

# LIFESTYLE

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**American Idol:** David Cook's new album just okay. **PAGE 9**



**Weekend Picks:** No football game? No problem. **PAGE 8**

**ON CAMPUS TODAY**  
Snowfest brings a taste of winter, snowboard skills to McCarthy Quad.

## USC's master of fine arts revamps repertory style

Graduate students put on repertory productions of 'The Last Days of Judas Iscariot' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' this month.

By **KELSEY BORRESEN**  
Daily Trojan

For anyone who has ever harbored an uncontrollable jealousy toward actors, prepare to feel a hell of a lot better about yourself.

It's easy to envy actors — these people (if you can even call them that) who seem to work so much less and get so much more in the way of fortune, fame, fashion and foxy arm candy. But sometimes the road to all the glitz and glamour is, quite frankly, a bitch.

For the first graduating class of the Master of Fine Arts Acting Program, this has meant working six days a week.

Yes, six. The 10 aspiring actors have been forced to part with their beloved Saturdays, which for most college students, provide a much needed 24 hours to catch up on sleep and reruns of "The Hills." Monday through Friday, they sit through classes and rehearsals that last from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and on Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

While a 12-hour workday seems rather excessive, the long hours have provided the actors with the necessary amount of time to master what is referred to as "repertory style"

theater. Essentially, in one night, the cast will perform one play and the next night perform a different play in a rotating cycle. On matinee days, they will really put their acting chops to the test by doing one play in the afternoon and another in the evening.

The graduate students explore the rotating repertory style by performing two plays, "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot" by Stephen Adly Guirgis and William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Though both plays can be characterized as dramatic comedies, they differ dramatically in their subject matter and delivery.

"Judas Iscariot" is a contemporary piece starring Christ's betrayer by the same name and is set in a courtroom in a limbo between heaven and hell. The play is the linguistic opposite of Shakespeare's work, which is widely known for being anything but colloquial. Guirgis' play, written only three years ago, is peppered with R-rated language and pop-culture references.

Case in point: Satan enters the courtroom to "I'm Too Sexy" just before the prosecutor alludes to his



Adam Perez | Daily Trojan

**Character movement** • Members of the first graduating class from the School of Theatre's Master of Fine Arts program act as different characters in William Shakespeare's classic comedy "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

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## 'The School of Night' questions Shakespeare

Trenchantly nuanced Elizabethan-era drama an intellectually stimulating treat.

By **DANIELLE CHARBONNEAU**  
Daily Trojan

As I meandered out of Mark Taper Forum after the first act of Peter Whelan's "The School of Night" — a play that takes place in Elizabethan England — classy theater-goers whispered among one another. There was a buzz of bewilderment — "Do you know what's going on?" one woman whispered to her husband. "Now who's the guy in the stripped suit," another man asks his white-haired companion.

No one seemed to know what was happening, and everyone seemed ashamed to admit it. The upper-crust, sophisticated crowd seemed to shun themselves for being confused. My suspicions were only confirmed while standing in line in the bathroom — a woman barged in, sealed the door firmly behind her and looked at me with the utmost seriousness. She tilted her head down, aimed her dark eyes straight at mine and spoke in a deliberate, low voice as if confessing some dark secret — "I just have to ask you a question... Do you know what's going on in there?" she asked.

As I stuttered, wondering what she meant, she crossed and threw her arms around in desperation, "I have no idea what's going on," she gasped. "I mean...something with Shakespeare... and the Protestants... and, um ... atheism."

"Oh. The play. Well..." I began.

I was interrupted. A 20-something woman with long black ringlets swung around from fixing her bright red lipstick in the mirror.

"What don't you understand?"

