



A backstage pass to a local theater production

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Mary Young and Patrick Russell are meeting almost every night after work, hoping to work things out. They're sorting through their emotions, trying to rediscover themselves in a strange new world.

It helps that Young's husband and Russell's girlfriend support their efforts.

It's not what you think. Young and Russell are actors preparing for a play.

Of course, what it's like being an actor in a local theatrical production might not be what you think, either.

There's a perception that actors simply memorize lines, then emote to their attention-starved hearts' content. That's a misconception. It takes hard work, a commitment to craft, sharp instincts and a desire to entertain. If there's a certain amount of ego involved, it's needed. The stage is no place for the shrinking or unsure.

Young and Russell are part of the cast for "Lincolnesque," a modern political satire with an unlikely tie to the past; the play runs through Saturday at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum.

Young plays Carla, the new chief of staff to an empty-suit congressman. Russell is Leo, the congressman's speechwriter. The two are joined by Ed MacMurdo and Tom Lawton, two veteran performers who round out the four-person cast. Phil Funkenbusch directs and Roger Kimball provides music.

The production didn't start with the customary auditions. Before deciding if he even wanted to produce the play, Funkenbusch decided to delve a little deeper into what the playwright wanted to convey.

"It is such a new play, and a difficult one, so I asked actors to come in and actually read the play," he says.

While Russell began immediately lobbying for a part, Young was initially skeptical.

"Lincolnesque"

Sponsored by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation

* When

8 p.m. today and Saturday

* Where

The Union Theater;
Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum, 212 N. Sixth St.

* Tickets

\$12 (\$10 for Foundation members), available by calling 558-8934 or visiting <http://foundation.alplm.com>.

“I thought the character was kind of two-dimensional. The story was great; the part just didn’t grab me,” she said.

After doing a read-through with the other actors, Young began to see possibilities of how the character could be more fully expressed. The chance to work with other actors and a director she both liked and respected was too good to pass up.

At 42, Young is too young to be called the dame of local actresses, but she is a veteran who’s often cited as a role model by younger performers. She estimates that she’s been in around 70 productions. Before ever taking the stage, though, Young first had to deal with her shyness, which seems a bit like having to overcome a fear of heights before conquering the dream of being a tightrope walker. But the desire and the ability to act are separate from the need for attention as well as a means for building self-confidence.

“I finally came to the realization that if I ever wanted to perform, I’d have to get past that fear of putting myself out there,” she says. “So I finally did.”

To this day, she’s still “wracked with nerves” before a show. She’s able to overcome her anxiety and self-consciousness through determination and by investing herself completely in her character.

“I’m comfortable knowing it’s not really me that I’m showing to the world,” she says.

The world, however, sometimes gets confused. Young says when she plays a character who is evil or depressed, some audience members will act leery around her after a performance, attributing the character’s personality to her. She describes Carla, her character in “Lincolnesque,” as “cutthroat — vicious,” so she won’t be shocked if people steer clear of her after the show.

Those who do approach will find an intelligent and introspective woman with a quick, dry wit. A Springfield native and UIS graduate, she’s employed as the public affairs director for the Illinois council of the American Institute of Architects.

She’s married now, and the desire to spend more time with her husband is a big reason she doesn’t appear in as many productions these days. In “Lincolnesque,” she found a unique opportunity to perform while minimizing the interruption to her life.

Since everyone in the cast works downtown, they’re able to meet at 5:30 p.m., avoiding late-night rehearsals. Funkenbusch’s reputation as a director with a clear vision and impeccable instincts means rehearsals are organized and productive. Since many scenes include only two of the actors, they don’t all need to be there every night.

“Unless, of course, you’re Patrick, who needs to be there all the time because he obviously needs the most work,” Young says.

As the youngest and least experienced in the cast, Russell, 32, is the target of many jokes. He doesn’t seem to mind.

He works as an actor at the ALPLM, appearing in Ghosts of the Library, a nine-minute presentation in which he interacts with special effects. Since “Lincolnesque” is a dialogue-heavy play that clocks in at just under two hours and includes other living beings, it’s a challenge for him, although being in the spotlight is not.

Among friends, he's known as "The Patrick," a moniker he gave himself while deejaying. It's partly self-mocking and partly in response to people who confuse his effusive personality with a scream for attention. His facial expressions sometimes call to mind a young Jim Carey, although he doesn't quite reach the same level of hyperactivity.

