

UNL theater students leave mark at competition

■ Group sets records at regional festival, surpass expectations.

By Jason Hardy
Staff writer

It is virtually impossible to be a student of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln theater department without learning a thing or two about criticism. With a program as big as UNL's, theatrical productions generally attract a large audience. And, by the end of the production, almost every person in

every seat has decided whether he or she liked it or didn't.

But seldom have theater arts and criticism been so intertwined as at the Region V Kennedy Center/American College Theater Festival.

UNL students taking part in the KC/ACTF left the confines of their beloved Temple building to pit their theatrical capacities against those of other students from Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota and South Dakota.

By the end of the event, the UNL theater department had left its mark.

"We were really strong," said Kyle Johnston, a junior theater major and par-

ticipant in the festival. "UNL has always done very well, and so has the (University of Nebraska at Omaha). I think that both UNL and UNO have a strong reputation there."

The festival took place Jan 18-23 in Sioux Falls, S.D., and featured different events for students to enter, including scene design, costume design, props design, lighting design, acting ability and even full productions. The competition winners are now eligible for the National ACTF in Washington, D.C.

Of the featured events, UNL earned record-setting results.

Included were: graduate student Robert Copley who won the graduate

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theater department faculty adviser

scene design award; freshman Shawn DeCou, who won the undergraduate costume design award; graduate student Kris Kling, who won best partner; junior Kyle Johnston, who won the Irene Ryan best actor of the region award and the cast and crew of "Three Sisters," which was selected as a possible featured play for the national competition.

"Three Sisters" was one of two productions in Region V to be selected, and of the eight regions total, six will be invited to the Kennedy Center pending a decision the first week of March.

In the acting competition, UNL did well, accounting for eight of the 40 semifinalists and five of the 16 finalists. Ken McCulouch, the students' faculty adviser, said the department was very proud of how the UNL students fared.

"I knew they were going to do well, but I was very surprised they did as well as they did because the competition was so hard," he said. "To have so many from one institution make it to the semifinals and finals is unusual. In fact, many are saying that at this region that was a record.

"It's amazing and very gratifying, so I think we were all surprised that it went to that level."

Johnston, who also wrote the two works he performed at the festival, said the event was rewarding, both in terms of personal accomplishment and artistic camaraderie.

"Everyone was doing a great job of looking at each other's work critically,

and I was very happy to see everybody doing great stuff on stage," Johnston said. "I was really overwhelmed with the sharing that was going on and with the communication of the students from UNL and other schools.

"They were true and enthusiastic responses to art, and it makes me want to represent all those people the best I can by being myself in the nationals."

The reward was not without its sacrifices. The competing students spent weeks working with faculty to prepare for the event. It was a kind of preparation that McCulouch said was unfamiliar to many theater students.

"I guess it's more of a concept of coaching rather than teaching or directing like we usually do," he said. "So it's a lot of individual discussion with each nominee about their material, then work on the actual presentation of their material."

"The pressure is much greater and, for some, it's really an eye opener that an audition is not like doing a role in a play."

Despite UNL's recent successes, the theater department is already gearing up for the national event, which will take place at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on April 17-27. Nevertheless, as department chairman Jeffery Scott Elwell said in an e-mail Monday, it's nice to enjoy the success.

"It really says a lot about our faculty, staff and kids when we dominate a region that has the universities of Iowa, Colorado, Missouri and Kansas in it."

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