Name: Rick Davis

Department: College of Visual and Performing Arts

Number of Nominations: 1

Previous Years’ Nominations: 2015, 2014

1. What characteristics make the nominee an exceptional mentor?

2. If you personally worked with the nominee, please describe your experience.
Rick Davis – Narrative Statement

A mentor changed my life when I was 20. I had doggedly pursued one path within the theater field – scenic and lighting design – before a wise mentor asked me some questions and made some observations that encouraged me to shift my trajectory to the ones – dramaturgy, directing, and writing - that have led me here. So the power of mentorship is imprinted on my teacherly soul. I feel compelled to pass it on. Perhaps consequently, mentoring has been my most successful teaching modality, reflecting the way many students in the arts learn (particularly in my “homeroom,” the theater).

On a larger scale, it is important to remember that long before there were university programs in the arts -- long before there were universities! -- knowledge, skill, habits of mind, ways of knowing and working were transmitted through variations of the process we now call mentoring. Students tend to observe their mentors keenly, seeking potential points of modeling and anti-modeling. Therefore I believe it is important to bring my “A-game” every time I work with a student in a mentorship capacity. In the best examples, positive role modeling joins with shared critical reflection, so that simple emulation of technique or attitude yields to intentional development of personal practice. I tell my mentees that there is a lifetime warranty on their education, which they should feel free to redeem often. Many do.

It is my great fortune to be able to work beyond the classroom walls (often for months, occasionally for years) with students in production settings, both academic and professional, imagining worlds on stage, researching sources and influences, testing the validity of learned precepts, employing critical thinking to make real-time artistic and interpretive choices, and reflecting on the day’s work to make tomorrow’s better. In production we must always “publish” our work on deadline – opening night comes on a date and time certain, and the response is always going to be both crowd-sourced and peer-reviewed. This raises the stakes and, borrowing from an old epigram, concentrates the mind wonderfully. Students who thrive in this environment are equipped to succeed across many fields of endeavor.

Working in this context requires several things of the mentor. One must first of all respect and value the student’s work, even while recognizing that it may be less than fully formed. One must offer gentle but clear guidance as the process unfolds, so that the student understands what might best be done while being given the freedom to discover how to do it. One must be willing to embrace and support setbacks, offering counsel where needed and a path to rescue when indicated. And one must be in it for the long haul.

I’ve tried to foster a culture of student scholarship at Mason in the classroom, by emphasizing original investigations and creative work, and relating them to the larger societal conversation about research; in production, whether as a member of the creative team or as an independent mentor/adviser; and more broadly through personal, structural, and institutional advocacy of the “New Trivium” of the modern liberal education: Creativity, Collaboration, and Critical Thinking.
Valerie Wheeler, ‘94. I taught Valerie in several courses including Advanced Directing, but the real mentoring occurred in production environments where she established herself as a strong stage manager. She stage managed a number of student and several professional theater productions for me, but I am most proud of the fact that I introduced Valerie to the world of opera stage management, engaging her to work on my production of La Boheme at Opera Idaho (a “grand opera” scale production with a stellar cast, major orchestra, classic scenery, etc.) in the late ’90s.

She has never looked back, becoming a steadily employed opera stage manager at major companies and institutions such as Wolf Trap, New Orleans Opera, Opera Colorado, Pittsburgh Opera, Music Academy of the West, Wichita Grand Opera, Opera Cleveland, Toledo Opera, Hawaii Performing Arts Festival, University of Southern California, and Opera Carolina.

Last year, Valerie had the high honor of stage managing a gala concert at Lincoln Center featuring Plácido Domingo, Frederica von Stade, and Sting (!) to help revive the New York City Opera, and that having been accomplished, she is now its Production Stage Manager.

Kate McConnell, ’00. At Mason Kate showed promise as a director, writer, scholar, and critic, so it was natural to open up the world of dramaturgy to her. Both in and out of the classroom, my colleague Kristin Johnsen-Neshati and I worked with Kate on building a portfolio for dramaturgy, and she was accepted on first her try to the Yale School of Drama, where she completed her M.F.A. and D.F.A.

Kate went on to a prestigious dramaturgy position at the renowned Oregon Shakespeare Festival, taught at Colgate, and is now creative director of Thinkwell Group, an LA-based international company that creates “experience designs” for attractions based on Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, etc., about which she was interviewed by The New York Times (July 2, 2015).

