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## Plano Thespian Flourishes in Dallas Production

By Kim Nguyen

Growing up in Rochester, N.Y., Shannon Kearns-Simmons had always dreamed of performing in the theater and being an actor, and now she's living her dream in Plano.

Kearns-Simmons is currently a working actress and is starring in "The Black Monk," an upcoming play at the Undermain Theatre in downtown Dallas. She also teaches theater at Collin College's Spring Creek Campus.

"Since I went into grad school, I've always had a vision of working with incredible, beautiful, spiritual and passionate people," she said. "It's a huge gift to work with the Undermain Theatre because it fulfills my artistic and heartfelt wish to be in theater. Sometimes I just want to stop and pinch myself to make sure it's really happening."

"The Black Monk" opened Sept. 9 and runs through Oct. 3. The show is loosely based on a short story by Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov. The sold-out shows kicked off the theater's 26th season.



"The Black Monk" tells the story of brilliant-but-haunted scholar Andrei Vasilich Kovrin who, exhausted by his studies, retreats to the estate of his childhood benefactor, Yegor Pesotsky. While there, Kovrin goes on a quest to look for the origin of the legend of a black monk, whose image has been seen in mirages for 1,000 years. He tells Tanya, Yegor's daughter, the legend, and the two begin a journey that explores inner life and outer life and how the two combine, Kearns-Simmons said.

Kearns-Simmons plays the role of the daughter, Tanya, and though the play has been in production for a week, she feels she has not found the proper stage presence for Tanya. The character is much more outspoken than Kearns-Simmons is, and she is continually working on finding and evolving into the appropriate mindset.

"As an actor, we would take the text and action and fill in the gaps with our lives and spirit," she said. "The movements we make on stage change moment by moment and it's up to us to be open and available to those moments."

The theater has always been something that Kearns-Simmons has wanted to pursue, but didn't commit to until her college years.



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“Actors are put in the position to learn how to communicate on stage with certain limitations,” she said. “Whether it’s extravagantly or subdued, we use a variety of instruments to express emotions for the audience.”

Kearns-Simmons began working with the Undermain Theatre in 2004, while working on a production called “Blasted.”

“I love working with the Undermain because they are an especially unique theater,” she said. “It fulfills my profession as an artist and actor and it’s the perfect place for my personal growth. I feel

like it’s my home.”

Surrounded by loved ones and pursuing two careers that she loves, Kearns-Simmons said she is always counting her blessings.

“I feel like in 10 years, these are the places I’m going to be. I can see myself here for a long, long time,” she said. “I don’t feel limited by my surroundings; I feel the possibility for infinite growth.”