Columbians Do the ‘Time Warp’

By Kristin Sterling

Thirty years after its American theatrical debut, The Rocky Horror Picture Show is back.

A group of 20 Columbia and Barnard students is bringing a production inspired by the 1970s cult classic to Off-Broadway theater.

The idea for the show came to director Ted Malawer, CC’06, several months ago when he directed the campus production of Halloween. “I wanted to do a show that would bring together students and appeal to a wide audience base,” he says. Rocky Horror seemed to have that appeal.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show, an Off-Broadway playhouse was spurred by members of Project 400 Theater Group who, after seeing the Columbia production, pitched the idea of a show that paid tribute to Rocky Horror to their associates at Triune Productions. Among the core members of Project 400 is a group of School of the Arts alumni who retain a close connection to Columbia.

Rather than recreate the original show, Brann Giacon, CC’09, who acts as the general manager of Project 400, contacted Malawer about putting together a type of interactive production, The Rocky Horror Party, based on the audience participation of late-night screenings of the original cult classic. The new production will be shown Fridays at midnight in a converted loft space in the El Flamingo Club on W. 21 St., where The Rocky Horror Show, a contemporary interpretation of Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream, set to 1970s disco music, has been running with critical acclaim for six years.

True to Rocky Horror Picture Show and Triple Win tradition, this production will be taping with audience participation. Students and faculty members hope that attendees will bring along a high level of energy and some knowledge of the story so they can offer traditional audience responses and join the actors in singing and dancing to the show’s popular songs in the shape of the “Rocky Horror” Warps.

“Because the El Flamingo is a club, it is a very interactive space,” says Paul Wright, CC’05, who plays Frank-N-Furter. “We hope to involve the audience more [in the show] and dance with them.”

This version will comprise the material from the original Broadway and film versions of The Rocky Horror Picture Show, which feature a clean-cut young couple who, after experiencing car trouble, finds themselves at the castle of mad scientist and alien transvestite Frank-N-Furter. “Just as he is about to unveil his newest laboratory creation—Rocky Horror—Don’t expect to see original Rocky Horror legends Tim Curry, Susan Sarandon or Meat Loaf in this production, the actors read in Minneapolis and Barnard students. Among other new elements, Malawer says, “We have hire hiphop chorography that adds a new twist. It is a special element that you may not normally see in Rocky Horror: There is also some gender bending with females playing male parts.

How do students fit an Off-Broadway rehearsal schedule into their rigorous academic schedule? “We only rehearse on weekends [for 10 to 12 hours], because we all have class and even more commitments,” says Wright. “It is very intense, but everyone is very dedicated.”

“It is very hard to be a full-time student and do something like this, and I commend the actors,” adds Malawer. “Every actor is just as excited about this as I am.

By bringing the production from campus to Off-Broadway, it seems that Malawer and the cast are embodying Rocky’s central message: Don’t dream it, be it.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show has a limited run Fridays at midnight at the El Flamingo Club. For more information or tickets, call the El Flamingo box office atm (212) 243-2321. General admission is $20. Columbia students can say the code “lions” for $15 tickets.

Freeman Speaks on Challenges for Graduate Education in the Bush Administration

By Ellen Rapp

Journalist and Professor Samuel G. Freedman spoke to a packed audience in the International Affairs Building about the impact of the Bush administration on higher education and the likely long-range effects of actions and policies on certain issues. In his Feb. 17 talk, Freedman, a professor in the Graduate School of Journalism, noted the following:

The New York Times, said the policies of this administration in the wake of the 9/11 attacks have made for “an isolationist, inward-facing” United States—a stance that has taken its toll on graduate education in years.

With the education agenda of the current administration focused on the No Child Left Behind Act, Freedman explained, “Bush has sezored on education as one of his legacy items but has not been the level of colleges and universities.”

Freedman focused on two primary issues: foreign language study and the admission of graduate students from overseas.

Little Government Support for Study of Muslim Languages

Because of the Bush administration’s attempts to silence the Al Qaeda attacks and “two years deep into the occupation of Iraq,” the Bush administration has not encouraged universities to teach Arabic, despite the need for people fluent in Muslim languages, SGA students and alumni are keeping the party alive by bringing Rocky Horror back to the stage.

