

Lumberton High School Theatre director uses professional skills to benefit students

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Darlene W. Natale Special to The Robesonian - August 9, 2023



Wynona Oxendine is a Theatre Arts teacher at Lumberton Senior High School.

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LUMBERTON — Under the Direction of Wynona Oxendine, the Lumberton Senior High School theatre program last year transitioned to dramas from a catalog heavy with musicals. The students in March performed “To Absent Friends,” a Rand Higbee drama about the perils of teen drunk driving.

The play opens with a late-night hospital visit by Eric’s school friends, who discussed their drinking prior to the accident. Eric eventually realizes that he is the only one of the group to survive the accident.

“It’s a hard-hitting play. But it was really interesting for the kids—to watch them and try to coach them through the process. Because it’s so much heavier. So much more serious than anything they had done so far. Yeah. So, to watch them go through the hassle,” Oxendine said.

The production was particularly poignant for teens, as car crashes are a leading cause of death in their age group and about a quarter of fatal crashes involve an underage drunk driver, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The 30-year-old theatre director said there were challenges in directing a play with a serious message. “Because it’s high school, you will hear children laughing in the audience at inappropriate moments. Coaching them (actors) through, ‘You’re the guy they’re following. They’re gonna go off their own instincts, but they’re following you.’ So the more professional you stay, the more professional they’re going to be,” Oxendine said of her mentorship.

This was Oxendine’s first year at Lumberton following five years in Fayetteville. She said there had been discussions about shutting down the arts program in Robeson County. “That closes all the theater classes. And for a while, there weren’t any plays done at all, except for like maybe one a year that they did countywide,” Oxendine said.

She credits Beth Perry, the theatre arts teacher at Purnell Swett High School, with saving the program. "She's a big advocate for the arts. She's really the reason, or one of the reasons that it managed to stay alive. Between her and parents in the community who realized that it is vital, it is necessary. They see that their kids enjoy it and how it positively affects their lives. So I guess there were enough parents and people in the community who came out and said, 'No, don't take it,'" Oxendine said.

Oxendine said the students were receptive to direction because of the possibility of potentially losing the theatre department.

"They were really excited to get on stage and strap up their boots and just go for it. So, for the most part, they were receptive. When you give them direction, they take it. They listen to it. It is really nice. It's one of the keys; you have to be able to listen," Oxendine said. "We talk all the time about nonjudgment." She said that she provides possible audience reaction during rehearsals.

Before "To Absent Friends," the student actors staged the play "As She Likes It," in partnership with UNCP. "Dr. Drahos (Jonathan) came in and co-directed that play with me. And it was a modern take on some of William Shakespeare's greatest female characters. "That one was also really interesting. We had a strong all-female cast. We made the kids do research on the characters and their historical meaning in Shakespeare's work, and then come in and do the modern retelling of it in our own way," Oxendine said.

Oxendine never directed before she became a teacher. "I was unsure about it. But then once you think, because of being an actor, and having been the person standing on stage performing for the audience, it gives you an edge as a director because you can understand what it feels like to be there. And because theater is live you can feel the audience. So, because you've been there, you know what the audience feels like. You know what kinds of things they react to. It kind of helps guide you in leading your actors and what they should do," Oxendine said.

The Maxton native began her theatre career as Marie in "The Nutcracker."

"And I just remember one of my biggest challenges was she was supposed to pretend to be asleep. And so, I had to lay on stage and pretend to be asleep and all I could think of was my mommy," Oxendine recalled.

Her acting career began in earnest in the 9th grade when her older brother said he wanted to do the school musical "Remember the '60s," written by the theatre teacher.

"I just remember Wyvis coming home from school saying that he wanted to do it and that it was a musical. And I decided right then that I wanted to do it. It was all just word of mouth. So, we just showed up." She said she wanted to do everything her big brother Wyvis did.

The 2015 UNCP grad has done some extras work for the popular Netflix show "Outer Banks."

"I was a background actor. So again, it wasn't the same as producing. You were acting but you weren't featured. But I got to be on set and see how everything flowed and worked," Oxendine said.

This past summer, Oxendine expanded her skills through an associate producer gig on the narrative short “Lumbee Land,” written and produced by Lumbee historian and filmmaker Malinda Maynor Lowery, Ph.D. of Emory University.

“And it was amazing. I have never produced anything. And Malinda is so warm and kind and really knows what she’s doing. She was a really good leader through the process. She made sure that I got to have a hand in everything and see how it was done to start learning the process. So that next time she does something like this I can be a part of that as well. And have a leg up,” Oxendine said.

She was a part of the behind-the-scenes group who did location scouting. They would go to a potential site, take pictures and report their findings. She said her Associate Producer position covered a wide range of production needs from pulling props, confirming the set dressing looked appropriate, and making sure that everybody was on the same page.

