

# Bangor Daily News

# Casting 'Off'



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*Penobscot Theatre's  
directing team hits the  
road to find fresh faces  
for the season closer:  
'Noises Off'*

BY ALICIA ANSTEAD  
OF THE NEWS STAFF

**M**ore than a decade ago, when Mark Torres took over as artistic director at Penobscot Theatre Company in Bangor, he announced that his casts would not be based on a repertory company, as they had been in the past. Indeed, Torres held auditions for a wider

pool of actors. While he continued to cast performers in the Bangor area, he also began hiring them from Boston, New York City and elsewhere.

In June, Torres will leave the theater. He resigned in March to pursue other opportuni-

ties, which he has not yet publicly named. At least one of the legacies he will leave behind is the far-flung casting practice that has brought new faces and new talent to the local stage but has also put Penobscot Theatre on the radar of actors in New England.

For Michael Frayn's backstage comedy "Noises Off," which opens tonight and runs through May 1 at the Bangor Opera House, Torres traveled with his managing director, Collene Frasier Torres, who is also his wife, to hold auditions in February in New York City.

"Noises Off" is a difficult play that requires agile performers who understand the importance of timing and understatement. Because the show is about a theater company and its botched production of a show called "Nothing On," each actor plays a character who, in turn, has to play another character in the play within the play. In short, the performances have to be sharp in order for the humor to work



**Kelly Thorne as Brooke in *Noises Off***



**Thorne onstage in *Noises Off***

# Noises

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Torres first held auditions in Boston, but he found that actors there faced many of the same impediments as actors in Bangor: Many also had day jobs and could rehearse only at night. For that reason, actors often turned down roles in Maine. Four years ago, Torres moved the auditions to New York City where more actors rely on acting rather than day jobs for employment. It paid off.

"The first time we went to New York, everyone said yes," said Mark.

"And the second time, and the third time, too," added Collene. "It's so much more efficient."

But it has other obstacles. More than half of the actors who audition are members of the Actors Equity Association, the labor union that represents actors. Equity has strict rules about payment for actors and employment regulations. Because Penobscot Theatre is not an Equity house, it can employ only two Equity actors at a time. More than that would mean a restructuring of other personnel.

Both the Equity issue and budgetary restraints shape a cast. But past those, Torres is the director and has the final word, even though he and Collene work together. Ninety percent of the time, they agree on the outcome, they said.

"We have similar sensibilities, but two separate minds," said Collene. "You both have to be

alert when you have five minutes to assess their personalities and whether you think you can work with them."

"I have a purely artistic encounter," said Mark. Earlier in the day, he had a distinctly unartistic response to one actor who auditioned with his trousers dropped to the floor: "Collene will remind me later that that was the guy who came in with his pants down around his ankles. I might have forgotten that."

After the auditions, the Torreses separate the head shots into piles marked one, two and three. The ones are their first choices. The twos are those they could work with. The threes should keep auditioning for other theaters or consider waiting tables.

Mark sat behind a folding table as the performers came in and out of the room. The men wore jeans or suits with ties. Most of the women played up their sex appeal with see-through shirts, booster bras, miniskirts and high-heeled shoes. Except for a few, they wore heavy makeup.

Collene was the meet-and-greet person, stage-managing the afternoon. She kept the clock and procured photographs and resumes. Mark mostly gave direction, nudging actors along.

"OK, that was good," he might say. "Let's do it again and turn up the heat. Let's say your character is so frustrated that deep down he really wants to kill the other guy. He has to contain those feelings but also let them show." To which actors might nervously reply: "Great, great, great, I got it, I see, good idea."

One disheveled woman came

to read for a role in "Pals," and Mark asked if she would be willing to read for the role of Brooke in "Noises Off." Brooke is a sexy, kittenish role and the woman playing Brooke has the awkward job of being an actress playing an actress playing a bimbo — often wearing very little clothing.

The disheveled actress agreed and disappeared into the waiting area to go over the lines while someone else read for another role. In a few minutes, she was back, and read for Brooke, adding a distractingly burly, full-toothed guffaw.

Others who auditioned for Brooke were bright-eyed, squinty-eyed, goofy-eyed. They pushed up their breasts and pushed out their tushes. But no one did the role quite as convincingly or impressively as Kelly Tuohy, who was up from Washington, D.C., for auditions that day. She was great from the start. When Mark asked her to make changes, she did and went from great to greater. When the audition ended, she looked Mark straight in the eye and asked: "When are callbacks? I'm leaving for D.C., but I'll stay if you think I should. I can come back anytime today." Mark and Collene did the callback audition right there.

In auditions, sometimes an actor gets one shot at a script, and the director says, "Thanks." And that's the last of him or her. Others, mostly the older ones, have a question or two about interpretation. Some have the lucky combination of the right look and the right stuff at the right time. They get hired. Tuohy got hired.

"The next day, we saw other people, but in my mind, Kelly stayed there," said Mark at a recent rehearsal in Bangor where Tuohy was going over lines with the rest of the cast. "First and foremost is her skill as a comedian. You can get away with a certain amount of murder in your casting. But to act badly well is a skill. Plus she has a great look. I didn't know it at the time, but I'd put her right at the top of my list of people I'd work with again."

Mark hired three New York actors to perform in "Pals," but Tuohy is the only actor cast in "Noises Off" from the New York auditions.

"I do so many auditions that I've conditioned myself to A: love it and B: have fun," said Tuohy, who is in town for five weeks while she rehearses and performs in the show. "I usually have a feeling if I am going to get a role or not get a role. For this audition, I left feeling pretty OK."

Tuohy, as with many actors who accept roles far away from their home base, knows that new places, news faces and new experiences are tools she can use elsewhere in her career. She came to town already indoctrinated in the lessons of enterprise and variety that Mark Torres leaves behind for theatergoers in Bangor.

*Penobscot Theatre Company will present "Noises Off" April 22-May 1 at the Bangor Opera House. For tickets, call 942-3333. Alicia Anstead can be reached at 990-8266 and aanstead@bangor-dailynews.net.*