Celebrating 70 Years of Theatre at Armstrong

The theatre is a magical place. Actors and audience leave their other worlds and, for a brief moment, enter a different time and space. Somewhere in the darkened theatre sits the director. Like the unseen Wizard of Oz, the director has created this magical moment of suspended disbelief. Whether comedies or tragedies, mysteries or musicals, classic works or contemporary pieces—the director’s wand brings their words to life. At Armstrong, theatre directors have worked this magic for 70 years. As Armstrong celebrates this anniversary year, it is appropriate to take a look at these individuals and bring them out of the dark and into the spotlight.

**Stacey Keach** joined the Armstrong Junior College faculty in the fall of 1936 and initiated the college’s theatre experience in February 1937 with a production of “Three Cornered Moon,” which will be presented in the spring of 2007 to conclude this anniversary year. Fresh from Northwestern University, Keach brought with him a vision of theatre that combined the talent of the college and the community for the benefit and enjoyment of both. For four years, until his departure in 1941, this combination of town and gown created the Savannah Playhouse and transformed the stage of the Armstrong auditorium into a theatrical center for Savannah. The pride and delight of the performers and crew marked every production. Keach possessed a flair for showmanship and a wide-ranging repertoire. Years later, students still shuddered at the memory of the chilling psychological drama “Night Must Fall,” when Keach himself played the role of Danny the bellhop.

**Carlson Thomas** arrived at Armstrong in August 1947 to revive the theatre program that had been discontinued during the war. Thomas was the right man to rebuild the Playhouse. Less of a showman than Keach, he was a genius at the technical side of theatre productions. He could build anything; and if he could not build it, he could scrounge it up from somewhere. Treasures from second-hand stores and attic trunks found their way to the Armstrong stage. Outside of the auditorium he constructed a new, lighted marquee to announce that theatre was back in business at Armstrong. Again, students, faculty, and thespians from the community brought their skills to Playhouse productions. In May of 1949, Thomas offered the community a five-day festival of productions reprised from the spring season: the musical “Green Grow the Lilacs,” a Victorian mystery “Angel Street,” and Shakespeare’s “Taming of the Shrew.” It was a technical tour de force of staging and organization. After injuries from a serious automobile accident in December of 1949 took Thomas temporarily off the scene, the theatre program shifted to smaller proportions necessitated by college finances. The curtain came down on the Savannah Playhouse; and when it rose again in the fall of 1950, the Armstrong Masquers took the stage.

**Jack Porter** directed the Masquers from 1952 to 1955. Theatre productions ranged from “Death of A Salesman,” in which Porter himself played the role of the hapless Willie Loman, to Molière’s 17th century French comedy, “The Doctor In Spite of Himself,” and Shakespeare’s “Othello,” with faculty member Joseph Killorin in the lead role. Porter chose “Othello” as a showcase piece for the Southeastern Theatre Conference that he invited to meet in Savannah. It provided a microscope moment of race relations in 1954, the year of Brown vs. Board of Education. The conference membership included both blacks and whites. It was not easy to
make arrangements that would accommodate a racially mixed group for the conference luncheon. But the telling question came early from one of Porter’s conference colleagues: “What color is your Othello?” Porter replied that Killorin’s make-up changed with each presentation, but he realized that the real question addressed not the color of the skin but the way in which the character was portrayed. How black could and should Othello be?!

**Ross Durfee** served as director for the Armstrong theatre program on two separate occasions. In the spring of 1950 he was one of Armstrong’s older students who had returned to college as a war veteran. He took over the direction of the Savannah Playhouse after Carlson Thomas’ accident, and his capable leadership may have helped the college administration to decide that the theatre program could still be successful on a smaller scale, and at a smaller cost, than before. When the Maquers made their debut in the fall of 1950, Durfee was the official director. In a sense, therefore, he was the director who both closed the Playhouse and opened the Armstrong Masquers. He then went off to complete his baccalaureate degree at Stamford, and Jack Porter arrived. After Porter’s departure, Durfee returned and resumed the directorship along with responsibilities as English instructor. In 1960 he stepped aside for **Al Gordon** to assume the director’s role, followed by **Bill Starrs**; but when the college moved to its new campus in 1966 and Frank Chew came on the scene, Durfee remained as a link with the earlier years of Armstrong theatre.

**Frank Chew** became director of the Masquers at the new Abercorn campus. He looked like an eighteen-year old college student himself. He gathered around him a close-knit group of liberal minded students, and together they used the Armstrong theatre for traditional productions and for productions that carried a distinct political tone. In conjunction with the student Democrats on campus, they lampooned George Wallace; and they staged a production of Sam Shepard’s “Chicago” that pushed hard against the edge of Savannah community standards. Parents and local legislators protested the play’s profanity and a particularly suggestive scene. High school teenagers filled the audience. Chew scrubbed out the profanity but retained the controversial scene in which the male lead stood with low slung jeans while his stage wife knelt and bestowed a kiss upon his navel. Joe Killorin, now Dean of the College, explained that there were also scenes in Hamlet that might carry offense if truly understood.

**John Suchower** came to Armstrong in 1969 and provided the Masquers with more than twenty years of theatre direction. It was a long run that touched the lives of hundreds of students. He initiated a summer theatre program to draw students from other parts of the state; and for many production he invited members of the community to join the theatre troupe. In the best tradition of Stacey Keach, community and college participated together in Masquers’ productions. From its southside location, the college now needed to work harder at building bridges into the community than had been the case when Armstrong resided at Bull and Gaston Street. Unlike the downtown days, Suchower did not always enjoy the good will of the theatre critics from the Savannah Morning News, but Suchower simply shrugged and concentrated on his productions.

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1 Jack Porter’s memoire of his directing experience at Armstrong. AASU Archives
Joe Mydell joined John Suchower from 1974 to 1976 and brought to the campus and to the Masquers the perspective of an African American theatre director. In the 1970s, Armstrong found itself in the midst of a higher education desegregation case brought against the state of Georgia and nine other southern states. All dimensions of life at Armstrong confronted issues of race and the legacy of southern racism. Masquers’ productions were simply one stage among many on which these questions were addressed. Now it was not Othello, but Ossie Davis’s play “Purlie Victorious” that Mydell offered to the theatre audience. As Mydell told the college Inkwell reporter, “If black and white societies can look at the problem [racism] and laugh and at the same time realize that they are the problem, then communication barriers can be eliminated.”

Pete Mellen came to Armstrong in 1993. Roger Miller joined him in 1996, the year that Armstrong became Armstrong Atlantic State University. They have taken the Armstrong theatre program to new heights, appropriate to a university-level institution. Today Armstrong offers a Baccalaureate degree in Theatre. Mellen and Miller actively recruit theatre students with competitive scholarship offers. The University sponsors theatre trips to New York that are open to students and individuals in the community alike. A new “Black Box” in Jenkins auditorium presents experimental productions for small audiences while the main stage continues to offer a broad appeal repertoire.

Theatre is alive and well and thriving at Armstrong. The magic continues.

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2 Inkwell, November 19, 1975.