearsal begins, she meets with the assistant stage manager to compare prop lists. Throughout rehearsal, she stays in close contact with all of the key managers.

As an example of her work, Gullickson shares her experience preparing for The People’s Temple. “The play tells the story of People’s Temple members, Jim Jones’ ascent to power, and the Jonestown tragedy. It was written using thousands of hours of interviews from survivors, friends, and family members. It was extremely important that we have the details precisely correct. I found copies of actual fliers that Jim Jones used to attract people to his services and passport photos of People’s Temple members. They had a choir and actually recorded an album. I was able to find an unopened one on eBay that we used to make replicas for the show. There was also an article from a 1962 Esquire magazine that was referenced that I was able to find.”

While preparing for shows is more complicated now with three different stages—a proscenium, a thrust and a studio—and three different productions underway at once, when the curtain goes up, Gullickson finds herself enjoying the new facility not only as an employee, but also as an admiring patron. “The first play that I saw in our new theater was The Great Gatsby on our thrust stage. It’s a gorgeous production, but what really struck me is just how similar our new stage is to the thrust stage on Vineland Place. There are some differences, but when the house lights go down and the stage lights come up, you can’t really tell you are elsewhere.”

“Now, the opposite is true for the first plays I saw on our proscenium stage,” she continues. “The Guthrie has never had a proscenium stage of this size (seating over 700), and it’s a totally new experience to be watching a play on a proscenium stage and know that it’s ours. I’m in charge of the props for all the Guthrie produced plays on the proscenium this season, so the place is becoming much more familiar.”

From Vineland Place to Second Street

Gullickson was present at the final performance in the old theatre—Hamlet, performed exactly 43 years from the very first performance on the stage, the Guthrie’s very first performance of Hamlet. “We’d been so busy getting Hamlet open as well as planning the move, packing, cleaning, etc. that even though I knew it was the final performance, it didn’t begin to sink in until the start of the show. The curtain call was quite moving. Joe Dowling gave a brief speech and pointed out that Ralph Rapson, the architect of the Vineland building, was in the theater. He got a huge round of applause. That was a great moment to witness.”

“Though it was sad to leave the building, we’ve been so busy that I just haven’t had time to dwell on it,” she continues. “We’re still the same people working together, just in a larger building, so the adjustment hasn’t been that hard for me. Plus, I got to use my experience as an UMM Orientation Group Leader (OGL) to help make the move. I was part of a small committee called T*A*O (Training and Orientation) that helped people get ready to work at the new building. My specialty was the navigation games, and it was so much fun to get Guthrie staff running around our new huge building trying to find clues and learn their way from place to place.”

Encouraging others to visit the beautiful new Guthrie Theatre, Gullickson says: “This new building has so many more amenities for the audience with the same high quality of plays. The time of day that you’re here makes it a totally different experience. In the daytime, you get the activity of people walking on the trails by the Mississippi River and the view of the falls. At night, the building is dramatically lit. The views are lights from the neighboring building and the beautifully lit Stone Arch Bridge. Of course, to make the experience complete, you’ll need to see a show.”
She adds an aside, “Can you tell I use to work for the marketing department?”

Gullickson is currently preparing for Edgardo Mine which opens November 4, 2006.

Photo: Sarah Nylander Gullickson ’98 and “Tyrone Guthrie” outside of the new Guthrie Theatre.

For more photos, click here.

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