

A French engagement

By Arthur Dudley :: PRINCETONIAN 'STREET' WRITER

AARON COOPER '05 WRITHES on the floor in pain. "Mon coeur! Mon coeur!" he says. It's not an existential crisis, though; it's L'Atelier performing a scene from "Travaux d'Acteurs," a collection of one-act plays.

L'Atelier has produced French theater at the University for three and a half years now under the guidance of Florent Masse, a lecturer in the Department of French and Italian. The program has expanded from an informal workshop to a formidable artistic presence on campus, staging

three public performances a year.

The group's upcoming performance, "Travaux d'Acteurs," includes three one-act plays and two scenes. It is known for its physical comedy and precise movement, including actors rolling around on the floor and strangling each other on a bed.

The actors have prepared themselves for the complex texts with a full semester of carefully detailed scene work. The process was a "pedagogical challenge," Masse said.

Masse devotes hours to language drills with his novice actors.

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Messe develops L'Atelier program

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He believes in fine-tuning the pronunciation skills of his advanced students until their French is "perfect."

History of L'Atelier

The L'Atelier program at the University is unique in the United States — though other universities might put on plays in French, they do not involve a workshop. Masse has been the driving force behind the program's recent development expansion.

An energetic director, Masse frequently paces the stage during rehearsals in a trademark blazer and jeans. He roars about the craft of acting in a stage voice while wielding a prop cane. He is fiercely proud of his work with student actors, very few of whom have experience or interest in professional acting.

L'Atelier students say Masse's

direction is classical in the sense that he dictates every bit of blocking and has a concept for how each line should be delivered.

"He's very exigent," Mina Morova '07 said. "Demanding."

When more than 40 students began attending weekly L'Atelier meetings, Masse decided to restructure the program and split the group into beginning and advanced sections.

L'Atelier also visits Paris each year to gain further instruction from renowned professionals.

"The trip to Paris was great," Morova said. She joined the trip last fall and visited the Conservatoire, the national classical theater institute, where she participated in workshops with theater professionals.

"Seeing how they do it, it really makes you want to become an actor," Morova said.

One highlight from the trip, Morova said, was working with

Daniel Mesguich, a renowned theater practitioner. Mesguich is Masse's former professor, and an inspiration to L'Atelier. After only twenty minutes with Mesguich, Morova said his stage directions made her scene "five times better."

The momentum from the "landmark" first trip to Paris inspired Masse to tackle the challenge of a full-length play last spring. The troupe performed Georges Feydeau's "Le Dindon," which they had seen at the Comedie Française in Paris.

"I didn't know if a two and a half hour play — in French — would work . . . but we made it," he said.

Later this semester, the advanced students will present Molière's "Tartuffe" and the beginners will perform a series of short scenes.

Travaux d'Acteurs runs today and tomorrow at 8 p.m. in the Matthews Acting Studio in 185 Nassau. Admission is free and unreserved.