

L I V I N G

IND



# MORE THAN A KISS

Upcoming play at UL is at the center of a cultural battle field. By Walter Pierce

When 18-year-old Tyler Clementi jumped to his death Sept. 22 from the George Washington Bridge after his Rutgers University roommate outed him via a live webcast, we were reminded of the brutal bullying that gays and lesbians, especially adolescents, endure as they make the often painful transit from private to public sexual orientation. It's a topic that has been on the front lines of America's culture war for decades, cast now in the sharp relief of steel girders and cold, black water, and it is the backdrop to an ambitious opening for the 2010-2011 season of the UL Performing Arts Department.

*Stop Kiss*, the Obie Award-winning play by Diana Son, opens Thursday, Oct. 14 and runs through Sunday, Oct. 17 in the still-new Burke Hall Theater on campus. The play follows through time- and scene-shifting scenes the story of Callie and Sara — the former a savvy New Yorker, the latter a headstrong Midwesterner who moves to the Big Apple to teach in the Bronx — a pair of theretofore heterosexual women whose disparate trajectories in life lead them to a transcendent, public kiss and, in consequence, a shocking act of violence.

"It's a socially relevant play; something that I think the community would be well-suited in viewing," says director Nyalls Hartman, associate professor and chair of the Performing Arts Department at UL.

"For me, this whole fight about gay marriage is such a passé issue," Hartman adds. "That people of great intelligence who are well educated think it's sinful is so unbelievable to me, so I think it's a good issue, a good relevant issue for us to deal with."

In a contemporary review written when the play first appeared Off Broadway in 1998 — at about the time Wyoming teenager Matthew Shepard was tortured, tethered to a snowy fence post and left to die by homophobic peers — *The New York Times'* Ben Brantley called it "a sweet, sad and enchantingly sincere play," adding that the script is "a gentle, affectionate work, with a blithe sense of comedy that brings to mind early episodes of 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show.' Imagine Rhoda and Mary slowly discovering that they are physically attracted to each other, and you'll know what I mean."

But even with 12 years on its tread, *Stop Kiss* still proves technically challenging as a stage play — a primary reason Hartman chose the play.

"We're used to TV where you can instantly change scenes, instantly change dates — we're used to that; but the theatrical world, it's not. And it's very difficult for theater to compete with an audience that's used to the abilities and effects of TV and film. So, I sat down with the design team and I said, 'Can we pull this off? How do we make it theatrical? What ideas can we do that would make this work and be compelling for us as artists to try and work on?' And so we came up with an approach we thought would work and we agreed to do it."

The UL production of *Stop Kiss* will also have legs: The cast and production staff are scheduled to present the play at the Louisiana State Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in November.

The teacher in Hartman sees a value in the play that extends beyond its important role as a prism through which to view contemporary events.

"This is the work [the students are] going to be doing when they enter the film industry," he says. "They're going to be doing scenes out of sequence and they're going to be doing plays that are written like this. And the subject matter is dicey and emotional, and they have to move from one emotion in an instantaneous scene change to two months prior and complete opposite emotion. It was really a good, meaty piece for our students to work on; it was really challenging." ■■■

Directed by Nyalls Hartman, *Stop Kiss* features Rachel Mauti (Callie), Elizabeth Satterly (Sara), David Huxynh (George), Tylor Clark (Peter), Catherine Lucchesi (Det. Cole), Kristen Dubois (Mrs. Winsley) and Tiffanyjo Ayers (Nurse). The play runs Thursday, Oct. 14 through Sunday, Oct. 17 in Burke Hall Theater.

General admission is \$10, \$5 for alumni and free for UL Lafayette students and faculty. Tickets are available at the door. For more information or to inquire about reservations, contact the theater office at 482-6357. For more information on the UL Lafayette College of the Arts, visit [www.arts.louisiana.edu](http://www.arts.louisiana.edu).