Patients' rights take center stage

BY KATIE WUDEL
Assistant Entertainment Editor

It is a matter of life and death for the characters in Creighton's fall play.

Jason Dorwart, who was paralyzed in a diving accident two years ago, plays the lead role in the fall play, "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" opened Thursday.

Dorwart's character, Ken Harrison, is paralyzed in a car accident and kept alive via life support machines. Although he is perfectly capable of intellectual thought, Harrison decides life is not worth living anymore. His physicians do not agree; Harrison hires a lawyer and the play climaxes in a trial scene in his hospital room.

"It's about the choice," said Alan Klem, assistant professor of fine and performing arts and theater, of the play.

The choice between allowing a patient to die and keeping him alive is one that spurs a lot of conflict, especially at a medically-focused, Jesuit university like Creighton.

Klem, who directs the play, described it as being of interest to Creighton's intellectual community because it deals with health policy ethics, the relationship between patients and doctors, and other social, religious and ethical issues.

First-year medical student Angie Adams, who plays head nurse and nun, Sister Anderson, found that the play echoed the topics in her class.

"This play embodies the entire argument my ethics class has been having for the past two weeks," she said.

Adams was able to defend both her character's position on the choice as well as her own.

Sister Anderson, described as "drill-sergeant-ish," feels that Harrison should stay alive, Adams said.

Adams does not agree. As a medical student, she describes herself as compassionate for people in pain. Therefore, she sides with Harrison, who is in mental anguish because he is not able to move at all.

Adams thinks that all patients have the right to decide whether or not to be treated. In the play, Harrison was brought into the hospital in an unconscious state, and wants to leave without medical treatment.

"Killing the patient is up for argumentation," Adams said. "But there's a difference between making them die and pulling them off life support."

Klem, who refuses to take sides, is glad that the play has sparked such discussion.

"It's an opportunity to confront the issues," he said.

However, "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" was not chosen simply for its intellectual conflicts. Klem said that his main reasons for doing this play had to do with providing exposure and an outlet for those with physical limitations.

Dorwart is one such actor, willing to prove himself. "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" would not be in production if it were not for him, Klem said.

He was cast as the lead in the play, "The Runner Stumbles" in the spring of 2000, which ran the following fall. During that summer, Dorwart was paralyzed and had to take a semester off from school.

The play was recast, and the theater department decided to find another play in which Dorwart could play a major role, despite his disability.

A friend of Dorwart's pointed the play out to him a few years ago, and the department decided to put it into production.

Klem thinks that the world of theater is still totally open to Dorwart.

"Certainly this has not affected his ability to act in any way," Klem said.

Because of his talent, Adams has no doubt that Dorwart will succeed as an actor.

He's one of the best actors I've ever worked with," she said.

However, Adams admitted that some parts would remain unavailable to Dorwart.

"He will never be an action-hero," she said.

Dorwart has learned how to deal with his disability, and through his experiences he has gained special insight on Harrison's choices.

"I think he makes the wrong decision, but it's his decision," Dorwart said. "It's satisfying to know that I think he made the wrong decision because it makes me appreciate life that much more... He doesn't want to die - he just wants the freedom to act on his own."

Opening the door for Dorwart may open doors for others in similar situations, Klem said.

"Despite this accident, Jason wanted to know that he was capable of doing a demanding role," Klem said. "The audience will be there to see the results."

'Whose Life Is It Anyway?'

When: Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m., and Oct. 10, 11, 12 at 7:30 p.m.

Where: Lied Center Main Stage

Price: $5 for students, faculty and staff, $6 for senior citizens and $8 for the general public

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