

FROM SCOTLAND



BE THE PLAYERS READY? EDINBURGH'S CASTLE ROCK LOOMS BEHIND (LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM) GRACE POSILICO, SAGE SPERLING, SEAN RYAN, CHRIS CONTE, CHRIS DEVLIN, COLLEEN DEGENNARO, NICK RUBANO AND GRACE PEKNIC.



WITH LOVE


By Elizabeth Koscinski



THE EDINBURGH FESTIVAL FRINGE is the largest arts and culture festival in the world. The 2024 festival sold over 2.6 million tickets for 3,746 registered shows, drawing performers and audiences from more than 60 countries.

And in the middle of it all were Sacred Heart Theatre Arts Program (TAP) students on the Royal Mile of Edinburgh (pronounced “ED-in-bruh” or “ED-in-bur-uh”)—breaking out into song, staging marriage proposals, standing on pillars loudly proclaiming their love for each other, slipping on banana peels and interacting with the crowd during the run of their musical rom-com, *Reject Me, Already*.

Chris Conte ’24, Colleen DeGennaro ’24, Grace Peknic ’25, Nick Rubano ’24, Sean Ryan ’25 and Sage Sperling ’26 took to the stage for 21 shows throughout the run of the festival.

REJECT ME, ALREADY

When the cast brainstormed ways to make their show stand out from the thousands of performances happening all over the city, they came up with the idea of an audience vote. *Reject Me, Already* is a musical comedy and the creation of Paul Richard Keegan ’23. As the show’s tagline suggests—“You are the matchmakers. We are the lovers.”—every performance kicks off with Grace Posillico ’24, the production stage manager, ex-





WORK HARD, PLAY HARD
WHEN THE SHU CREW WASN'T ASSEMBLING AT ONE OF THEIR FRINGE PERFORMANCE VENUES (ABOVE), CAST MEMBERS LIKE COLLEEN DEGENNARO AND GRACE POSILICO HAD TIME TO CUT LOOSE.



plaining the characters and polling the audience on which actors will play the two characters who fall in love and who will play the best-friend couple already in love. The remaining actors play characters who interact with the lovers.

This involved more than simply giving the characters gender-neutral names and learning the lines and songs. The cast rehearsed up to 12 hours a day leading up to Fringe. Posillico and producer Christopher Devlin '23 came to Scotland prepared with multiple musical background recordings, especially for the duets, as each cast member has a different vocal range.

The cast embraced the challenges. "It's been fun learning all six parts," says Conte, who admits that he usually only memorizes his own lines and cues. "It changes your perspective. It made me appreciate the whole story more. Also, we have developed a synergy between the six of us. We have each other's backs and can cover for each other, which we do."

Ryan appreciates that the show remained fresh, even after 21 productions. "When playing the same character over and over, you can fall into a routine," Ryan says. "For this show, every night seems like opening night because you don't know what's going to happen. It creates a great energy, not only with the cast, but also with the audience."

Peknic says her preshow anxiety turned into excitement throughout the run. "Initially, it was nerve-racking not knowing what part I was playing each night," Peknic says. "By the end of the

festival, I was excited to see who I was playing at the start of the show and what fresh take everyone was going to bring to the characters that night."

As the show's creator, Keegan felt anxious before Fringe. "It was scary, but incredibly surreal," he says. Usually, his musicals are performed to an audience of friends, family and peers. "For instance, after [the original playwriting festival] TheatreFest at SHU, people are so supportive because they want to foster your love of writing.

"They always say that you don't know what you have until you're performing in front of a paying audience of strangers," Keegan continues. "They owe you nothing. They paid money to be there, so you owe them something." To see how the nightly Fringe audience connected to the show was thrilling, he says. "People resonated with my sweet, simple rom-com," Keegan adds. "That's a gift that I don't take for granted."

