

Life lessons from Mr. Tabb



Hillside High School's drama teacher, Wendell Tabb, stands in the school auditorium before casting for "Cinderah." After the four-performance run of "Cinderah" in March, Tabb will travel to Santa Cruz and Los Angeles with students for a drama workshop in April. Photo by Kenzie Cook.

Hillside High School's drama director takes students all over the world for professional experience

By Kenzie Cook
Durham VOICE

For the last 31 years, North Carolina Central University graduate Wendell Tabb, 55, has headed the theatre program at Hillside High School. Tabb has consistently gone above and beyond expectations of a high school drama teacher, transforming the humble high school stage to something more akin to professional theatre.

Since 1995, Tabb has directed the International Professional-Student Theatre Exchange Program allowing drama students to interact with and learn from professionals across the country and around the world. The students both travel to and host visitors

Locations of International Professional-Student Theatre Exchange Workshops

- Havana, Cuba
- Beijing, China
- Sydney, Australia
- Kenya, East Africa
- London, England
- Osaka, Japan
- Lima, Peru
- Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- Gambia, West Africa
- St. George's, Bermuda
- Los Angeles, California
- Santa Cruz, California
- Brooklyn, New York

from other countries to share ideas and beliefs.

A traveling troupe

"The program is designed to provide students with the opportunity to work with professionals and peer performers from all over the world," Tabb explained.

So far, Tabb has taken his students to drama workshops of his own creation in 10 foreign countries including Cuba, Japan and Kenya, as well as U.S. cities such as Los Angeles, New York and Santa Cruz.

In April, he will be returning to Santa Cruz and Los Angeles with this year's group of nine drama students.

"The students are always so eager to learn new things, explore the culture, even if they don't always speak the same language," Tabb said.

Though the trips are not cheap, much of the funding comes directly from the community. According to Tabb, each trip can cost between \$40,000 and \$50,000, but he only asks students to pay a small portion. Even then, Tabb has instituted fundraisers such as a season ticket fundraising campaign and donor cards to help students who cannot afford that amount.

"The Durham community has been an unbelievable support group," Tabb said. "This grassroots approach keeps the community invested in its children and their educational advancement."

While on these trips, the students usually perform two or three times for those in the host country and tailor the performances specifically to the customs and cultures of that particular community.

Homegrown performances

As for performances in their own auditorium, Hillside has just completed its run of August Wilson's "Fences," a play chosen for Black History Month. The play focuses on an African-American man, named Troy, and his family during the civil rights movement.

Though "Fences" only ended last week, on February 18, Tabb has already finished auditions and started casting for the next show, "Cinderah," which has special ties to

Tabb and to Hillside High.

"Cinderah" is a fairy tale somewhere between Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty and was originally produced by Tabb in 1995. Former Hillside student Irving Walter Truitt wrote "Cinderah," which features music by Xavier Cason.

Tabb likes to keep each season balanced with a musical in the fall and spring and two dramas in between, making sure there is something for Black History Month and for families. The two musicals brought to the stage each year would not be complete without help from the music teacher, Tiffany Agerston, 27, and the dance teacher, Valencia Lipscomb, 25.



Hillside High School's dance teacher, Valencia Lipscomb (left) and music teacher, Tiffany Agerston (right) pose together onstage. Both teachers collaborate with Tabb during Hillside's musical productions. Photo by Kenzie Cook.

Agerston and Lipscomb are both former Hillside students and appreciate their experiences working both under and alongside Tabb.

"I still respect Mr. Tabb the same way," Agerston explained. "It's like being under his wing again.

I'm his colleague now, but I continue to learn from him." Agerston works with the singers in each musical while

Lipscomb arranges the choreography. Tabb focuses on making sure the students learn professional theatre skills and present professional performances.

'Under a big wing'

Daisha McCarter, 17, is a member of the drama club at Hillside and says she is grateful for the opportunity to learn from Tabb.

"It's a great experience – like getting under a big wing," McCarter said. "He's made me see what I could be, not just what I am. He wouldn't pick you for a role if he didn't think you could do it."

Drama club president Natalie Perkins, 17, agrees that Tabb pushes all of his students to be better versions of themselves.

"I can't even put into words how amazing it is," Perkins said. "He doesn't just teach us about the stage; he teaches us life lessons."

Four performances of "Cinderah" will be take place between March 16 and March 18. Tickets can be purchased from Hillside Drama's Facebook page.