In addition to acting, Russell is a musician, DJ and photographer. He spent some years in Portland, Ore., before returning home to Springfield. Not counting his day job, "Lincolnesque" is his eighth theatrical production.

Before a Wednesday-evening rehearsal, Young and Russell are practicing lines. He seems excitable, reading in character. She's relaxed, simply reciting her lines. It's clear that the veteran is helping the upstart.

"He knows his lines better than he thinks he does," Young says reassuringly and loud enough for Russell to overhear.

The cast, at this point, still is on-book — meaning a member of the crew will feed them lines if they forget. By the next week, they're expected to have everything committed to memory.

Memorizing lines is only part of the challenge. In live theater, everything matters.

Funkenbusch takes a moment to comment on the merits and shortcomings of a bench that is being used for a scene set in a park. Ultimately, he decides the bench won't have to be recast.

When Young rehearses a scene on the bench, assistant director Nancy Cole suggests that she stiffen her posture to match her increased intensity when the scene turns volatile.

The collaboration between cast, crew and props extends all the way to Washington, D.C. That's where Lincolnesque playwright John Strand lives. Funkenbusch has been in e-mail contact with him when questions arise about how certain scenes should play.

Funkenbusch's commitment to his craft had earned the respect of the cast long before this production came about, so his suggestions usually are taken well — even when they're cutting.

"Phil and I had a discussion and decided that long hair just wouldn't be right for a speech writer on a campaign. So off it went," Russell says of his newly shorn locks.

Now comfortable with Russell's look, Funkenbusch asks his cast if there is anything they're uncomfortable with. Russell, jokingly portraying the sensitive artist, claims he's having difficulty with Young. She quickly retorts: "That's exactly the way I want it."

The line gets its intended laugh, but it's tempting to read more into it. Young, however, says it isn't a case of Method acting.

"My response to Patrick was probably more me being 'me' than me working to create an atmosphere for the sake of the relationship between our characters," she explains of her need to rip on her co-star.

There are times, however, when real-life emotions do inform the characters. At early rehearsals of a scene in which Carla seduces Leo, Russell described the experience as "sufficiently awkward."

"The good thing is that it's supposed to be a comedic moment and (the character is) supposed to be awkward," he says. "So, I think it'll work."

It's clear that Russell puts more pressure on himself than do the others. While admitting that initially he was a bit intimidated by his more accomplished cast mates, he says they now serve as inspiration to do better work.

"Working with Mary and Tom and Ed makes me want to be better," he says. "I have to bring my lunch pail and really work."

The lunch-pail analogy is accurate — acting is hard work. Even so, the mood and camaraderie on display doesn't recall a crew slogging its way through another shift.

A few impromptu publicity photographs set off a series of mugging and somewhat-suggestive poses. Someone jokes about getting a Lincoln tattoo to commemorate the experience. Young says at an earlier rehearsal, much effort went into finding double entendres in the dialogue. The word "duty" proved useful for lightening the mood.

"Everyone seems to know when it's time to buckle down and when it's OK to crack jokes, and that creates a great work environment," Russell says.

Just over a week before opening night, the cast is buckling down. They rehearse in costume for the first time.

"It always amazes me what happens once the costume goes on," Russell says. "Leo finally felt like a real person to me and not something written on a page."

MacMurdo agrees. Weeks ago, when he looked at Russell he saw an actor working hard to cultivate his role. Over time, the actor has disappeared into the character.

"Now when I look across the stage, I find myself seeing Leo and experiencing the relationship he has with my character," MacMurdo says.

On opening night, Russell is confident, excited and a little amazed at how much they've accomplished in just a month's time.

"Personally, I'm at a place where I'm comfortable with the script and ready to let Leo take over," he says. "I just hope the audience is entertained."

Young is excited as well, although she describes opening night as bittersweet, because it marks the beginning of the end of the experience they've all shared this past month.

Russell compares the journey — from casting through rehearsals to show time — as walking on a tightrope: exhilarating, stressful and a lot harder than it looks.

As the curtain rises and Kimball's saxophone begins to sing, they're all about to find out if they make it to the other side.

Dan Naumovich is a freelance writer who can be reached through the features desk at 788-1512.