

University of Alabama dance troupe to perform at international festival



The first dictionary definition of "entropy" revolves around thermodynamic energy, a system's disability to convert to mechanical work. The one most of us could more readily understand is "gradual decline into disorder."

While in the physics of our known universe matter seeks its highest degree of disarray -- spreading to the void -- through consciousness and efforts we combat entropy, forging order out of chaos, finding balance amid shifting poles; lifting against gravity, shaping momentum.

A third way to view entropy is through "co/lapse," a 50-minute dance piece assembled by a team from the University of Alabama, premiering the work later this week in Scotland, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the largest arts festival in the world.

For Sarah Barry, an associate professor in UA's Department of Theatre and Dance, teaching modern technique, choreography and improvisation, dance pedagogy and dance history, it'll be her third visit to the renowned event. Sarah put the plan into action with help from husband Mark, an instructor in art direction, pitching strategies, and portfolio development with UA's Department of Advertising and Public Relations. She worked the artistic side, while he brought together the promotional strategies.

"('co/lapse') is about 50 minutes total, using six different choreographers, myself and five students," Sarah said, "and we all worked around the theme of 'entropy.' "

Student Brianna Milner, a double major in dance and chemical engineering, brought the idea forward.

"Order and chaos ... they can apply in so many ways: relationships, the environment, politics," Sarah said. "(Milner)'s is very scientific, but the rest of us took our sections in differing directions."

The pieces were then assembled into a whole, one long transition, with all eight dancers on stage through "co/lapse" for the entire performance. Preparation has been underway roughly a year, since the Barrys' last Fringe.

"The first time, I performed a solo in 2008, and last year I went and took two alumni students, Shey Thorn and Deidre Graham, performing a duet," Sarah said. "And last year we just thought, 'What a great experience for our students, to be able to choreograph work that can be seen by their peers,' " and by the art lovers who swarm Edinburgh for three weeks in August. Last year's Fringe attendance was measured by 2,298,090 tickets issued, for the chance to choose among 3,314 shows over 313 venues, for a total of 50,459 performances over 25 days.

This is the first UA Fringe class, featuring student dancer/choreographers Milner, Katie Rose Carnes, Jay Tavares, Abigail Lee, Grace Kurosaka, Alexandra Mannings, Emily Scott, and recent UA dance graduate McKay House. Another dance and theater major, Camille Stillman, is with the team as lighting designer and stage manager.

With the vast acreage of performances at The Fringe -- theater, comedy, dance, circus, cabaret, opera, spoken word and more -- Mark's gifts were needed to draw attention.

The performers "... are used to choreographing, used to performing; what they don't really sink their teeth into is how to get people in the door," he said. So for the past three months, he's been developing promotional materials, working on social media and a website, with assistance from Stillman's photography.

"We've given it the full professional treatment, because if we don't do promotions, nobody's there," Mark said. "We've been to shows, either at The Fringe or other international things, there's three or four people sitting down in a 1,500-seat venue. There are so many aspects where we can help."

If the UA Fringe process continues, as planned, Mark hopes to bring in students from advertising and PR to assist with the promotion, and possibly add students in theater management studies.

The Fringe spun off in 1947 from the Edinburgh International Festival, which was aimed at more established names and companies. The Fringe began with less-known, growing and experimental artists seeking stages of their own, and has since swamped its progenitor in scope.

"There are like many smaller festivals housed under the big umbrella of The Fringe," Sarah said. The

International Collegiate Theatre Festival contacted the Barrys, from previous connections, about including UA students. UA's program is well-known in the dance world, so festival invitations are nothing new, but many clash with school schedules. By beginning in early August, and running until about the time school starts, The Fringe fits.

"The atmosphere of The Fringe is probably more experimental," Sarah said. "It really is a place to just try things, try out new things. It began with other artists saying 'Just because we're not famous yet, that doesn't mean we're not as good.' "

Speaking of climate, the UA team is looking forward to dropping 20 to 30 degrees cooler in the capitol of Scotland, though Mark avers it's just as humid.

"It's an awesome town, it's got incredible history," he said.

The Edinburgh Castle fortress looms over the city, atop Castle Rock, with the street known as the Royal Mile leading down into the city, which spreads in concentric circles from there. The skyline includes cliffs and highlands, and a mile to the east of the castle, Arthur's Seat, main peak in a mountain range, thought to have been named for the legendary once-and-future-king. Though linguistics believe it might also come from Scottish Gaelic's Àrd-na-Said, or "height of arrows," corrupted over years to "archer's seat."

Much like Tuscaloosa on a football weekend, Edinburgh during The Fringe doubles or trebles its population for visitors and artists, with venues created inside ancient churches or stone buildings. Those archaic timbers and centuries-old soaring rafters will be strung with the best in lighting and sound technology.

During days, the Royal Mile becomes The Fringe's main promotional area, with presenters passing out fliers, and small stages set up for preview performances; UA's Fringe team will occupy one.

"It's crowded, very New Orleans, very Mardi Gras on Bourbon Street, with lots of energy," Mark said.

The Fringe does offer awards, largely in its comedy segments, which have launched the careers of many United Kingdom comedy stars. But UA's not concerned with that aspect of it.

"The vibe of the festival is more celebratory than competitive," Sarah said. "I can't wait for the students to see their stuff out there in this atmosphere, with all the other work around; it should give them ideas about the possibilities out there, give them exposure to other forms and directors."

The collaborative nature, and longer-form work, will help students develop as professionals.

"Just the fact that they're going to be in an international venue, with audiences from all over the world ... they'll kind of see what they do in a bigger picture," Mark said. "There's a difference between talking about

stuff like this and actually doing it, learning through little mistakes."

UA's team is rehearsing again this weekend, then flying out Tuesday, coming back Aug. 14. The piece "co/lapse" will have four performances in Space Triplex. Video of the work, and more about the schedule, is available on the website at www.uafringe.com/collapse. That site also gives times for the group's four performances. Should Wi-Fi capability be strong enough, UA's team hopes live-stream at least one of the performances. Bearing in mind it's six hours later in Scotland, the Aug. 10 9:40 p.m. show would be at 3:40 p.m. here, for example.

Though the students sought and landed grants and scholarships, and more funding came from the department, from Alpha Lambda Delta (an academic excellence society) and from UA Study Abroad, the performance won't be profit-making, even with a five-pound cover charge.

"As educators, we want the light bulbs to turn on for the students," Mark said. "If this can make any of the students see potential, be made more aware of what it takes to really work professionally, then we'll have a success."

The grant-seeking work is a transferable skill as well, Sarah said, should graduates wish to become professional artists, where money's always short.

"We hope students going this year become the recruiters for next year," she said.