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RAVE REVIEWSPROFESSIONAL ENSEMBLE ON CAMPUS BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO 'A MIDSUMMER
NIGHT'S DREAM'by [Kelli Caplan](#) | June 28, 2024*Read time: about 3 min*

Jimmy Grimes never expected to be part of a professional theatre group on campus. So when Associate Professor Dr. Grace Godwin announced the newly-formed James River Shakespeare Company (JRSC) needed members, Grimes jumped at the chance.

And he was not alone. Students, alumni, and staff were enamored with the idea and lined up to be part of the company. Now that dream, if you will, has come true with the staging of William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"It is such a gift," said Grimes, '25 [Theatre](#). "It builds our resume in an honest and diversifying way. It's a way for us to be able to show we were part of a professional company on our resume. It adds to our resumes outside of CNU productions."

The company is similar to summer stock theater, as the participants get paid for their work, rehearsal time is short, and the productions are presented at several community venues, both on and off campus. JRSC was the brainchild of Godwin and Bruce Bronstein, executive director of the [Ferguson Center for the Arts](#). Godwin had just finished a successful production of "Queen Margaret" at CNU and thought it was the right



time to engage the cast and gauge their interest in starting a professional stage company. The goal, which was enthusiastically met, was to have it up and running by this summer.

“To my astonishment, more than 20 people showed up at an informational meeting during exam week. They were pretty much ready to get started,” Godwin said.

The JRSC was born and it gained immediate momentum. The founding company has 21 members, including 12 current students, six alumni who graduated this year, one faculty member, and two staff members. All of the members are theater majors or minors.

“Their generous willingness to participate, combined with my experience with them as a collaborator and professor, and Bruce’s determination to get the JRSC off the ground, made it possible for us to take on all interested parties this year, many for their first professional theatrical employment,” Godwin said.

The JRSC produced Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” as its inaugural production. It began with a handful of free performances that quickly sold out. The show’s popularity rapidly grew, rave reviews poured in, and more performance dates were added to meet demand.

In the future, Godwin said, “we plan to offer a repertory of two or more plays each season, complemented by a concert and educational materials.” Students, alumni, and faculty, and staff will also be able to audition for the company.

The stage company has not only created a place where intellectualism and collaboration come together, but also a platform from which members can expand their experience and bolster their resumes.

“It is a wonder to see how the James River Shakespeare Company, in the very short amount of time since it has formed, has emerged as both a crack professional ensemble and as a witty, supportive fellowship.

“The trust in, and respect for, the ideas and talents of supportive peers has, in the mere 10 days since our first official rehearsal, yielded not only an utterly original and absolutely skillful production of a very oft-produced play, but also a space filled with as much much laughter as there is learning,” Godwin said.

The company not only enhances the theatre scene on campus, but is also a way to bring alumni back into the fold. The JRSC, Godwin said, is committed to the values of creativity, connection and cleverness. It offers three ways to boost the CNU theatre experience:

- Creates a comfortable and supportive working environment attuned to industry standards and compensation. Company members can experience what it is like to work as professionals in the field.
- Establishes a process that supports practical and intellectual creativity and focus. The summer season provides members the chance to focus on a single endeavor without the many pressures of a semester and detaches creativity from academic evaluation such as grades and tests.
- Employs company members to undertake roles in ways that expand their skill sets: progressive and provocative casting choices inform new readings of historical texts while the cast, creatives, and crews are all offered opportunities to enhance their resumes by undertaking activities sometimes unavailable to them within the course of the co-curricular season.

Grimes said he and his fellow company members have had a wonderful experience reinventing “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” flexing their creative muscles and seeing their interpretation come to life on stage. They have added humor and several twists to the production.

“We have had the best time doing this,” he said.

Being part of the company has driven home how much he truly loves being on stage and has helped him to envision a career in theater.

It is one of many opportunities on campus Grimes has to experience theatre outside of the classroom. He has also been involved with [The New Musicals Lab](#), a musical theatre incubator program unique to Christopher Newport.

“Being able to have the summer just to focus on this work has helped me realize that this is what I want to do with my life,” Grimes said. “It is such an amazing opportunity.”

As the JRSC continues to flourish, its presence and impact at CNU and in the community will grow, Godwin said. So far, Godwin, who has been involved in theater and academics for decades, said she has been wholly impressed by the company’s work, energy and progress.

“In 30 years of professional and or academic experience with theatre, on two continents, that run the gamut from wholly profit-based to completely voluntary, and ranges from mindless entertainment to purposely esoteric production, I can attest that the James River Shakespeare Company does and will stand out as a uniquely productive, provocative and positive experience,” she said.
