

# Bremner connects theater to the community

Dr. Kelly Bremner grew up in Athol, Massachusetts, where her parents encouraged the arts and higher education.

"I have been involved in the arts my whole life, though I began as a musician. I came to the arts through community theater, singing in church and my school music programs. I didn't really fall for theater until college. I thought I would become a high school English teacher, but then I saw my first college production," Bremner says. She attended Hobart and William Smith College and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"We had such a great theater director, Dr. Robert Gross. His productions just stretched my mind to imagine what theater could really be. He taught me how innovative and engaging each individual production could become, and I was hooked. I fell for directing because I loved finding unique ways to make my theater immediate and relevant to audiences. As I got older, I began to see how theater could connect communities and engage social issues. This is the part that most excites me today. I see theater as a vital forum to engage with the important ideas of our time. I think the best productions are able to entertain and provoke audiences into conversations," Bremner says.

While she was a graduate student, she began to work as a freelance director and stage manager and trained in applied theater, which connects theater techniques to community engagement.

"Right as I was finishing my Ph.D. (and having my first child, Lotte), I got my first job as a professor at Albion College in Albion, Michigan. Unfortunately it was 2008, and the great recession hit Michigan hard. I was laid off along with many of my other colleagues that year. I moved back to Madison, Wisconsin, where I started to work on more original theater, and I had my second child, Twyla. I came to Emory & Henry College in 2010 to begin as a professor in the theater department, and I have been here ever since."

Since then the department has grown. When Bremner arrived, there were 12 majors. There are now nearly 60. Bremner credits this growth to the high-quality faculty she works with, their partnership with Barter Theatre and the McGlothlin Center for the Arts with its state-of-the-art facilities.

Bremner is on sabbatical, but she isn't idle. She's collecting and pub-

lishing an anthology of contemporary Appalachian plays. "I love this work, and I love being a cheerleader for the amazing playwrighting going on in this area," she says. She is also working on new creative work with Janeve West and Jennifer Rouse from Cornell College in Iowa. "We are hopeful to present this work here in Southwest Virginia soon, but also at national and international Fringe Festivals, and we plan to use this work to launch a women and gender focused theater company. Lastly, and as a point of great pride, my sabbatical has afforded me the time to do some really interesting work at Wolf Hills Community School in Abingdon where my children attend. We have partnered with the Abingdon Community Center on an original theater piece. The children have taken oral histories about the childhoods of seven seniors associated with the center. I am working with those interviews to create a short play to give back to that community, and in so doing, we are teaching the children about the value of theater as community engaged service.

When her thoughts turn to the future, she thinks about Emory & Henry.

"I would like to see us emerge as a national leader in theater in higher education. What we have is incredible. We have top-notch pre-professional training, which is beautifully supported by our partnership with the Barter Theatre. My former students are working in professional theater all over the country and at rates as high or even higher than those at more famous theater conservatories. We are able to do this because we have held on to who we are in our connection to the college.

"Emory & Henry College is a place built on the idea of developing curious minds and engaged citizens, and we fully embrace that in our department. I am so proud of the work my students do to challenge the injustices they see in the world, and to support the community around us. The more we lean into that identity of high quality training while deeply embedded in deep engagement with the world, the program really starts to sell itself. We just need to keep getting the word out about what we do," she says.

"I see theater and the way I teach it as a way of taking students into new areas of exploration and critical thinking, especially for students of rural America who have more limited exposure to live theater. I have become a fierce advocate for the importance of theater in rural settings as equal to or even more important than, the theater



Kelly Bremner has found a home at Emory & Henry College.

presented in major cities. New York has always been seen as more important than any other place for theater, and I challenge this idea.

"I vividly remember how I came to feel that I was 'from here.' In preparation for the production of 'Unearthed,' a play I helped create that is based in this region, I had culled through archives, been to musical festivals, craft festivals, climbed mountains, and just plain become friends/family with the people who had spent their whole lives in this place. I had vetted the script and its characters through countless workshops filled with local audiences and their feedback. I could feel my rural roots mingling with the rural roots of these people in a profound way.

"At one point, I had a conversation with a friend from the Northeast who, eager on my behalf to see the show get performed in 'higher profile' venues, suggested I seek audiences in New York and more urban areas. He meant well, but he could not have been more wrong. It was then that I realized I had a mission to help my students challenge such assumptions and to instill in them a sense of pride in their own stories.

"I have noticed that students often explain away the importance of their own work (It is 'just' a college production. It is 'just' a performance in rural Virginia. I am 'just' a college student). The beautiful thing about the theater is that to fully appreciate it, you must see it live, which means there is no such thing as 'just' anything.

"It is armed with this sense of my place in the world that I come to the theater, and I find the perfect home for this at Emory & Henry, whose mission is so directly tied to making an impact on the community in which it resides. Many of my students here arrive with a similar story to my own. They are often rural and blue-collar and they often see the point of theater as limited to entertainment. I hope my students come here with a sense of personal pride in their work in the theater, but I hope they leave with a deep understanding of the way in which choosing theater as a career is to choose a way of acting, not just on the stage but in behalf of others.

"While I am not originally from here, I have made this place my home. I have chosen to raise my children here, and I have invested in Emory & Henry College and this region as a place to celebrate the amazing theater that happens and can happen in rural America. We need the arts more than ever. As the divisive rhetoric is amplified nationally, the arts can be a haven for real nuanced discussion. As more and more of our lives move away from human-to-human connections and into social media and our smart phones, we still come together as a live community at the theater, concert halls and galleries of the world. This region has a beautiful tradition of the arts, and I think that helps explain, in part, the deep kindness I see in the people I have met here. I am so honored to be considered an important part of the fabric of this arts community that I so love," she says. A!