BEYOND THE STAGE

DeGennaro and Rubano performed in Sacred Heart's inaugural year at Fringe in August 2023 when they brought a family drama to the festival for two weeks. They pulled from that experience to quickly develop this year's pitch, already knowing what resonates with the Fringe audience.

"I'm grateful that we had that experience of figuring out how to sell ourselves before we brought a more technical show over," says DeGennaro. "We were able to get right into marketing our show."

They started networking for the show from the first day. "Your best audience members and the greatest word of mouth come from the person whose show you are seeing right after you perform yours, who will return the favor the next day," Rubano says.

Four of the students are dual theatre arts and communications majors who gained real-world marketing and communications experience. The primary marketing method at the festival is flyering—performers literally handing people print ads as they walk by and trying to convince them to see their shows. The students developed specific methods to engage the crowd, including working in teams instead of individually and developing attention-getting methods, such as

showing people the flyer and asking who they thought would be the best kisser or who they would vote for as a couple.

The marketing began months before landing in Scotland. Students used the skills they learned in their communications classes to create posters, ads, a one-sheet, press releases, pitch emails and a PowerPoint deck to present to various Sacred Heart departments. This enabled them to gain funding for the trip from Dr. Petillo's office, the School of Communication, Media & the Arts, undergraduate admissions, the provost's office, the Office of the Dean of Students, and marketing & communications.

The students used many of those same methods and materials in Scotland to reach out to press and reviewers to bring them to the show. "The University trusted this program and sent us here for a reason," Rubano says. "We don't take that lightly and are doing everything we can to get the message out that Sacred Heart is the reason we're here and that they taught us everything we need to know to be successful."

SHUPER GRATEFUL

The SHU TAP production is the only fully University-sponsored show from North America that took part in the festival, eliminating any possible financial barriers that might have prevented students from auditioning and accepting roles.

Every member of the cast gained confidence in their craft in Edinburgh and returned home invigorated in their passion. Recent alums Conte and Rubano will continue to pursue the professional theatre path. Rubano recently reprised his title role in *Bat Boy* at Catalyst Theatre Company in New Jersey.

"I am grateful for learning a new set of techniques and practices that I can add to my toolbox," Sperling says. "We can absolutely bring these into our future careers as professional theatre makers."

DeGennaro's Fringe experience gave her the confidence to audition for and get accepted into the conservatory program at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York City. "The support we've received from Sacred Heart is unprecedented," she says. "People don't get the training and the opportunities that the University has given us."



Adds Ryan: "It's easy to get wrapped up in the performance, and I'll pause and remember I'm in Scotland performing a show. We are on an international stage here. We're so grateful."

Now a senior, Peknic feels ready to make theatre her professional path.

"This felt like the Olympics of theatre," she says. "Sacred Heart has given us the opportunity to realize that, yes, we can make this happen."

Peknic, Ryan and Sperling look forward to another year of spectacular productions at SHU, especially with the opening of the new John & Sabina Petillo Center for the Performing Arts.

Jerry Goehring, director of performing arts, runs a different kind of theatre arts program. Breaking silos, TAP students learn every aspect of running a show—from stage management and costume design to props and technical skills. Lesser-known and student works are mixed in with more traditional theatre shows.

"The most comments we received at Fringe were about how we collaborated as a team, from the chemistry that we had on stage to how we worked together for marketing and teching," Rubano says. "That was directly taught to us by Sacred Heart."

Even *A Christmas Carol*, now performed annually, is an adaptation written by former student Grace Curley '23, rather than the traditional, licensed version of the show.

"This program is a home for new works," Devlin says. "They are integral to the education here." **SHU**

WORD OF MOUTH
ABOVE, CAST MEMBERS HAND FLYERS TO FESTIVALGOERS AT THE ROYAL MILE. BELOW, PAUL RICHARD KEEGAN SHOULDERS UP TO A PROMOTIONAL POSTER FOR THE MUSICAL HE CREATED.

