

## The sound of success

### JMU senior sets the scene with music

►Back

By Rachel Bowman [rbowman@dnronline.com](mailto:rbowman@dnronline.com)

When Anna-Lee Craig graduated from Harrisonburg High School in 2007, she had her sights set on an acting career. Now, in her senior year at James Madison University, Craig has found a creative and cutting edge way to touch the emotions of theatre and moviegoers without ever having to step foot on a stage or set. And she's already winning accolades for her work.

Craig, daughter of Marvin and Rebecca Howard of Harrisonburg, won first place for Sound Design Excellence at the Region II Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival held at Towson University in Maryland (Region II encompasses Northern Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Western New York).

Her win came from her work in JMU's spring production of "bobraschenbergamerica" by Charles Mee and the fall 2010 production of "Letters To Sala" while other JMU students won for costume design and directing, said Dennis Beck, theatre program coordinator in the JMU School of Theatre and Dance. Craig will next move on to present her work at the KCACTF National Festival, which includes presentations from theatre and dance students from across the country, Beck said.

Sound was the farthest thing from Craig's mind when she entered JMU as a freshman theatre major and music industry minor. Having starred in HHS's spring musicals during the mid-2000s, Craig said she always pictured herself as an actress. Then, she discovered the power of sound while assisting a senior year sound designer during a production; sound, she said she learned, "can change the way people feel." Since then, she said she's handled sound design for many of JMU's theatre and dance productions, averaging about two productions in the Main Stage Theatre each year.

Although sound in movies and theatre productions is nothing new, Beck said sound design is "the next step in the evolution of movie-making." Many composers in Europe have explored the concept in their shows for years, he said, and American moviemakers are now beginning to see that setting the sonic landscape is vital to a successful show, he said. Craig added that sound designers use everything, from so-called background noises to specific sound effects to song selection, to create mood and evoke emotional responses from members of the audience.

Craig explained how her festival entries illustrate the power of sound design. The motif of "bobraschenbergamerica" is nostalgic Americana, so she chose jazz, big band and orchestra music that evokes a uniquely early 20th century America mood. "Letters to Sala," a Holocaust drama, is somber and the plot travels from bustling New York streets to the stark, staccato noises of a concentration camp; for that, she said she chose subtle, environmental sounds that seem to creep in and out as the scenes shifted. Festival judges were able to take in her sound design portfolios by reading descriptive reports, viewing



**Anna-Lee Craig parlayed a love of theater into a career when she learned sound design. Now she competing in the national round of the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival's sound design contest.**

Photo by Rachel Bowman

production stills and listening to sound files on headphones while interacting with a slide show of each performance, she said.

While her two entries made up 50 percent of the entries in the Sound Design category, Craig said she's excitedly preparing for national competition. Held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in April, the festival brings together the other regions' winning artists to collaborate on several productions and present their entries for judging. She said she's decided to refine "bobrauschenbergamerica" as her sole entry, and she's thoughtfully adjusting the paperwork, photos and sound files for the judges' consideration. "It's going to be an exciting thing," she said, smiling.

And, while prepping for the national contest, she's also thinking about the future of sound design at JMU. She said having a new arts and theater center filled with new equipment gives theater and dance students like herself pride in their work and the desire to learn more about other aspects of the business. She helped form a club specifically for technical theater students: the club sponsors workshops in all areas of technical design, including sound design. And she said she's already identified five freshmen theater students who would make promising sound designers after she graduates this year.

She may be a hard act to follow. Craig "is the best student sound designer I've ever come across," said Beck. He praised her drive to learn in class as well as on-the-job on student productions, which may entail going into an ill-equipped space to set up superior sound equipment that allows audiences to imagine they're taking in a major show, he said. While working with Craig on "bobrauschenbergamerica," Beck said she proficiently analyzed the show and used the equipment available to her to blend sound effects and music to create a unified production, and adroitly negotiated the rights for all the music featured in the show. He's not surprised she's already received job offers; Craig "is not only good technically," he said, "but she's also an artist."

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