Mildred Langford, ’02. I worked with Millie in the classroom and in production, including her professional debut in a Theater of the First Amendment production of Ibsen’s The Lady from the Sea, where she had a speaking ensemble role and also understudied – and performed – a major supporting role. The mentorship of which I am most proud, however, took place outside of the formal structures, involving months of audition coaching, career counseling, and professional preparation. We worked on classical and contemporary work in detail, filling in gaps in Millie’s training and experience. She is now one of Chicago’s fastest-rising talents, appearing frequently at theaters such as Steppenwolf, Victory Gardens, TimeLine, and recently in a starring turn as Beneatha Younger in Milwaukee Repertory’s acclaimed production of A Raisin in the Sun.
Jennifer Harris Dewberry, '05. Jenn Harris showed early promise as a director, production manager, and all-around theater generalist. Outside of the classroom I worked with Jenn in two primary ways: she was my assistant director in a credit-bearing independent study on a very intense, exciting, and challenging Theater of the First Amendment production, Three Hotels, and took on more than the usual A.D. role, including providing me (and occasionally the cast) with detailed and insightful notes on rehearsals, and helping organize technical and dress rehearsals. After that, Jenn decided that she wanted to pursue a career including both artistic and managerial roles. We explored career development and graduate school options in depth, and she ended up receiving an interdisciplinary Masters degree from NYU, combining programs from the Tisch and Steinhardt Schools.

Jennifer directed and produced some off-off-Broadway projects in New York before returning to DC to work at the Studio Theatre; she is now Production Manager and Casting Director at Woolly Mammoth, one of DC's major theater companies.

Christy Denny, '08. Christy is one of the more talented young directors I have worked with. After the usual 3-semester directing course sequence, she wanted to explore directing at a higher level than is typically available in undergraduate drama programs, so we created an independent study that was wrapped around a studio production, Richard Greenberg's Three Days of Rain, in which she staged scenes in different theatrical styles (e.g., realism, expressionism, etc.) to explore the effect of style on audience perception, conducted post-play audience discussions and held a formal post-mortem with faculty and participants. What an OSCAR-worthy project that would have been!

Christy went on to win several highly competitive internships (including Irish Rep in NY and a year-long stint at Seattle Repertory Theater), and has directed two productions in the Capital Fringe Festival. She also was selected as a Directing Fellow in a highly selective program at NYC's Lincoln Center (LCT-3 Lab).

Baron Pugh, '11. I have a rare continuity of mentorship with Baron, since I was his first email contact at Mason when he was a prospective student interested in performance in musical theater. Despite our extended, frequent, voluminous, and candid conversations about the then-current lack of such a program, he came to Mason and had what might be considered the ultimately successful undergraduate experience—he found his true vocation. The discovery began with stage management and assistant design work and flourished when Baron had the opportunity to begin designing sets and lights. It has been my pleasure to work with Baron in the classroom and, most crucially, as a directing-design colleague and mentor on a number of productions both collegiate and professional, most recently as an alumnus and (paid) assistant set designer on my production of the opera Amahl and the Night Visitors for Mason Opera Theatre last winter at the Hylton Center. Baron has since won admission to a very competitive M.F.A. program in scenic design at Boston University, where he is finishing his second year.
Halah Zenhom, ’14. I served as Halah’s faculty mentor for her Mason Players studio production of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, consulting over several months on textual interpretation, production concept and design, and attending selected rehearsals to offer responses to her and, where invited, to the cast as well. As someone who has made a semi-specialty of Ibsen, it was a real pleasure to bring that perspective to a student of unlimited curiosity and an energetic fusion of analytical and creative energies, and one who had a real vision for the play’s importance and resonance with the world today. Following graduation I have continued to advise Halah on career development, and last year at this time employed her as an assistant director on my production at Strathmore Music Center for Young Artists of America, *West Side Story/Romeo & Juliet*, a fusion of professional opera singers and students with a full orchestra in one of the region’s most prestigious venues. Halah was an active A.D., able to stage or refine scenes and musical numbers while I was rehearsing with other parts of the ensemble. She also worked as part of a 3-Mason-A.D. team for another professional production of mine in DC (see below). She has begun making her way in the area’s professional theater world, most recently as a staff member of NextStop theater in Herndon.

