

Eric Christmas, who will retire from teaching at end of academic year, to direct "Merchant of Venice", UCSD's 12th annual Shakespeare Project

February 6, 1986

ERIC CHRISTMAS DIRECTS HIS LAST UCSD SHAKESPEARE PROJECT

The first full-time faculty member of the University of California, San Diego's Department of Drama will retire from teaching at the end of this academic year. One of his final duties will be to direct "Merchant of Venice," UCSD's 12th annual Shakespeare Project.

Renowned stage and screen actor Eric Christmas, who founded the project, said, "I am pleased we are doing 'Merchant of Venice' this year.

"In this day and age, our society is searching itself, opening doors, and breaking down old attitudes, especially those about stereotypes," he added, referring to the character Shylock, a Jewish moneylender and antagonist of Antonio.

The play will be performed at 1 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. March 4 and March 6, in the Warren Theatre.

Under Christmas' tutelage, the play will be staged and performed by the second year graduate acting class, comprised of students who are studying for their master of fine arts degree in drama. Two quarters of the academic year are devoted to studying the Shakespearean text, because, Christmas says, "I believe we learn more by doing fewer things well. Spending time and care is a much more complete learning experience."

The idea of the project is to prepare students for success in attaining jobs in repertory or regional theater. "These theater companies have a repertoire of plays, and among them is always something classical," he said.

The Shakespeare Project provides the actors with the opportunity to become skilled in the speech, diction and movement required by classical theater.

The students spend one quarter intensely examining the text of the play, and the other is spent actually getting into the roles. One character is shared by several actors, thereby giving each a chance to get into the role, according to Christmas.

"They learn to make their discoveries from the play. The life of the play is released through the learning of it," he said.

"By sharing the characters, the players are not forced to put their own personality on top. They are allowed to escape themselves and learn acting, rather than behaving. So much of acting is decorating. These students are finding more wonderful things in exploring than decorating.

"This experience is exciting for them because they learn how to listen. They hear what is said about them while they are in character, and what is said to them. They are not leaning on the director or becoming so preoccupied with their own character that they have no time to do anything else," he said.

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(February 6, 1986)