



Erin Givarz/Index

Professor of Theater Ron Rybkowski speaks to his students on the set of "See How They Run" during his Stage Craft class Friday afternoon. The show starts April 12 and goes through April 19.

# Professor offers Hollywood experience

## All Eyes On Ron Rybkowski

Theater professor shares stories of youth in tinsel town

BY RYAN MOORE  
Staff Reporter

Ronald Rybkowski knows a thing or two about Hollywood stars and rock 'n' roll junkies.

But the professor of history, who spent his youth in southern California, has since settled into the ways of the Midwest and set up shop in the University's theatre department calling it home.

Rybkowski said his interest in the arts has been with him since childhood.

"I'm probably a little bit odd in that I knew since sixth grade that I wanted to do something in theatre or show business," Rybkowski said.

In junior high, a theatre department and an enthusiastic teacher who provided an introduction to improvisational

acting, helped sustain his affinity for theatre, Rybkowski said. And that drive for drama received some help from his home state as well.

Rybkowski said a close proximity to a theater, a luxury provided by southern California, gave him an outlet for his ambitions for which he is thankful.

"Growing up in L.A. with Hollywood and everything else around me, there were many, many opportunities, where, if I had grown up in a small town like Kirksville, that never would have happened," he said.

After receiving a degree in theatrical arts from California State University, Rybkowski launched a freelance scenery construction store, where he was able to generate low-budget music videos for musical artists, primarily of the rock genre.

"I was kept pretty busy building scenery," he said. "... It was the perfect time to be in L.A."

Rybkowski had various jobs



in the arts business, such as resident designer for the La Mirada civic playhouse Lith, a Broadway series in which Rybkowski worked alongside the likes of Charles Grodin, Cloris Leachman and Bette Midler.

"It was the first taste of what it was like to be working with actual professionals, which was a transition into some of the film work that I have done," he said.

He also shot a film with Tim Burton.

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"This was before Tim was Tim Burton," Rybkowski said. "He was working at Disney studios at the time. ... The fact that I worked with him and saw his genius at that point was like, 'Wow!'"

A lack of professionalism in the actors he worked with, combined with a need to have a steady job for his family, were two reasons he decided to get into education, Rybkowski said.

"I had an opportunity to go to

Africa to work on a film, but my wife was ready to have our first child," he said. "... I had another opportunity to do the Michael Jackson tour of America, when he was doing 'Thriller,' but my wife was ready to have our second child, so I found that my focus was more on my family than deepening my career."

In a case of good timing, his alma mater, Whittier College, offered him a position as adjunct lecturer.

"Working with the students was great," Rybkowski said. "That was really the turning point where I knew that this is really what I want to do. I love the classroom."

Rybkowski waited five years for a full-time position while teaching in a condemned gym at Whittier. But when it came time to put Rybkowski on the tenure track, he was laid off, despite a student protest.

Attempting to regain a position in academia, Rybkowski sent out applications to colleges and universities across the United States. The University received his notice and decided to fly him in.

"The one thing that really set it off was that night I got to meet some of the students, and I thought the students here were just brilliant," Rybkowski said.

Coming back to his roots in the Midwest boded well for Rybkowski and his family.

"L.A. was getting dangerous — there were a lot of freeway shootings," Rybkowski said. "... The opportunities that we've had in this town have been much, much greater than what we ever would have had in L.A."

Since 1988, Rybkowski has been educating and entertaining the Truman population.

"We've done all sorts of shows, from the classics to the contemporaries," he said.

The recipient of multiple "Who's Who Among American Teachers" and American College Theater Festival awards among others, Rybkowski said his Educator of the Year award is his most cherished.

"That, to me, is probably one of the most wonderful awards because it's from the students," Rybkowski said. "It's like I'm doing what I'm supposed to do."

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