Rebecca Wahls, ’15. Rebecca’s staging of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* was supported by OSCAR, and I had the pleasure of working with her throughout an unusually long production process, including the preparation of an original critical edition of the play (suitable for both production and academic close reading), extensive research on the playwright, Christopher Marlowe and his sources for the play (principally Virgil’s *Aeneid* and classical mythologies), and an intensive exploration of the visual and verbal strategies that would make the play connect with a contemporary audience. Not only did the production succeed admirably, but Rebecca’s text has recently been announced as a component of the Scripts-in-Play series of WSC Avant-Bard, a highly respected professional theater company in the DC metro area.

I have also worked with Rebecca as a directing mentor outside of *Dido*, and engaged her (along with Halah Zenhom, ’14 and Alex Galloway, ’16) as an assistant director for a professional production I directed for the IN Series in 2013, an operatic/dance/theater double bill of *The Soldier’s Tale* and *Gianni Schicchi*, performed at DC’s Tivoli/Gala Hispanic Theatre. In this capacity Rebecca and her colleagues helped research visual imagery for projections, took rehearsal notes (mine and their own), and supported my work in many other ways.

In the short time since she graduated, Rebecca has worked steadily (sometimes for pay, sometimes as an intern) for some of DC’s most interesting small to mid-size companies such as Constellation and the Forum Theatre, as well as directing for Capital Fringe. We continue to consult on her short and medium range plans for professional development and graduate study.
March 9, 2016

Dear Colleagues,

Professor Rick Davis has asked me to write a letter in support of his nomination for an OSCAR Mentor Award, and I am honored to do so.

Rick and I have been colleagues for over 20 years, and in that time I have worked with him closely on academic initiatives, as a co-teacher in the classroom, and in rehearsal. As Rick’s students observe in his teaching evaluations and in surveys, he brings not only enormous expertise to his lectures, but also a deep appreciation for the subject’s relevance. This is why students who study with Rick or receive his mentorship will consistently refer to him as “inspiring.” He engages students with rigor, curiosity and enthusiasm, but he also instills in them a crucial understanding of what it means to work, and work awfully hard. After a semester with Rick, students report wanting to read more plays, see more theater, and try their hand at more jobs in the field. Rick’s passion for the field is infectious; indeed, his London theater tour has taken on legendary status, with students calling it “life changing.” In short, under his tutelage, students realize that they can achieve more than they had ever expected of themselves. They see a warm, approachable artist-scholar who works incredibly hard, but who makes even the hard work look easy and enjoyable. With Rick’s encouragement and guidance, they begin to see that they, too, can make a life for themselves by pursuing art and ideas.

Rick frequently uses theater production as the context for mentoring student playwrights, dramaturgs, and designers. He speaks of the rehearsal hall as a place for research, and especially experimentation. Just as chemists must toil in their laboratory, so must theater artists clock time in rehearsal. Rick’s collaboration with Rebecca Wahls on Dido, Queen of Carthage was an especially fruitful exploration of a difficult and under-appreciated text by Christopher Marlowe. For this project, he met regularly with the student, helping her prepare to direct the play by guiding her research and helping her shape ideas for realizing this challenging play in production. For his production of Bertolt Brecht’s Galileo, Rick challenged the full company to help him discover what it means to apply Brecht’s principles of Epic Theater to a contemporary production. Having cast guest artist Matthew Vaky in the title role, Rick teamed up with Ken Elston, our department chair, to bring him on as a guest instructor so that students could work with Matthew both in the classroom and in rehearsal. As Artistic Director of Theater of the First Amendment, Rick chose plays that would both intrigue the public and provide students with extraordinary opportunities to grow. He considered it his duty as a professional director guiding young artists to choose plays that were meaningful and worthwhile, if not always well-known, easy or financially profitable. During his tenure with TFA, he involved students in productions of new plays, under-produced classics, musicals and new translations. Under his leadership, students saw him shift from one professional role to the next—from director to dramaturg to translator to lighting designer. They enjoyed the rare opportunity to work alongside a talented theater artist and gifted teacher whose expertise is as great as his generosity.

As a graduate of the Yale School of Drama (M.F.A. and D.F.A.), Rick could have chosen to take the path of the snob who teaches the next generation to choose between feeling inadequate or arrogant about their work in the American theater. Instead, he models an extraordinary work ethic, continually immersing himself in contemporary and classical work, seeking excellence in
all genres and styles. Students see Rick put in the hours to achieve brilliant results. Day in and
day out, he brings more energy to rehearsal than the youngest of his collaborators. Over the
years, they have seen him solicit as many voices as possible to shape a season, a production, or
a project, and they watch him share the credit easily—even joyously—without losing the
confidence to lead. Rick teaches his students to think critically and test whatever material they
encounter against cultural, historical, and critical standards from the original context and ours,
posing a most profound question for evaluating any creative work or piece of scholarship:
Why does it matter?

