Rasbury's art makes buzz, wins billboard-size acclaim

Louisiana Tech's Michael Rasbury is on an artistic roll. Like the proverbial rolling snowball, his career is gathering momentum and mass.

Translation? In just over a month, Rasbury has won three sizeable honors from state and regional art associations. The assistant professor of theater in Tech's School of Performing Arts:

- received a $5,000 artist fellowship grant in theater from the Louisiana Division of the Arts
- was named to the Shreveport Regional Arts Council Artist Roster and
- earned two spots in SRAC's Highway Haiku outdoor highway gallery with his photographs.

Even before this recent rash of recognition, however, Rasbury was part of significant artistic endeavors. Among them: working with the John Cage Trust in New York City to provide original composition and sound design for a production of "Alphabet," a newly discovered Cage work. The late Cage was an internationally acclaimed avant garde composer and musician.

"I've always been a jack-of-all-trades," Rasbury says of his broad-based accolades. "I even messed with my car one time. I get bored if I do the same thing too long."

If pressed, he sums up his passion in one word: art.

Because of that variety of interests, Rasbury says he "thought long and hard" about which category to enter in the Louisiana Division of the Arts fellowship competition. After all, he's not only a theater professor; he also pursues graphic design, excels in digital photography (witness the Haiku billboard awards) and plays keyboard in two local bands. He ultimately decided to concentrate on his work as a theatrical composer and sound designer, but also made use of other proiciencies to snag the prize.

Rasbury entered a five-minute documentary about himself using what he terms "Ken Burns' effects," referring to the celebrated PBS filmmaker. The entry included still photographs of productions Rasbury has worked on — with special attention paid to the accompanying music. He used his own voice underneath.

"I wanted it to be entertaining," he said. The John Cage project is a prime example of his theatrical accomplishments. The production of "Alphabet" premiered in 2001 at the International Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, and continued to Ireland, Germany, Australia and the University of California-Berkeley. Rasbury served as master sound technician and sound designer.

"That project changed my life," Rasbury said. "I flew out of New York on September 10 (2001), and in a year's time I went to so many cultures so quickly."

Then he jokes: "I never understood culture shock before. I always thought it was going to Ruston from Shreveport."

Quite seriously, though, Rasbury's immersion in Cage's experimental philosophy has left its mark on him. "I'd be interested in doing more drama that way," Rasbury says. "Drama is an extension of humanity, and humanity is unpredictable."

Cage is recognized as the initiator and leading figure in the field of indeterminate composition by means of chance operations. His best-
known piece is "Four Minutes, 33 Seconds" from 1952, which has no sound added to that of the environment in which it is performed.

Rasbury was put in touch with the John Cage Foundation by Mikel Rouse, who has a three-year tenure as composer-in-residence in Ruston, overseen by the North Central Louisiana Arts Council.

Indeed, Rasbury had credentials the Cage family would be interested in: Five years earlier, he had written the original music for "One Flea Spare" that played as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival. It won the 1997 Obie (Off Broadway Theater Award) for Best New Play.

Rasbury brought that talent back home in 2001 with original composition, arranging and sound design for Tech's production of "The Leafmen and the Brave, Good Bugs" by children's author William Joyce. Rasbury has also worked at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, Ky., First Frontier in Xenia, Ohio, and numerous other venues.

His selection as a state Division of the Arts fellow is what led to his recent listing in the Shreveport Regional Arts Council Artist Roster. Two other professors in Tech's School of the Performing Arts were also chosen for that honor: Drs. Kenneth Robbins and Alan Goldspiel. (See accompanying story.)

Robbins says of Rasbury: "Michael is a most deserving young man with so much to offer that he often surprises himself. He's doing an outstanding job of representing the School of the Performing Arts with all his activities and successes."

Rasbury's other recent honor – his photographs being chosen for the Highway Haiku billboard project – "is the first time anyone has patted me on the back for my photography," he says. "I was honored and thrilled to be selected because I know how many good artists there are in the area.

