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## E.L. students to perform 'Working' at Scotland festival

 Mike Hughes | [Lansing State Journal](#)

There may be school shows somewhere that are only seen by friends and family.

Then there's the new East Lansing show. It will be seen by the world.

"Every time I think about it, I get excited," said Elizabeth Sherman, 17. "We're going to Edinburgh!"

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That's in Scotland, this August. "Working" - the musical being performed locally this weekend - will be in the Fine Arts Fringe Festival. "It's such an honor to be going there," said Alellan Hirpo, 16.

In a way, the honor was decades in the making. "There has been a great history of theater here for the last 30 years, going back to Kate Veihl," said director Mark Shaheen.

Veihl started a tradition of booming East Lansing shows, drawing crowds from other towns. That continued with Cynthia

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(Raymond Kopen)

Double staging: East Lansing students will also perform "Working" at the Fine Arts Fringe Festival in Scotland.

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Cash and Shaheen.

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Some Michigan State University professors recommended East Lansing to the festival. Shaheen followed up with DVDs of previous shows and more.

The result: East Lansing was one of 50 high schools invited.

The festival began 60 years ago to perk post-war spirits, Shaheen said, evolving into a far-flung event. "You've got around a half-million people there. ... When I was there once, I saw 'Macbeth' done on stilts."

In this case, he needed something without mega-sets. "Working" seemed logical.

"It's a portable show," Shaheen said. "It's flexible."

The show began with a book by Studs Terkel, a Chicago writer with a blue-collar feel. He had people describe their work and their lives.

That was transformed into a series of monologues, plus songs by James Taylor and by Stephen Schwartz, the "Wicked" composer.

"The people are so real," said Peter Borchgrevink, 17.

That's the opposite of last year's musical, "How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," awash in foolishness. "It's easier to do an exaggeration," Sherman said.

### Now the actors are playing everyday Midwesterners:

- Robert D'Valentine, 17, plays a steelworker. "He's a very conflicted character," he said. "He does what he does well. He's proud of it, but he realizes he could have done other things."
- Sherman plays a veteran teacher. "She loves teaching, but she's very angry with the modern school system."
- Borchgrevink plays a truck driver. "He likes his work, but he does the same thing over and over. The route is always the same."

- Hirpo plays a cleaning woman. "She does it out of desperation. She says her daughter will have the opportunities she never had."

These roles require some stretching and some reflection. East Lansing does not have a strong blue-collar contingent.

When asked, the actors mention their parents' work: Hirpo's dad is a chemist; her mom owns an Ethiopian restaurant. Borchgrevink's dad is a hospitality professor; his mom is in accounts-receivable. Sherman's dad is an MSU flute professor; her mom is a lawyer. D'Valentine's mom owns Tomie Raines Inc.

There isn't a steelworker in this particular group; that makes "Working" a chance to expand their reference. "The monologues are by people who really exist," D'Valentine said.

The show is often done with a small group of actors stepping into multiple roles. Shaheen has expanded that locally to include 35 actors and more large-scale numbers.

Then he'll shrink it back to 22 actors for the overseas trip. Some people had to skip it anyway; Borchgrevink said it comes too close to the start of his freshman year at MSU.

Others will be on the plane, each with two suitcases - one personal, the other for props and costumes. It's not easy to have a show cross an ocean.

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