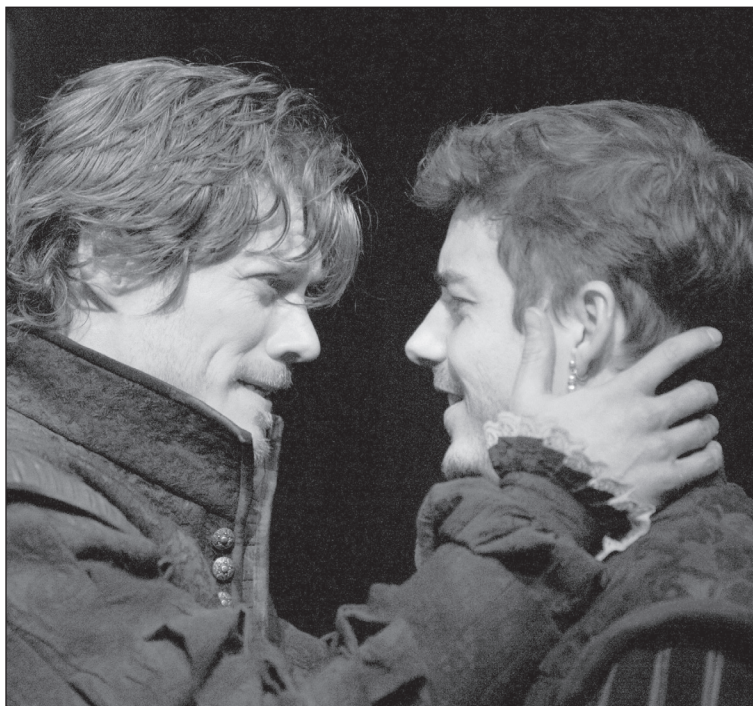


Photo courtesy of Craig Schwartz

**Creative duo** • Gregory Wooddell (Christopher Marlowe) and John Sloan (Tom Stone, a.k.a. Shakespeare) star in "The School of Night."

she asked in a warm tone, head cocked to the side. "My boyfriend's in the play, so I know a lot about it."

As she began a vibrant history lesson, women slowly crept out of the stalls and gathered around her. A pre-play history brush-up would have helped us all decipher the many layers and characters of Whelan's nuanced, dynamic play, which toys with the idea that Shakespeare was not the sole author of his works, but rather his works were the collective efforts of a group of writers and intellectual thinkers called the School of Night.

The School of Night was a secret society made up of astronomers, mathematicians, voyagers,

philosophers and poets who explored the joys of science and art. But their explorations of such topics were outlawed at the time by Queen Elizabeth I who saw budding new ideas as a threat to her already unstable power over England.

The era was a dangerous one. Elizabeth I, successor to Bloody Mary (Queen Mary I, her staunch Catholic half-sister known for burning Protestants), restored Protestantism as England's official religion when she took the throne. As a result, England was threatened by the Catholic powers of Spain, Italy and France, and Catholic followers who wished to dethrone her.

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## Vampire films and books just suck, period

In the humidity stricken month of July, I began counting the days until November.

Not because I was looking forward to chilly breezes and sweat-free afternoons, which are apparently unheard of in Los Angeles.

And not because I couldn't wait to have a delicious Thanksgiving dinner, although in the midst of papers, projects and exam hell, Thanksgiving couldn't come soon enough.

It wasn't even for the releases of "Milk" or "Slumdog Millionaire," two films that didn't start accumulating industry buzz until a month ago.

No, I was absolutely giddy for "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," the sixth installment in the wizard franchise.

Back in July, "Half-Blood Prince," which is bound to be the darkest, scariest and dare I say, sexiest film in the franchise yet, was slated to enchant cineplexes on Nov. 21, 2008. But then, "The Dark Knight" happened.

An unprecedented summer blockbuster, "The Dark Knight" suddenly made going to your local cineplex the hippest thing to do on a Thursday night. After selling out nearly every midnight showing throughout the United States and witnessing the astronomical box office numbers that followed, the studio moguls at Warner Bros. realized this wasn't a once in a lifetime opportunity but something that could happen each and every summer if they played their movie release dates right.

And so there went "Half-Blood

**Lauren Barbato**



IN FOCUS

Prince," pushed back until July 2009 as quickly as the trailer leaked onto the Internet.

