

Graduate-level theater training arrives, in form of **SUMMER STOCK**

By **BILL BROOKS**

LOCAL THEATER-GOERS undoubtedly remember Jeff Owen from his many years performing with the American Cabaret Theatre, which operated in the Athenaeum for nearly 20 years beginning in 1990.

For most of that time, Owen crooned in many a production under the tutelage of Claude McNeal, the ACT's founder and long-time artistic director. But since 2005 they have been working together in Claude McNeal Productions, a not-for-profit which specializes in what McNeal calls "alternative theater-related educational programming for the greater Indianapolis area." Working primarily with schools, the organization serves more than 17,000 students a year.

But Owen and McNeal know that young people interested in theater need more experience than students can get in high school and even in undergraduate work.

"Indianapolis is the largest city in the nation without graduate-level theater training," said McNeal, who has long been bothered by that fact.

For Owen, the shortfall leads him to memories of his college days at Indiana State University, where he was able to work in summer-stock productions for three summers. He said he learned more those summers, working with actors



▲ Jeff Owen is directing the summer productions, with Hannah Boswell as his assistant director.

from Chicago and New York City, than he did in classes.

"I want to recreate that experience," he said.

Which is exactly what he and McNeal plan to do as they launch the Performing Arts Initiative at Herron High School - essentially a summer stock program being housed at the charter school located in Herron-Morton Place. The fledgling semi-professional program will present two productions this summer:

□ *Jekyll & Hyde: The Musical*, from June 17 through July 30.

□ *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, July 1 through July 29.

Owen will direct both productions which have a common theme, that of "reality versus illusion." McNeal said it is

□ More details on the two productions coming this summer from the Performing Arts Initiative will be included in for upcoming issues of Urban Times.

quite intentional that one play is a musical, the other not.

The Performing Arts Initiative involves collegians and high schoolers from the Indianapolis area. By mid-March, all of the main parts had been cast, bringing in local students from IUPUI, Ball State University, the University of Indianapolis, two Chicago campuses and Virginia Tech University. Three students from Herron High School had also won spots in the program, as had a student from Avon High School.

But the program involves more than performers. Directors, designers and choreographers are also involved. McNeal and Owen noted that the students will be able to hone their craft while working with professionals currently working in the field.

Internship and apprenticeship positions in theater administration and production will include production assistants, stage management, set and prop design and construction, marketing and promotions, box office and group sales.

Said McNeal, "This initiative will help to bolster the enthusiasm for future students to seek continuing education in the performing arts in Indianapolis."

The idea for the Performing Arts Initiatives dates back to 2004 on the IUPUI campus, where McNeal has also worked as an English professor. He and two other professors identified the need for a graduate-level or professional-level performing arts program.

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It took a while for the project to come together. McNeal had originally wanted the Athenaeum to host the project, but when that turned out to be unworkable, Herron High School entered the mix.

As did Young Actors Theatre, the immensely successful training program for young people, led by Justin Wade and

and Claude McNeal Productions are involved in theater programming at Herron High School.

Also relatively new to the mix is Terri Bourus, another IUPUI professor who gained international acclaim as the general editor of the anniversary edition of William Shakespeare's entire works published by the Oxford University Press. Her Hoosier Bard Productions, in association with IUPUI, regularly presents Shakespeare's plays and her IUPUI Student Shakespeare Club has over 200 members.

The collaboration runs even deeper. For this summer's two productions, McNeal and Owen have tapped a choreographer who teaches dance at Ball State University, a lighting designer from Indianapolis Civic

University. Long-time McNeal collaborator Jerry Panatieri, also an American Cabaret Theatre favorite, will handle the costumes. IUPUI junior Hannah Boswell is Owen's assistant director.

Owen said all the students will get the experience of working in an actual professional theater, plus one-on-one instruction on such issues as how to interpret a song. The experience will include intensive daily workshops and rehearsals for the two main-stage productions.

And while McNeal's fingerprints are all over the Performing Arts Initiatives, the elder statesman gives his younger colleague the credit.

"It's Jeff's vision we're really getting behind," he said. ■