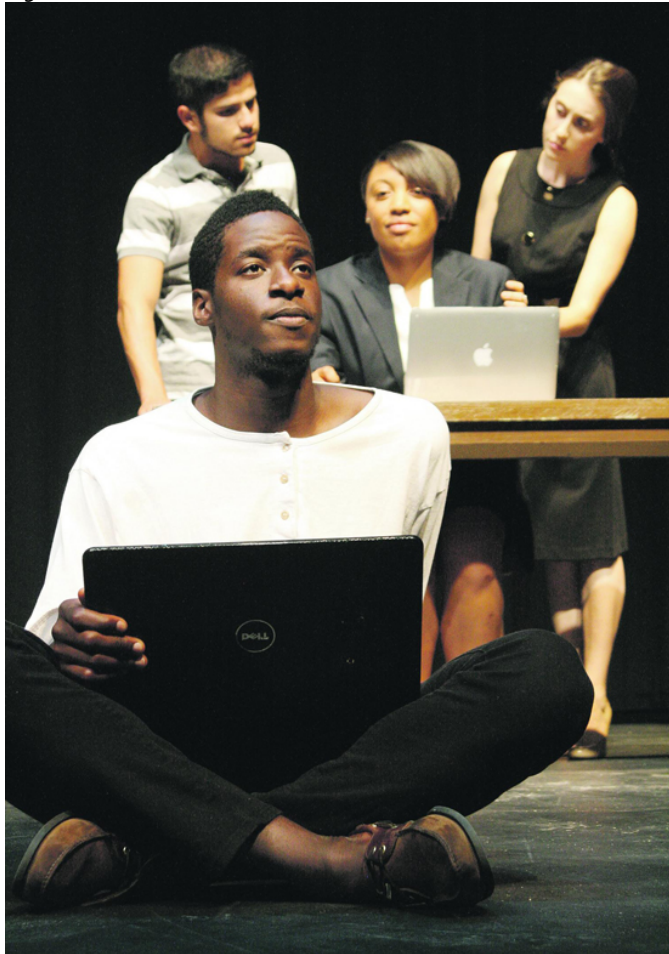


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## SMC Production Explores What It Truly Means to Help

By Lou Fancher



SMC performers, from left, back row: Joseph Klink and Haley Leitman. Front row: Paul Nnaoji and Kentaley McCurdy. Photo Michael Cook

A current theater production at Saint Mary's College reflects contemporary society's wired, surreal landscape with a dark-edged fable that poses more questions than it provides answers.

Playwright Laura Jacqmin's "And When We Awoke There Was Light and Light," directed by Susannah Martin, features students in the college's Performing Arts Department theatre program. The play opened on Nov. 14 with a pre-show talk by Martin and runs through Sunday, Nov. 24. A discussion with Jacqmin, Martin, the cast and Theatre Program Director Rebecca Engle as moderator is scheduled for after the performance on Saturday, Nov. 23.

Written in 2007, Jacqmin's play won the \$25,000 Wasserstein Prize in 2008 and was premiered at the University of Oklahoma in 2012. The story circles around Katie (Kentaley McCurdy), an affluent high school senior who befriends David (Paul Nnaoji), a boy in Uganda. Their online bond - and all sense of trust - is broken when David eventually reveals a secret from his former life. Katie's helicopter parents, a too-uptight teacher, a smart-aleck sister and a cadre of magic, fantastic entities (a clock, a luggage carousel) provide a backdrop for Jacqmin's ambitious examination of what it means to "help." Is the risk of personal sacrifice the blade cutting off compassion? Are we willing to "do good" if it comes with a price tag?

In an email, Jacqmin says the play has continued to evolve. "I was making changes all the way through the production process last fall," she writes.

Influenced by Sam Shepard, a playwright whose one act plays cause Jacqmin to ask herself, "You can do that?" she admires Shepard's "sheer theatricality and inventiveness." Edward Albee, she suggests, created "fascinating toxic spirals" for his characters. But her contemporaries - Jackie Sibbles Drury, Marisa Wegrzyn, and Sheila Callaghan - light the brightest sparks with their innovative language and stories that push the parameters of

universal concerns like trust, honesty, goodness, evil and mercy.

Martin is an in-demand, Oakland-based director who teaches drama at San Francisco University High School. While directing the play at SMC, she's also developing Ariel Luckey's solo show about race and integration that will premiere at La Pena Cultural Center in May 2014 and she will be directing "Our Town" at Berkeley's Shotgun Players next season.

Martin's working process is layered, like many of her peers. Piercing each step, from research to script readings to rehearsals, probing questions lead to dramaturgical understanding.

"I come in prepared, but I don't have a set idea of everything that's going to happen," she says, in an interview. "Everyone I work with has a skill set I don't have, so what they bring will make it go in a direction I don't expect. I get a more expressive storytelling."

Martin admits to being "intense, rigorous - even a hard-ass," and says the Saint Mary's students are sweet and hard working. Adjusting to their varying level of experience, she insists on professionalism. The scripts might be a magical blend of deceptively simple folktales, instant messaging and the rhythm of teenagers in conversation, but the issues addressed are hard core.

The fact that the David character is not just a refugee, but was once himself a Lord's Resistance Army child soldier who has killed, unraveled streams of inquiry for Martin. She researched every element: cultural capitalism, globalization, Ugandan and LRA history, Ivy League schools, and the Evanston, Ill., educational system.

"There are no easy answers to the questions the play is asking," she says. "It's thoughtful, but it's also demanding we think about what we are giving up with all our technology and 'instantness.' That's a subject worth paying attention to."

The Saint Mary's College production "And When We Awoke There Was Light and Light," will run at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, Nov. 21-23 and at 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 24. Tickets can be purchased at the door, or by calling (925) 631-4670 or visiting [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com).

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