One photo shows "a little green lizard on green leaves -- he thought he was camouflaged." The other showcases "a drastic Louisiana morning sky with shadows and trees."

The haiku venture features billboard-sized photographs and poems alongside highways in the Shreveport area. Of 131 entries in the competition, 10 were selected. Two Tech architecture professors' photographs were also chosen, those of Walter Green and Tim Hayes. (See accompanying story.)

"It's nice to have three out of the 10 awards going to Louisiana Tech," Rasbury says.

The locations and time frames for placement of the billboards have not yet been announced.

As if these projects aren't enough, Rasbury has a plethora of other artistic irons in the fire:
• mastering, mixing, engineering and cover design for local bands' and churches' albums ("I like the fact that I start with nothing -- with air" and carry the project through shrink-wrapping the CD. "It thrills me to do it all.")
• composing original music for non-theatrical undertakings (He penned original music for a hunting video produced in Franklin, Tenn.)
• performing keyboard and vocals with The Lightnin' Bugs (Good enough for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in 2002 and 2001; he also plays and sings with Monty Russell and the Hardcore Troubadours.)
• designing Web sites ("It's a side business.")
• assisting with the Folklife Program housed in Tech's School of
Literature and Language.

• Appropriately, Rasbury’s view of the future is rather Cage-esque. “I can’t wait to see what the next moment will bring,” he says. “It’s always a surprise -- and a good one, even when it’s bad.”

To see or hear more about Rasbury’s projects, visit his Web site.

Five faculty members in Louisiana Tech’s College of Liberal Arts have received honors relating to their artistic work.

• Drs. Kenneth Robbins and Alan Goldspiel from the School of Performing Arts were chosen in the first round of inductions for the Shreveport Regional Arts Council’s new Artist Roster.

• Artwork work by Walter Green and Tim Hayes of the School of Architecture will be featured as part of SRAC’s second annual Highway Haiku, which spotlights artwork on billboards in the Shreveport area.

• Michael Rasbury, an assistant professor of theater in the School of Performing Arts, was included in both those groups and also received a $5,000 artist fellowship grant in theater from the Louisiana Division of the Arts. (See accompanying story.)

SRAC representative Serena Sheriff said this is the first time the council has put together an artist roster. A panel selects the inductees, and these first 50 represent “the cream of the crop” of area artists, she said.

Goldspiel is also on the statewide Louisiana Division of the Arts roster.

The other project -- Highway Haiku -- features billboard-sized photographs and poems along the roadside in the Shreveport area. Of 131 entries in the competition, 10 were chosen, and four were from Tech professors. Green and Hayes had one piece of artwork selected; two of Rasbury’s photographs made the cut.

Lamar Advertising of Shreveport donates space for the project. The locations and time frames for placement of the billboards have not yet been announced.

Hayes’ billboard will feature an acrylic painting that was originally 48 by 48 inches but that he adapted to fit the long, narrow proportions of a billboard. A “portrait” of one cow has now been cloned so that there are two animals. The end result is overlaid with a light pencil grid and filled numerous times with the word “moo.”

Hayes started painting on masonite only four years ago, he said, and finds it interesting “because of the way the paint can be manhandled. I can sand it, scrape it from the surface, create all kinds of interesting textures. It’s a very versatile medium.”

Green’s painting portrays a lizard and, ironically, one of Rasbury’s photos is of a lizard, too. View Hayes’ and Green’s images.

Hayes, an associate professor, graduated from Tech with a master of architecture degree and is in his 20th year of teaching at the university. Green received his bachelor of fine arts from Tech and is now a faculty in residence for the School of Architecture.

Robbins serves as director of the School of the Performing Arts. Goldspiel, also in performing arts, is assistant coordinator of music, head of music theory and strings, director of guitar studies and the Louisiana Tech Concert Association, and chair of the curriculum committee.
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