While I'll be mourning what could have been this Friday, tweens and teens of the female persuasion will be flocking to the theaters for that other novel based on the only mythological creature J.K. Rowling excluded from her "Harry Potter" series.

"Twilight," a film adaptation of the uber-popular series penned by Stephanie Meyer, is more than ready to slay the box office this weekend when it premieres on nearly 5,500 screens across the United States. As of Tuesday afternoon, "Twilight" has sold out more than 700 showings and accounted for 85 percent of all pre-sale movie tickets for this weekend.

And like every film geared to children and teens, there are already talks for a sequel.

In the midst of Fandango sales and box office projections, Summit Entertainment has acquired the rights to the next three books in Meyer's series, entitled "New Moon," "Eclipse" and "Breaking Dawn," respectively. Summit has also rehired "Dexter" scribe and USC alum Melissa Rosenberg to pen the scripts. But let's not forget the origin of the series.

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## NIGHT

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In addition there were no more successors by blood to take the throne.

The bubonic plague, or Black Death, was reeking havoc on the nation and theaters were shut down to prevent both the spread of disease and ideas. Citizens found to have atheistic tendencies were burned to death and spies roamed the city to report non-Protestant activity back to the queen. The era, while dangerous, was also an exciting one. Explorations of the New World created an air of discovery and expanded the minds of artists and thinkers.

This is the atmosphere in which "The School of Night" takes place, so it's understandable that a 21st century audience without prior knowledge would be perplexed. But as the play unravels in the second half, head scratching diminishes and it all starts to make sense. Needless to say, the play, directed by Bill Alexander, takes too long to find its stride. But once it does, the witty whodunit is a fully engaging experience. Anyone could be a spy, everyone's at risk and backstabbing is a way to survive.

The play begins in the home of Thomas Walsingham (played by Adrian LaTourelle) a confidential agent for his cousin, Francis Walsingham, the queen's grand spymaster. Walsingham houses the great Kit Marlowe (played by the flamboyant Gregory Woodell), known as Elizabethan England's second greatest playwright. Marlowe is a homosexual and rebel thinker with a thirst for truth who challenges the queen's suppression of thought. A Cambridge-trained poet, Marlowe is working on crafting his next masterpiece.

When a young actor, who turns out to be Shakespeare, is recruited to perform one of his works under a stage name, the two instantaneously form a writer's bond. But when Marlowe is arrested for treason for his atheistic tendencies, all focus goes on saving Marlowe and protecting the members of the School of Night.

In the process, however, conversations between Marlowe, Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd (played by Michael Bakkensen), who wrote "The Spanish Tragedy," hint at a collaboration of the writers on plays such as "Othello" and "As You Like It." Viewers not attuned with the works of Shakespeare will most likely miss the subtle clues, but for those who don't, the play hints that Marlowe is responsible for some of the great comedies and tragedies attributed to Shakespeare, while Shakespeare might have contributed more to the romances.

Other historical figures are intertwined in the drama, such as Sir Walter Raleigh (played by Henri Lubatti), one of the queens prospective mates, and Ingram Frizer (played by Ian Bedford), Walsingham's servant, a spy and acquaintance of Marlowe's.

The cast is top notch — Woodell has a theatrical gusto that makes Marlowe a truly likable, complex character, Lubatti stands out as an exuberant explorer with a taste for too many women, and John Sloan plays Shakespeare with poise, portraying a boyishly romantic poet.

The costumes, designed by Robert Perdziola, are ornate and capture each character's personality, in particular Sir Walter Raleigh's stripped suit, and the set, designed by Simon Higlett, is restrained but effective.

Whelan's intellectually stimulating, multi-layered play walks a fine line between research-driven conspiracy theory and engaging entertainment. It requires a broad base of knowledge, or, if you're lucky, a historian to explain the plot to you after you pee.

"The School of Night" plays at the Mark Taper Forum until Dec. 17. Tickets range in price between \$24 and \$62.