“It was a lot of preliminary planning. And then once filming actually started, we were there on set making sure that everything was running smoothly—people were where they needed to be and

making props on the spot,” Oxendine said. They had an on-set emergency and needed to make some fake blood. “And so, my theater background came in handy. I got the stuff and I whipped up fake blood. It was really cool. I would have never thought of it as literally as that, but to be a producer is just to help produce the film. So anything that they needed, you know, any way I could help it out at all throughout the process. That was my job. So, it was really cool.”

Malinda Maynor Lowery is enthusiastic about Oxendine’s talent and professionalism

“Wynona was like my second brain, all the way through the pre-production planning and the principal photography. People are rightly confused by the idea of a “film producer”—why would you need one of those, when other people write the script, use the camera, record the sound, direct the actors, and act? The producing team does literally everything else—makes sure we have funds to shoot, places to shoot, that every role is filled, even down to making sure folks are fed on set! Wynona had a hand in all of that and she was a dream to work with. And she brought her stage expertise as well—juggling a million moving parts is an aspect of any stage manager’s job, and we needed every bit of her wisdom and calm throughout the process,” Malinda Maynor Lowery said.

“Working on Lumbee Land was truly a remarkable experience, not only for the incredible work that was done, but the incredible people I got to meet. To have a film starring Lumbee people and with so many Lumbees on the creative team behind the scenes was something for the history books,” Oxendine said. “I’m looking forward to more opportunities like this to come around and to see more of our people on the ‘silver screen.’ We have such talented people, always have and always will!”

Most recently, Oxendine has been doing a lot of work with Purple Door Productions in Lumberton. The company has been around for years and is led by Jeanne Koonce, who said she has worked with Oxendine since she was 15 or 16.

"We did 'Chicago,' and she was one of the featured dancers. And she liked to sing. So it started from there," Koonce said. "But as she trained and developed, I became aware that she's really got the actor's gift. You know, there are people who make really decent actors. And then there are people who are actually capable, if they so choose to become a professional actor. And Wynonna is one of those."

Koonce said that Oxendine started out in musicals and that was what she was predominantly interested in until she got her involved in a straight play. "And then she discovered that she really liked the acting stuff. And she's very, very brilliant," Koonce said.

Right before the pandemic, Oxendine played Elizabeth Proctor in Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" for Koonce's company.

"She was wonderful. When you meet her, she's this very easygoing southern girl, so you can be unaware that behind that easygoing, southern girl, there is this big imagination brain that has all this analytical skill, and everything that just suddenly shows up when she goes to work," Koonce said. "You know, because she definitely is a professional. And she chose the teaching profession because she wanted to stay in theater, and she wanted to commit – she loves teaching. But that's also why she does 'Strike' ('Strike at the Wind') and things like that, because she really loves performing."

James Bass, Ed.D, the Executive Director of the Givens Performing Arts Center at UNCP, approached Koonce to build "The Last Dance of Dr. Disco," a murder mystery dinner theater and fundraiser. Koonce said the performers are very good improvisational actors.

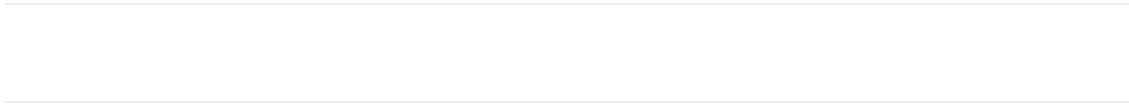
"There is a script, but a lot of it is improv, because it's interactive with the audience. And so, you have to have really advanced professional type actors who are really good comics, and who are comfortable interacting with an audience. There are a lot of actors, really good actors, who really do not feel comfortable directly interacting and making up dialogue with an audience. When you're doing murder mysteries like this, you have to have people with that skill set who are fast on their feet. Because once you start asking an audience questions that pertain to the show as part of the interrogation of the plot, once they start answering, then you have to be able to play with them, because now it's off the script, because you don't know what they're going to say, or how they're gonna respond. And then you have to be capable of being free enough to mess around with them. What they say. And so that's lot of how I chose this cluster of actors. These are people who have done a lot of these plays. And Wynonna is one of them," Koonce said.

Oxendine will play the role of a dancer named Angie in the dinner theatre murder mystery "Dr. Disco," at UNCP on September 21. Oxendine said that as Angie, she will get to use a New Jersey accent. The audience dines throughout the performance and prizes are awarded to the audience members who identify the killer.

Oxendine continues acting and directing and is starting graduate school in Theatre Arts at Regent University in Virginia.

"I've recently been accepted into Grad School, so that's a major step for me that I'm really excited about! I'm looking forward to furthering my education and gaining more tools to share with my students," Oxendine said.

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