# UNC Charlotte

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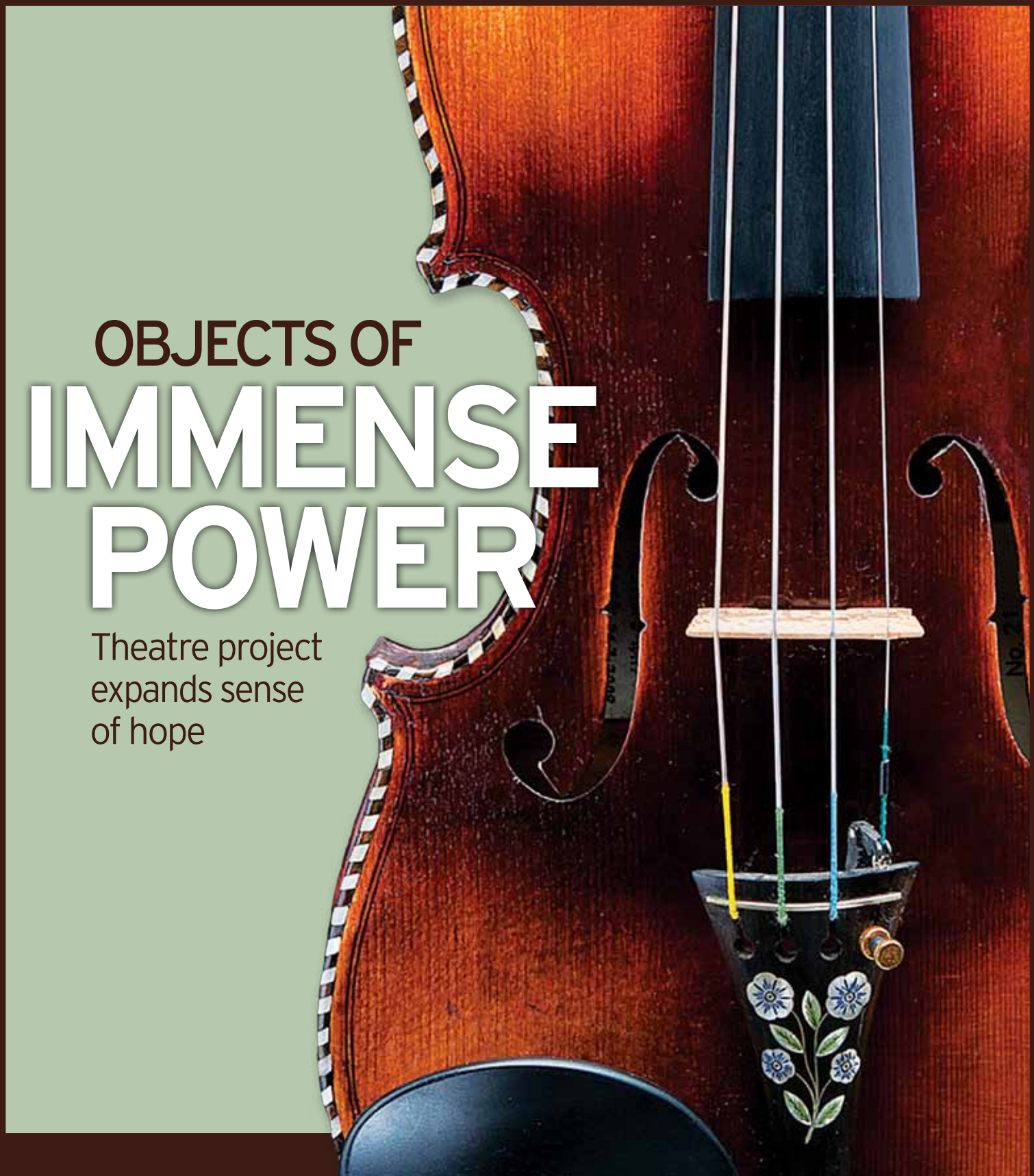

## OBJECTS OF IMMENSE POWER

Theatre project expands sense of hope

By Meg Freeman Whalen

# Objects of Immense Power

## Project/Hope explores new perspectives on art, history

On the first day of "Topics in Theatre" class last semester, students brought in their most prized possessions. Well-worn stuffed animals, a bracelet, a photograph of an old friend, a mother's journal — what appeared to the untrained eye as ordinary bric-a-brac were in fact precious artifacts from the students' lives.

