

A Real Character

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fsimon@tulane.edu

As Broadway veteran Mary Louise Wilson teaches a master class in character acting, a documentary film crew follows her every move. For a group of students taking the course in the Tulane Department of Theater and Dance, it's a rare experience.



Students get pointers from actress Mary Louise Wilson during her Tulane class. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Wilson went from growing up in the Crescent City to a long career on stage in the Big Apple, coming full circle this semester back to New Orleans to teach the special class.

She has appeared in dozens of plays on and off Broadway, including her Tony Award-winning performance as Edith Bouvier Beale ("Big Edie") in *Grey Gardens*. She also has worked in movies and on TV, including parts on *One Day at a Time*, *Frasier* and *The Sopranos*.

When Carl Walker, adjunct assistant professor of theater, asked her to teach the character acting master class, she embraced the opportunity. Wilson views

character acting her forte, particularly comedic roles.

"Young people haven't had enough life experience to be aware of their feelings, particularly the bigger emotions," Wilson says. "We all have some unpleasant feelings, and they can be useful to us as an actor.

"Pleasant doesn't make interesting theater."



Wilson portrays fashion maven Diana Vreeland, her favorite role that she wrote for herself in the one-woman play *Full Gallop*. (Photo by Michael Sharp)

She defines acting as "behaving truthfully in imaginary circumstances."

Wilson says she is enjoying the five-week course because she rarely thinks about acting, even though it has been her life's work.

"It's terrific for me, because I can break down acting in my own mind," she says.

Plus, she finds the students "energizing" ? a joy for an actress who is an expert at observing and absorbing emotions.

Joseph Singletary, a senior theater major from New Orleans, says, "Opportunities like this don't come around often ? someone of this esteem to help you in your career. I couldn't have an intimate experience like this elsewhere. I'm going to take in every moment and cherish it."

What is next for the actress? Wilson hedges, saying "I'm picky at this point about parts. I'll do it if it's a funny death (scene)."