Freedman noted that over the hundreds of thousands of hours of audiotape in Arabic and Central Asian languages in the hands of American intelligence following the 9/11 attacks, and the shortage of linguists able to translate those tapes—a situation that seriously hinders U.S. military and counterterrorism efforts. Of the nearly 2 million people who graduated from American colleges and universities in 2003, he said, only 22 took degrees in Arabic.

Freedman contrasted the current lack of federal funding for Muslim language studies with a program initiated during the Cold War, the National Defense Education Act. Intended to involve colleges and universities in waging the Cold War the program channeled federal funds toward developing skilled speakers of strategic languages, especially Russian.

Subsequently, thousands of students learned Russian and went on to become spies, diplomats and Sociologists who contributed to the resolution of the Cold War. Today, strategic language training in the United States is centered at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California, an institution that serves only the military—and “fails short in helping students understand those cultures’ whose languages they are studying.

In describing the contrast between strategic language study then and now, Freedman quoted Dan Davidson, president of the American Councils for International Education. “Compared to the Cold War, we’re not even at the level of zero. We’re at minus one.”

Fewer Graduate Students from Abroad

The policies of the Bush administration toward overseas students has often required, and newly affected the enrollment of students from abroad. When asked for “an assessment” for visa, yet denied visas, Freedman said:

On the last three years, enrollment of foreign graduate students in American educational institutions has dropped by a third—not only in students from Islamic countries, but also from China, South America and Israel.

Given that many universities have traditionally drawn a large number of overseas students in math and the hard sciences, these disciplines have suffered the greatest loss from the enrollment decrease. The resulting brain drain, said Freedman, poses serious consequences for the American economy, especially in biotech fields. According to the Bay Area Economic Forum, an estimated one third of the high-tech companies in that California region were found to be immigrants.

Freedman also noted that at Columbia, a disproportionate number of the faculty in math and hard sciences come from overseas. He quoted A. Paul Alivisatos, professor of chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, regarding the potential consequences of turning away artificial talent. “No one wants to stamp the visa for the next Mohammed Atta. But we’ll never know who it was who refused a visa for the next Einstein.”

“Complete incomprehension and intellectually gifted ‘people are losing the chance to study in the United States,’ Freedman said, closing the lecture. “This is a strange moment in time. This country is involved in a global war, but at the same time we are more isolationist than before—it’s a strange oxymoron.”

Current Research

Public Health Study of Urban Air Pollutants

By Craig LeMoult

Since 1998, the Mailman School of Public Health has been working on a large-scale research project, The Mothers and Children Study in Harlem, which examines the health effects of exposure of pregnant women and their newborns to pollutants from vehicle exhaust, the commercial burning of fuels and tobacco smoking, as well as from allergens and residential use of pesticides.

As part of the project, a new study of 60 newborns in New York City reveals that prenatal exposure to combustion-related pollutants alters the structure of chromosomes (the carriers of genetic information) in human cells. In the womb this is the first study to find links between environmental exposure during pregnancy to such pollutants can cause a measurable increase in chromosomal abnormalities in the fetal tissues. Such abnormalities have been linked in other studies to increased risk of cancer in children and adults.

The research involved a sample of newborns and their nonsmoking mothers in Lower Manhattan, Harlem, Washington Heights and the South Bronx. They examined pregnancy to varying levels of airborne combustion-related pollutants, known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), was measured by personal air monitoring of the mothers during pregnancy. PAHs are carcinogenic, causing cancer in children and adults.

They enter the environment when combustion occurs—such as from car, truck or engine exhaust, residential heating, power generation or tobacco smoking.

The study was released by the Mailman’s Center for Children’s Environmental Health, and the results were published in the March issue of Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers and Prevention.

We have previously learned that air pollutants signiﬁcantly reduce fetal growth, which may affect cognitive development during childhood, but this is the first evidence that they can alter chromosomes in utero,” said Frederica P. Perera, professor of environmental health science, director of the center, and principal author of the study. “This is troubling, since this type of genetic alteration has been linked in other studies to increased risk of cancer. We cannot estimate the precise increase in cancer risk, but these findings underscore the need for policymakers and other stakeholders to take steps to protect children from these avoidable exposures.”