"On the surface they were everyday objects," said Abbey Elliott, a senior theatre major who graduates this May. But when asked to tell about their possessions, she adds, "most people ended up in tears."

What Elliott and the 11 other students in the class learned that day, said playwright Joe Salvatore, was that objects can have "immense power."

"Objects carry memories. They link us to the past and present and sometimes propel us into the future."

Salvatore, a successful playwright and, since 2002, a professor at New York University, was commissioned by the UNC Charlotte Department of Theatre to work with students to create an original play inspired by "Violins of Hope," a project the UNC Charlotte College of Arts + Architecture presents this spring. Like the bracelet and the teddy bears and the photographs, the Violins of Hope are mere things that have become invested with extraordinary meaning.

Collected over a period of more than 15 years, the instruments have histories related to the Holocaust. Some were played in concentration camps; some belonged to the klezmer tradition — the Jewish folk music tradition that was nearly obliterated in the Holocaust.

Recovered and restored by Amnon Weinstein, an Israeli violinmaker, the violins have never before been exhibited together in the Americas. They will premiere in Charlotte this April in exhibition at UNC Charlotte Center City and in a series of concerts featuring renowned musicians from across the world.

Embedded in the University's commitment to bringing these remarkable instruments to Charlotte was the intention that the project would engage students from many different disciplines, spurring them to approach history and art from new perspectives. Ken Lambla, dean of the College of Arts + Architecture, issued a broad call to professors to participate. Among those who responded was James Vesce, chair of the Department of Theatre.

"I'm always banging the drum for collaboration," Vesce said. "When Ken asked us, 'Do you want to be involved?' I said, 'Of course, we do.'"

Although there are several notable plays about the Holocaust, Vesce wanted to do something different. "We wanted to look forward instead of look back," he said. "We wanted to expand the sense of hope and what that means."

## 'INTERVIEW THEATRE'

Vesce had worked with Salvatore before and was especially interested in Salvatore's experience with a relatively new genre of drama called "interview theatre." As the Department of Theatre develops a strategic plan for the future, Vesce said, "one of the principles is a commitment to new work and new ways of working. We want to explore new ways of creating work."

Perhaps the most famous piece of "interview theatre" is "The Laramie Project,"

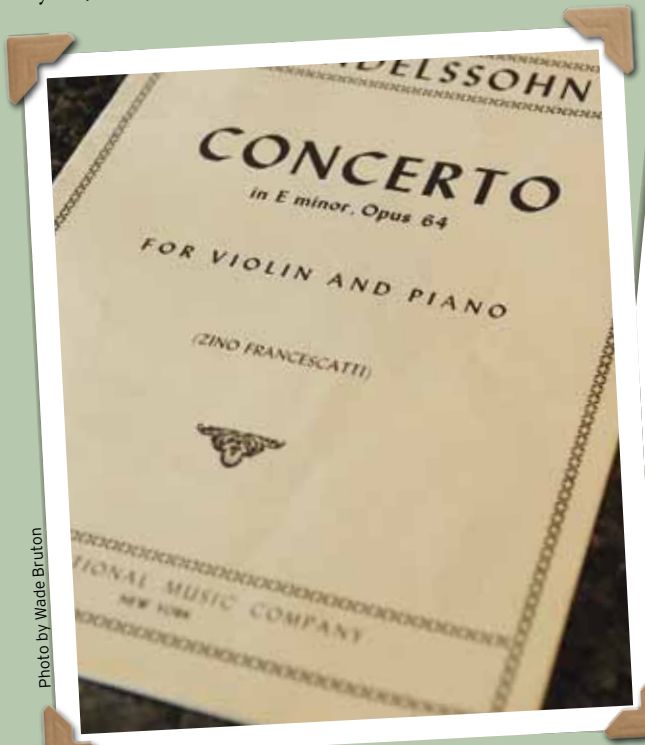


Photo by Wade Bruton

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The violins that comprise the soul of Project/Hope and Violins of Hope have histories related to the Holocaust. Project/Hope participants used their own "precious artifacts" as symbols of hope. Among them was sheet music of a Felix Mendelssohn concerto. Mendelssohn's music was banned by the Nazis because Mendelssohn was Jewish.

a play by Moisés Kaufman about the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998. Based on hundreds of interviews with people in Laramie, Wyo., the play premiered in 2000 and has since been performed across the world.

