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'The Revolutionists' at Heartland Theatre a metaphor for the modern fight for equality

WGLT | By [Lauren Warnecke](#)

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From left, Mia Katz (Charlotte) Janet Ademilua (Marianne), and Brooke Moonan (Marie Antoinette) star with Drea Fecht (Olympe) in Heartland Theatre's production of "The Revolutionists" by Lauren Gunderson.

The mostly true story of three real-life feminist icons – and one imagined one – in revolutionary France is laid out in Lauren Gunderson's play within a play, "The Revolutionists," currently being staged at Heartland Theatre Company.

"Revolutionists" director Sanhawich Meateanuwat grew up in Thailand and attended Bangkok University for theater. But most of his collegiate and professional credits are English language plays.

"It's a long story," he said. "I'm gonna make it short. My school is based on U.S. literature or English literature. So, we studied American plays."

Part of Meateanuwat's studies included learning American history and cultural norms to contextualize the plays, so it makes sense that he wanted to continue his education in the United States.

"When you do something a little bit too much, you kind of get obsessed with it," he said. "I wanted to see how these plays get done in America."

Now in his third year of Illinois State University's graduate directing program, Meateanuwat somehow managed to squeeze in his Heartland Theatre debut, directing Gunderson's 2016 smash hit, "The Revolutionists," while simultaneously working on his thesis.

The play runs three weekends through Nov. 19 at Heartland Theatre in Normal.

Meateanuwat has been itching to direct at Heartland since first arriving in Normal for grad school and seeing Heartland's [production of "Human Terrain."](#)



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"And then I saw 'Life Sucks' and was like, 'Oh God, I really need to direct a play here,'" he said. "I love this space; I love this theater; I love the way they do it here. I thought I need to sneak my way in."

Gunderson is among the most celebrated living American playwrights. And she is having a moment in central Illinois. "The Revolutionists" comes just two weeks after Illinois Shakespeare Festival announced its [2023 season](#) that includes Gunderson's "The Book of Will."

Meateanuwat was most drawn to "The Revolutionists" story and feminist message.

"This is a play for four women, written by a woman," he said. "I see it as a human condition. I see the voice of the oppressed in that. I see a connection between me as an artist."

The central characters are a playwright (Olympe De Gouge), an assassin (Charlotte Corday), an abolitionist (Marianne Angelle), who is a fictional composite of Black Haitian revolutionists, and a former queen of France (Marie Antoinette).

Political executions of women in the French revolutionary era were relatively uncommon and therefore affirmed the power and influence these specific women held. De Gouge's 1791 pamphlet, "Declaration of the Rights of Woman," moved the needle toward women's equality. It also sent her to the guillotine in 1793, charged with being a counterrevolutionary and "unnatural woman."

The play begins as De Gouge ascends the guillotine, sentenced to death. She imagines the radical women whose stories ended the same way as hers and writes her final play in her head.

"This woman is going to die in front of a lot of people," Meateanuwat said. "What is (the) story she wants to tell before she dies?"

That sounds like a downer, but "The Revolutionists" is decidedly funny, described by Gunderson as a "feisty feminist comedy."

Corday is best known for having killed Jean-Paul Marat. She also was executed in 1793, as was Marie Antoinette, queen consort to King Louis XVI. Antoinette was charged with

pop culture and fashion are indisputable – a kind of soft power to endear the French to the monarchy even as they almost universally rejected it.

“During that time, we can see a lot of women fighting, representing their own agency and doing something for the political movement,” Meateanuwat said. “These stories were untold.”

In the current era of political and societal upheaval, and in light of the Supreme Court’s decision overturning Roe v. Wade, Meateanuwat sees parallels between “The Revolutionists” setting and 21st century America. He thinks the play is a call to action to inspire all to keep fighting for equality.

“Women’s voices are important,” he said. “When you look back, they were fighting for the same things 300 years ago. Where are we right now?”

“The Revolutionists” continues through Nov. 19 at Heartland Theatre, 1110 Douglas St., Normal. For tickets and more information, visit heartlandtheatre.org.



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