SOA Students Make Off-Broadway Debut and Get an M.F.A. in the Process

They also engage with local high school students interested in drama

By Kristin Sterling

ew York Magazine recently listed all the reasons to love New York—a comfort to those of us suffering from the January doldrums. Were we to make a similar list for Columbia University, it would surely include the opportunity to earn a degree in theatre arts by acting in an off-Broadway play—a feat being performed by a cohort of M.F.A. students in the School of the Arts (SOA) who have, themselves, The Young Company, have spent two weeks putting on daily performances of three of Molière's greatest comedies.

SOA Gleams at Golden Globes

Columbia's James Shapiro extols the virtues of "partial biography"

By Mary-Lea Cox

hakespeare scholar James Shapiro has written a book, 1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare. It took him 15 years to write about a single year in Shakespeare's life—but the exercise paid greater dividends, he told a recent Miller Theatre audience, than if he'd tried to tell the elusive playwright's story from cradle to grave. Inspired in part by the hit film Shakespeare in Love, Shapiro, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia, decided to break with the tradition of writing biographies of Shakespeare based on the few known facts of his life, to produce what he calls a "micro-biography." Shapiro pointed out that while Shakespeare in Love asks what prompted the bard to write Romeo and Juliet, he was more interested in asking how did Shakespeare get from there to Hamlet?

Fortunately, the year 1599 was "unusually well documented." By reading everything he could on that year, including any political texts, books or sermons that might have inspired Shakespeare, Shapiro said he was able to derive a much richer sense of the time and place in which the playwright had created the works of his middle period, than exists in other scholarly accounts.

He discovered, for instance, that Henry V was neither pro-war nor anti-war, as critics have alternately argued, but "a play for a nation reluctantly at war." According to Shapiro's findings, by 1599 the Tudor campaign to recover England's control over Ireland had proved costly and unpopular, and the playwright's leadership had failed to anticipate the strength of the Irish insurgency—a situation not unlike America's current predica-ment in Iraq. Shapiro noted that another highlight gleaned from writing a "partial biogra-phy" was a clearer view of the Bard's determination to use his acting troupe's move to the Globe as an opportunity to "reconsider his relationship to the theatre."

Reading aloud the epilogue to Henry IV Part II, which Shakespeare is thought to have delivered before the Whitehall court around the start of 1599, Shapiro postulated that Shakespeare was signaling his intention to move away from churning out crowd-pleasers (in particular, history plays) in favor of concentrating on psycholog-ical dramas like Hamlet, which would demand more of his audiences.

Shapiro spoke as part of the "Teatre of Ideas" series sponsored by the Miller Theatre and curated by Bill Goldstein of NTYimes.com. Upcoming events in the series include a panel of African music specialists and, next month, a talk on global climate change by environmental science profes-sor Wallace Broecker. For more information, go to www.millertheater.com/series/ideas.html

Shakespeare at Work

Columbia's James Shapiro extols the virtues of "partial biography"

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Under the directorship of Michael Sexton, The Misanthrope, directed by Michael Sexton, and Tartuffe, directed by Brian Kulick, Notably, all three directors are actively involved in M.F.A Theatre Arts Division. Wolcz and Kulick as teachers, and Sexton as a regular guest-artist.

Produced by Columbia Stages, The Molière Cycle was staged at the Classic Stage Company in Union Square—a collaboration that "capitalizes on our burgeoning relationship with New York's theatre community," according to Theatre Arts chair Steven Mangold.

SOA Gleams at Golden Globes

The prize for best dramatic film at this year's Golden Globes went to the cowboy romance Brokeback Mountain, which was coproduced by School of the Arts (SOA) professor James Schamus and stars Columbia College alumnus Jake Gyllenhaal.

Schamus, who is copresident of Focus Features, accepted the award at the Jan. 16 ceremony and thanked Columbia University in his speech. He was also invited to attend one performance of Scapin, directed by Nikolaus Wolcz, which pulled in Best Picture, Best Director (Joachim Phoenix) and Best Actress (Reese Witherspoon). Walk the Line was directed by James Mangold. SOA'99.

Below left, SOA professor James Schamus discusses "Brokeback Mountain" during a screening at Columbia last November.