## MFA | Graduate acting students perform rigorous repertory

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alleged affair with Ricky Martin.

The performances are held in McClintock Theatre where you can use the words "fourth row" and "nosebleed seats" interchangeably, creating an intimate setting. It's especially needed in "Judais Iscariot," where the audience unofficially acts as another character: the jury.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream," the more well-known of the two plays, consists of three markedly different worlds that eventually converge, including upper class Athens, working-class Athens and a fantasy fairy realm. While Shakespeare's dramas have a certain hoighty toighty air to them, his comedy has more low-brow appeal.

"It's a very physical show so even if you're not following all the language you can still follow what we're doing," said cast member Kristin D'Andrea, who plays two male characters in the play. "It's visually pleasing and ridiculous."

Beginning next semester, the actors will take it a step further and add two one-act plays by the French playwright Marivaux to the rotating repertory.

Repertory-style theater, while still

popular in parts of Europe, has gone out of vogue in the United States for primarily economic reasons. And it's these underlying economic reasons that have people asking why anyone would spend tens of thousands of dollars and three additional years of study to pursue acting when, in many cases, it has proved to be more about raw talent than education. After majoring in theater as an undergraduate, many students rush into the real world of auditions, callbacks and all too often, rejections.

But many others choose the proverbial "road less traveled."

"Going to grad school for three years gives you an opportunity to focus on where you're personally going and what your gifts are," D'Andrea said. "It is kind of a bubble. All crafts and artist people need to have a bubble of safety for at least a period of time before they can really do something in the world — where you can have strength and security in yourself. I was making choices like that — taking jobs that were taking away from me really exploring the artistry and craftsmanship that I wanted acting to be for me."

One of the most trying aspects of the repertory style is the challenge

of playing several characters that are not only a far cry from the actor himself but also from his other roles. This undertaking, characteristic of repertory-style theater, leads to what the Dean of the School of Theatre, Madeline Puzo, refers to as the "triumph of miscasting."

"In repertory theater you can't cast people to type," said Andy Robinson, senior lecturer and director of MFA Acting. "For instance we're doing three plays. I have 10 actors. All 10 actors have to play all the roles in the three plays so some of them are just going to be far removed from the description of that role. Young people will be playing old people. That is definitely miscasting in a traditional sense, but that's the beauty of it. By playing an older person, by playing someone that's not like you at all, the effort to find that character is what turns you into a character actor. You never see that kind of miscasting in film and television. Everybody is always playing according to their type."

Despite their tremendous amount of work, the graduate students seem thankful for the opportunity they've been given. They could have easily spent their Saturdays chowing

down on cold lo mein and watching "Dawson's Creek" reruns while waiting for a callback for a local commercial. But instead they opted to work their asses off in hopes that they will be better prepared for whatever it is the acting world throws in their way.

And while the MFA students have certainly developed their talent in the last three years, it seems the totality of the experience won't be wholly realized in the immediate future.

"You're an actor and then five years, 10 years later I know I'll understand that line," fellow MFA student Carolyn Zeller said. "That's going to happen with a lot of things we learn in this program. And when your system actually processes it, it's like an ice box joke — you don't get it until years from now."

If you don't buy this, then take it from Andy Robinson, a man who had the invaluable firsthand experience of performing in the rotating repertory style as a young man.

"By working this hard and working to the extent of abilities is the only way we find out who we are and how good we are and what power we have as performers. If it's easy then I don't think it's worth much."

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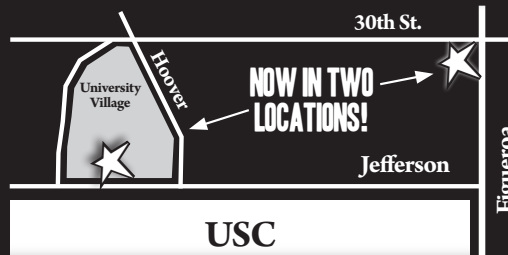
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