As a recipient of Mason’s prestigious Excellence in Teaching award, Rick has demonstrated how
scholarship can take the form of creative projects through his mentoring of student directors,
dramaturgs, designers, musicians, independent filmmakers, and multidisciplinary artists of all
kinds. Even before he was appointed Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, Rick was
promoting liberal arts education among students, faculty and parents. Indeed, for theater artists
and the next generation of theater-goers, this approach yields consistently well-rounded,
engaging graduates who understand how to communicate across disciplines and seek
inspiration from a wide variety of sources. As a mentor, Rick encourages students to call on a
wide range of interests and skills to formulate a specific research question or design a focused
artistic project. The “100th Meridian Project” is an initiative that he has devised in the same
spirit; he has identified a theme that’s specific enough to be meaningful, but broad enough to
offer its partners infinite points of entry.

One of the most significant ways that Rick has fostered a culture of scholarship at Mason has
been by making himself a clear example of those values he promotes. Incoming freshmen come
to us, passionate about the field, but afraid that what they’ve heard from others is true: that
they won’t be able to “make it” and ought to major in a “more practical” field to survive. Rick
has combined his passion for theater with a deep love for teaching in a way that attracts
students and makes them want to emulate him. Theater students need to see a way forward for
themselves in this field, one that will be not only professionally rewarding but also sustainable.
Rick is the model that students and their parents look for in an artist-scholar. He embodies the
values of life-long curiosity, varied interests, community engagement, and good citizenship. He
is a sterling example for students and faculty, reminding us that through rigor, joy and selfless
collaboration, we can each contribute meaningfully to our communities and our field.

Sincerely yours,

Kristin Johnsen-Neshati
Associate Professor of Theater
March 15, 2016

OSCAR Mentor Excellence Award Committee
George Mason University
4400 University Dr
Fairfax, VA 22030

Dear OSCAR Mentor Excellence Award Committee,

The day I met Dean Rick Davis was the day I knew that George Mason University was the right choice for me. As a high school senior, I was torn in many directions concerning college selection and traveled all over the east coast with my mother looking at options. While visiting George Mason, I spoke with many wonderful faculty members and also had the opportunity to sit in on (then Professor) Davis’ Directing class. Those three hours were the first real exposure I had to higher education and what it really means to be an academic.

A few years later while taking that very class, Professor Davis, known to his students as Rick, encouraged us to think big. In an industry where we are so often faced with limits (whether budgetary or otherwise), Rick forced us to let our imaginations be the only limiting factor. This was the class where my own OSCAR project, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, was first conceived. That project now has exciting new life as a featured staged reading in the professional DC theatre company WSC Avant Bard’s Scripts in Play Festival this coming month. This will be my first professional experience directing on my own (rather than assisting), and it is all thanks to Rick’s mentorship.

Rick is a crowd favorite amongst students in the School of Theater and beyond. A truly exceptional experience was the London Theatre Tour, which he led for three consecutive years before becoming Dean. I was fortunate enough to attend for his first year, 2013. Never have I been so happy to learn so much in such an accelerated period of time. The care that int into planning every moment of the trip, from the productions we saw to the classroom lectures, was outstanding. Every single student, no matter his major, left with an enhanced appreciation of the art, of London, and of his place in the global society.

These are just a few examples of how Rick has been essential to my growth as a theater artist. Thanks to his personal work with me on *Dido, Queen of Carthage* last year, I realized not only that I want to attend graduate school, but why I want to. I have encountered so
many honestly lazy people in the so-called real world of my industry since graduation. Many people seem satisfied with good enough. The academic tradition is the opposite of that. Rick taught me that I am allowed to fail, and fail spectacularly, as long as I learned from the experience. This was a hard pill to swallow while in college, but I understand the value of that advice more and more every day now.

Rick, or rather, Dean Davis, is a remarkable artist who has chosen to devote his life to educating the next generation. He has been the head of the theater department, co-founder of Theater of the First Amendment, Mason’s in-house professional theatre company, and is now the Dean. Though all of this, his goal has always been the betterment of the students, which is why I can think of no one more deserving of the OSCAR Mentor Excellence Award.

Sincerely yours,

Rebecca Wahls