

## **"Courting Winnona" to be presented by Department of Theatre work by Jonathan Field**

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"COURTING WINNONA" TO OPEN AT UCSD JAN. 7

The parched streets of Cliff, a mid-sized city that might have been dozing in the searing New Mexican sun since the 50s, will take shape on the Warren Theatre stage at the University of California, San Diego on Jan. 7 in "Courting Winnona," an earthy "work in progress" by UCSD graduate student Jonathan Field.

Field recently won the Los Angeles Arts Council Award in playwrighting for two new works. Walton Jones, a nationally recognized director and UCSD professor of theatre, will direct the production, and Floyd Gaffney, professor of theatre and founder of UCSD's Contemporary Black Arts program, will perform one of its major roles.

The Department of Theatre presentation will run through Jan. 11. Curtain time is 8 p.m. Jan. 7-10, and 7 p.m. on closing night.

"Courting Winnona" explores the unrelenting grip that environment can have on our lives. The play's characters are inextricably linked to the self-contained desert community in which they live. Cliff, New Mexico, with its Southwestern car culture, scorched land and ubiquitous dust, helps determine how its residents live their lives.

The play is a tale of love and thwarted love. It entangles the lives of six engrossing characters during the course of a summer. Although the story is set in the '80s, Cliff and the trusting, often ingenuous nature of its residents are reminiscent of the '50s.

The action revolves around the courtship of a radio talk show host named Billy Bond and Lizbeth Cates, a woman who has learned to avoid life's painful truths and decisions by digging in her garden. Both are in their early 20s.

Shortly after the play opens, the town learns that Liz's former beau, Stick Montoya, who had confidently departed Cliff the previous September to attend college on a baseball scholarship, is returning home to pitch for the rookie league Cliff Miners. Understandably, both Billy and Lizbeth are anxious about the anticipated homecoming.

This three-way entanglement is played out against a different kind of alliance--that of Thelma Seagar, Lizbeth's widowed landlady, and Redman Edwards, the 65-year-old black man who owns Cliff's sweet shop. Thelma, who consumes two fifths of bourbon a week, sits at life's ringside and champions two primary causes, the Miners and Billy and Lizbeth's romance, with equal enthusiasm. Redman, a former boxing promoter with a colorful and shady past, dreams about living his life on the road again.

Although the two appear to be an odd couple--even at his ripe old age, Redman is decidedly a lady's man; Thelma is a broad-beamed "old pigeon" who supports her enormous weight with a cane--they offer one another support and continuity as they drift through old age.

That brings us to Winnona, a burger cook in her late teens who turns up in the lives of the citizens of Cliff at odd moments. She is a free spirit, the only truly independent character in the play. Her utter lack of convention and inhibition perplexes and disturbs--and at the same time tantalizes--the other characters. She teases and frightens them with her unlikely preoccupation with buffalo, a symbol of death and the earth. For Winnona, there are no lasting attachments--not even to Cliff, the town of her birth.

Playwright Field lived for several years in a New Mexican community not unlike Cliff. The characters in his play are based on some of the people he came to know. In fact, the real life people may not have known one another, but he felt they were connected in some way.

"I knew 'Thelma' wouldn't have liked 'Redman'--she was a racist--but I felt that there was something that they shared. I liked the idea of finding connections between people who were so different and yet, in some ways, quite similar," he said.

Field grew up in New York and graduated from Vassar in 1980. Following graduation, he moved to New Mexico, where he was a freelance writer. He entered UCSD's Master of Fine Arts program in 1983 on a Regents' scholarship.

Jones, who earned his M.F.A. at the Yale School of Drama in 1975, joined UCSD's Department of Theatre last fall. He served as associate artistic director for the Yale Repertory Theatre and the Alaska Repertory Theatre before coming to UCSD. Since 1975, he has directed on Broadway and off-Broadway, in Tokyo, in numerous regional theatres, and for television and radio.

Gaffney plays the hard-edged Redman Edwards. Other cast members are Peter Carlton Brown and Theresa McCarthy, graduate theatre students, Elizabeth Backenstow and Michael J. Lopez, undergraduate theatre majors, and Marce Grahame, a San Diego actress.

Designers are Lucie Lortie, sets; Lori S. Catlin, costumes; Randa Rai Slack, lighting; and David Leyton, sound. The stage manager is Linda M. Funsten.

Tickets are \$5 (student) and \$7 (general public), available at the Mandell Weiss Center Ticket Office, the UCSD Student Center Box Office, the ARTS TIX booth and all TicketMaster outlets. Call 534-4574 for information.

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