

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

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UC San Diego MFA Students Move, Shake the Political Stage



(Left to right) UC San Diego students Zora Howard, Caroline Siewert, Keith Wallace and Luis Vega during a recent rehearsal. Photo: Jim Carmody, UC San Diego.

When playwright Deborah Stein and director Suli Holum began working on the musical comedy “Movers + Shakers” in 2012, it was the height of the presidential election season and they were amused by the foibles of politicians such as Sarah Palin and Anthony Weiner. Flash forward to 2016 and another election year. The players have changed, but the intersections of “sex, power and hubris” portrayed in the play, which premieres Feb. 13 at the Joan and Irwin Jacobs Theatre District at the University of California, San Diego, are just as fascinating.

Created by Stein | Holum Projects, the production is an interdisciplinary collaboration between UC San Diego artists. It stars six actors from the Department of Theatre and Dance's Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program and was produced by a team including MFA designers. The cast and crew also includes a Department of Music Ph.D. program composer and musicians who are UC San Diego music alumni.

"This play is about smart people doing stupid things," Holum said, citing former President Bill Clinton's oval office exploits and Sen. Anthony Weiner's sex texts. "There is an interaction between sex, power and hubris—the ancient Greek concept of the tragic flaw that is part of the fabric of human behavior. There's something about thinking that, because they have power, they can get away with such behaviors."

Stein, who teaches playwriting in the Department of Theatre and Dance, and Holum, her collaborator, believe in a "devised theater" process where lines and actions develop through workshops in which actors devise scenes following basic directions. Characters and lines grow from these sessions. This process is much different from the traditional idea of a playwright sitting down alone to invent a story and characters.



(Left to right) Tim McNally, Zora Howard, Luis Vega, Emily Shain, Sean McIntyre and Caroline Siewert rehearsing, "Movers + Shakers." Photo: Jim Carmody, UC San Diego.

"Our improvisational structures are more investigations of character and style than they are of situation," said Holum. "They are not so much intended to generate dialogue as they are to explore states of being in the world of our play. For example, a question we came in with is 'why do people sing?' There is a whole host of reasons, and therefore a wide range of sung expression."

Holum and Stein were also interested in the mundane and absurd, so they asked the actors to bring in everyday objects and have the objects rebel—the pen that keeps falling out of your hand, the coffee cup that has a lid that doesn't fit. These physical 'scores' that the actors generate became layers of staging.

After a few years of development, Stein and Holum ultimately decided that "Movers + Shakers" would work best as a musical comedy in which each of six actors performs two characters—a politician and a constituent. For the most part, constituents speak their lines and politicians sing theirs.

According to Stein and Holum, while Bill Clinton and Anthony Weiner are high-profile male politicians whose tragic flaws included careless sexual behavior, other politicians in the spotlight exhibited different variations on the “power, hubris and sex” theme. For example, Palin and President Barack Obama flirted with audiences during their campaign; Hillary Clinton does not have this same kind of presence and this, they said, may make it more difficult for her to win over some voters. Additionally, Donald Trump uses his power as an outspoken billionaire to impress conservative voters in spite of his multiple marriages and pro-choice stance on abortion. Stein and Holum are also fascinated with Bernie Sanders, who they said appeals to voters drawn to a candidate who wants to “burn the house down.”

“The play is non-partisan,” explained Holum. “It’s about which politicians we choose to revere and prop up.” To which Stein added, “We’re not making a judgment about how voters make their decisions, we’re only shining a light on it.”

“Movers + Shakers” runs Feb. 13 – 21 at the Mandell Weiss Forum Theatre at UC San Diego. For more information about the play and how to buy tickets, visit the [website](#).

The UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance regularly ranks among the top three in the country. The program also shares a close relationship with the Tony Award-winning La Jolla Playhouse, and its graduate students participate in at least one professional residency. Upon graduation, many students go on to work professionally in theater, film and television. For more information visit the [website](#).

MEDIA CONTACT

Dirk Sutro, 858-534-4830, dsutro@ucsd.edu

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