

Honors Program

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SU Honors Student's Website Serves as "Gateway" to Theatre

SHIPPENSBURG, Pa. — Nineteenth-century theatre will become considerably more interesting for college students thanks to the efforts of a Shippensburg University Honors Program student who has designed an innovative website to capture theatrical productions.

Nick Ray, a senior communication/journalism major at Shippensburg, has constructed an interactive website, <http://witchcraft.njray.com>, for the play *Witchcraft* by Joanna Baillie, a 19th century Scottish dramatist and poet. The website allows students to watch a live recording of the play while following along with the text.

"This is the way theatre was intended to be experienced: through performance, not through reading," says Ray. "Theatre was never intended to be a product solely for scholars or people who study English. Plays were designed for entertainment, for reaching out to an audience that doesn't study them."

Last year, Ray traveled twice to the Finborough Theatre in London, England, where he videoed 40 hours of rehearsals and performances—though not before navigating the delicate process of securing permission from the theatre company to make the recording.

"One of the biggest challenges was that you had actors who were uncomfortable with being on tape at all," explains Ray. "The theatre was portrayed as less than perfect because they correct mistakes and you see the hard work they go through to make it not look like hard work."

Ray began collaborating in the spring of 2008 with Shippensburg English professor Thomas Crochunis, who was searching for a student to help pair footage and text for *Witchcraft*. The website is evolving beyond picture and word, though, with resources that will include interviews with actors and actresses, journal articles about the play, and essays about Baillie.

"The resources are a big selling point," says Ray. "Here's text; here's video pertinent to the part we're studying; and all of these articles tie in somehow with a character. It's a holistic approach to learning theatre: a gateway to the video and script and a starting point from which students can branch out to other resources."

The website is nearly done: Ray is developing the full prototype and intends to test-run it in a general education class, possibly Introduction to Literature. He hopes the project will help

foster interest in Baillie and her works and bring them back to the limelight, particularly *Witchcraft*, which has languished in relative obscurity for more than a century.

“This website mixes the active and passive ways we use media so we’re able to get a fuller experience of literature,” notes Ray. “If we can take something students are familiar with and present it in a way they can benefit from educationally, that makes the project worthwhile.”

Ray intends to stay on with the website after he graduates and follow its progress, possibly expanding it to other literary works and exploring its potential as a marketable product.

The 21-year-old Waynesboro native originally came to Shippensburg wanting to be a teacher but discovered a passion for videography and multimedia work.

“Part of the reason I enjoy film is it’s not enough that I want to make the videos, but that the videos share something with other people,” he says. “I learn something and I can share it through the multimedia technology that we have access to today.”

Among Ray’s videography experiences are filming a documentary for an Honors Program colloquium trip to Wallop’s Island, Va., in the fall of 2007 and a documentary of preparations for the musical *Gypsy* at the Luhrs Performing Arts Center. He has also completed a promotional video for the Chambersburg YMCA and helped with a professor’s full-length feature film—and in his spare time created a campus-oriented political blog during the 2008 presidential election.

Ray will serve as videographer when the Shippensburg University Honors Program hosts 28 students from honors programs across the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education in May. The students, along with five professors, will travel to France and Belgium, and Ray plans to generate a daily video blog of their experiences.

Shippensburg’s communication/journalism department offers an electronic media emphasis that doesn’t include much in the way of video editing, and as a result, most of Ray’s skills are self-taught through freelance projects for which he hasn’t received course credit or payment. “The experience,” he says, “is payment enough.”

Ray’s future plans are to pursue graduate school in film and video at American University in Washington, D.C. He looks forward to a career in video production that will allow him to travel globally and teach at the college level.

The Shippensburg University Honors Program is made up of more than 150 undergraduate students of diverse backgrounds who are accepted to the program based on academic achievement, intellectual curiosity, and evidence of leadership and community service.

The Honors Program offers small, dynamic classes with excellent instruction; opportunities for research projects, internships, and study abroad experiences; and cultural events, social activities, and service projects.