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Spotlight on the Guest Artist Initiative

In 2010, the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation began the Guest Artist Initiative Program, which facilitates and funds the hiring of SDC Members to direct and/or choreograph theatre productions at universities and colleges across the country. To date, funding and/or facilitation services have been granted to schools including Arizona State University (twice), Colorado State University, Eastern Mennonite University, Fordham University, Louisiana State University, Marymount Manhattan College, Michigan State University, Morehead State University, University of Evansville, and University of Nevada Las Vegas.

The experiences funded through this program have been positively received by all involved—the university community, students, audience members, and artists. Rob Roznowski, head of Acting and Directing at Michigan State, states about the Guest Artist Initiative grant: “What a great success it was having **Jen Bender** here. We were expecting her professionalism and high standards—what we did not expect was her kindness, compassion, and sincere interest in our students’ education. It was a resounding success.”

American colleges and universities may apply for matching funds for a Guest Artist fee for a director or choreographer for a specific project. Interested schools may apply by submitting a completed application form for a production to SDCF. An SDCF panel comprised of professional directors and choreographers, arts administrators, and college educators will select the productions to be awarded grants.

In the spring of 2013, **Andrea Andresakis**, a freelance director, choreographer, performer, and educator, was selected by Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, VA to direct *Arms and the Man*, by George Bernard Shaw. Below is an excerpt from her experience as a Guest Artist:

I often feel that the learning environment in a university is a great arena in which to experiment and, as a director, I think it’s healthy to try new approaches every now and then, so I decided to try a rehearsal method that Shakespeare and Co. uses, whereby instead of holding scripts, they verbally feed the actors the lines during rehearsals.

The actors loved this rehearsal method and were off book in record time, considering the difficulty of the language. One of the actors said that when he went home to work on his lines, he discovered that he knew them already. Furthermore, from day one, the actors were able to handle props and rehearsal costume pieces such as skirts and bustles, hats, and sabers that the costume designer had provided, thereby connecting their physical actions with the lines, which was very helpful for a piece with such a specific style.

While it’s always satisfying when the production as a whole is successful, for me the greatest reward comes from passing down the training which I’ve been so fortunate to have and watching the student actors blossom. One such actor was a freshman who played Catherine. She had such a tiny voice when she auditioned that we could barely hear her and she was rather uncomfortable using her body. However, she had good diction, a feel for the style, and was connected to her audition monologue, so I took a chance and cast her. With a lot of hard work, her acting soared and she ended up being the first pick for the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. It’s a great feeling when you have the opportunity to make such a positive impact on a young person.