

Faculty Profile



Karla Baldwin: *Drama Director
and Academic Dean*

A

ll but a few of the 135 seats in the Jeffrey Campbell Theater are empty. The house lights fade to black. The stage lights come up slightly and... nothing happens. A few more seconds tick by and still nothing happens.

“Stage manager, you need to have your people in position before the house lights go down! Actors, the stage lights are your cue to enter,” bellows a voice trained so well in projection that it can be heard anywhere in the theater from backstage to light booth. That voice belongs to Karla Baldwin, Putney School’s drama director and academic dean.

The house is empty because this is the first dress rehearsal, which continues without further directorial intervention. Karla will take notes for the entire two hours, after which she’ll debrief cast and crew so they can get it better tomorrow night, the last run-through before opening night.

Dress rehearsals for the year’s big productions occur during the final days of spring and fall Project Week. The interest level in theater among students has been so high recently that Karla has been compelled to run two shows in the fall, just to keep everybody engaged. “Never again,” says Karla—every time she does it. This year it was two bedroom farces by Georges Feydeau, *She’s All Yours* and *A Flea in Her Ear*. Last year it was *Macbeth* and *Othello*. The year before it was *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy of Errors*. Before that, *Antigone* and *Electra*—with a mid-spring, senior-directed production of *Laundry and Bourbon* and *Lonestar* for dessert.

A spring musical production has become tradition. This spring we’ll hear *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* set to the sounds of the 1930s. Last spring the stage became a Jewish ghetto for *Fiddler on the Roof*. Before that, we laughed and cried through *Cabaret*. And the year before that Harlem came to the Jeffrey Campbell as *Ragtime*. Karla collaborates with longtime friend (they did their first musical together 30 years ago) Becky Graber to direct the music, providing a unique Project Week opportunity for student pit musicians. Karla also works with Putney School Dance Director Kalya Yannatos and jazz dance teacher Patricia Wilson when her actors need to strut



their stuff in the literal sense. And much of the magic would not happen without the technical expertise of Robert Olson, who designs and executes sets and lighting with his crew of afternoon activity student techies. And last year, Assistant Director of Admission Anne Seidenberg was recruited to assist Karla with everything from running rehearsals (especially during multiple shows) to chasing down costume details. It's hard to avoid participating in a Putney School play on some level—whether it's driving the bus from the main building (parking is limited at the theater), acting, shooting photos of dress rehearsal, printing posters and playbills, or sniffing out just the right typewriter or desk for the set at local thrift stores. Theater is inclusive at The Putney School, thanks to Karla's collaborative directorial style.

Theater is accessible at several levels at Putney. There's the Drama Tech afternoon activity. Drama evening activity is the place you want to be if the big fall and spring productions are your bag. Karla offers three academic courses: Elements of Theater, History of Theatrical Performance, and Theater Intensive. Each class requires performance, however advanced students may focus on acting, directing or writing, with Karla's approval, for Theater Intensive. Students can also join the big productions as musicians or techies during Project Week.

Now here's the punchline: Drama is Karla's part-time job. All of those shows, classes, direction and collaboration don't add up to full time. Karla divides her time between drama and the duties of academic dean, which include, but are certainly not limited to, scheduling all of the classes, teachers and classrooms twice a year. Karla also coordinates outside tutors for students with mild learning differences or other difficulties and keeps tabs on individual students through weekly class deans' meetings.

Here's the other punchline: If you asked Karla which part of the job she'd pitch if the need arose, she'd say, "Definitely the drama. It's so much work and those kids can really suck it out of me over time." Then her eye will catch a passing student. "Have you been working on your monolog for your college audition?" she'll inquire. Or maybe the distraction will be Robert Olson. "Can you darken the park bench? It doesn't look right in the third act." Or maybe it's Patricia. "Aren't our dancers coming along fabulously?"

Karla dumping drama is about as likely as Karla running one fall play when she has the personnel to run two. Nonetheless, she swears off every time. Faulty memory is an unlikely excuse. Karla can remember hundreds of cues and other stage direction minutiae. This ability to forget is more likely akin to the selective memory of birthing children. That, and a deep love for her students and the process of theater, keeps her coming back to face the exhaustion year after year. “Yes,” says Karla, “it can be immensely stressful, but I’m crazy about all of the kids and doing theater with them is such a big bonus.”

Karla’s drama lineage at The Putney School starts with the theater’s namesake, Jeffrey Campbell. David Calicchio carried the mantle for many years after that, followed briefly by Allegra Brelsford ’79. With all that momentum and all that tradition, it’s ironic that many of Putney’s famous actors didn’t study acting while at Putney. “Oh, that’s easy to understand,” says Karla. “It’s the self confidence that kids get from the rest of the program here that helps them become successful actors. They understand that hard work eventually pays off.” In a discipline typically fraught with overinflated egos, Karla is an island of confidence.

Despite all that, Putney has sent several recent graduates to renowned acting conservatories. Shashanah Newman ’00 recently graduated from Carnegie Mellon’s School of Drama. Last June Roy Brown graduated from Putney and headed for the acting programs at Cal Arts. More telling is that Abraham Brown and Willa Van Nostrand were accepted at Tisch, but chose Sarah Lawrence and Emerson instead. High school is a good place to learn what you don’t want to focus on as well. In 2004, Stephanie Power went to Tisch and Katherine Partington settled on the One-Year Classical Acting Course for Post-Graduates & Professionals at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. This is what a few of them have to say about Karla’s influence on their college career choices:

“Because of Karla, I’ve grown to love what it is to go through process as an actor and also how important focus is in a show. She guided me to begin to discover personal style as an actor. She became my mother away from home, not only helping me grow as an actor but growing as a young man as well. Because I was able to tell her anything and everything about my dramatic life off-stage, I felt comfortable exploring characters so far from myself without any insecurity. Working with her has given me so much drive and passion for what I do.” —*Roy Brown ’05*

“Karla is why I love theater. When I directed *The Zoo Story* she said, ‘It comes from the actors. Let it come from them.’ She never showed us how to act, she merely pointed us in a certain direction and asked us to play. It was only until I had worked in theater outside of Putney that I realized how important it was that Karla allowed us to do our work and feel comfortable to make choices in rehearsal. Ideally an actor is able to play around with a character and try many different things. Karla provides this atmosphere. She will push you as far as you want to go, and then make it possible for you to go farther.” —*Katherine Partington ’04*

“Karla is not just a teacher, or a director, or dean of academics—she’s a friend and a mentor. To me, her title was ‘Karla.’ There is no category to put her in. Karla made theater a passion of mine because she made it energetic, fun, interesting, serious and professional. She took it from being an extracurricular fun thing that kids do at summer camp to a professional fun thing that credits integrity. She inspired me to feel that acting is an honorable way to lead my life and to know that it is more serious than a thing kids do until they graduate.” —*Abe Brown ’05*

The rest of us are just glad to have her here. Really, really glad. 🍷