But Salvatore was actually introduced to that genre of theatre several years earlier while a graduate student. He taught a course that used the 1991 play, "Fires in the Mirror," by Anna Deveare Smith, a pioneer of interview theatre. Salvatore wrote his first such piece in 1999. He said that the process of interview theatre directly engages the community in complex issues.

"It is less about drawing conclusions for the audience than presenting a series of thoughts and ideas from which the audience can draw their own conclusions," he said.

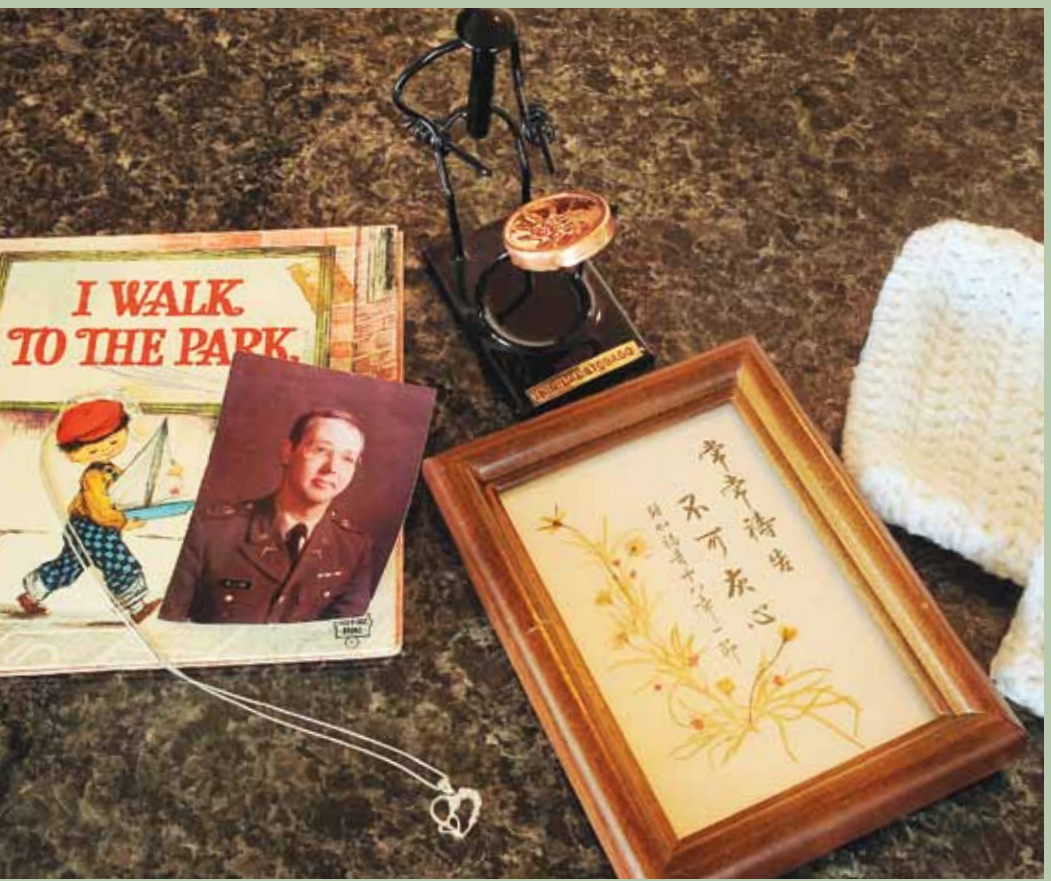
"Project/Hope," as the work for UNC Charlotte is called, has grown out of an intensive collaborative process shared by Salvatore, Assistant Professor of Directing Robin Witt, and the dozen students who took the "Topics in Theatre" course last semester. Beginning in August, the class met each Friday for three hours, led by Witt. Salvatore joined the class regularly by Skype and flew to Charlotte from New York several times during the semester to meet with them in person.

Photo by Wade Bruton

Theatre majors Abbey Elliott (left) and Celeste McCants took part in Project/Hope.

After introducing their special belongings to the class, the students began a four-week process of intensive research on the Holocaust.

"You learn about the Holocaust in high school," said Celeste McCants, a junior theatre major, "but there were so many other facets to that history that I did not know about — the personal accounts of how it affected people's lives. It taught us to look beyond the surface to that personal experience."




What appear to be everyday bric-a-brac proved to be objects that carried distinct memories for the students.

## SHARED SORROW

The historical stories the students encountered were often brutal. "One student talked about being paralyzed by the despair," Witt recalls. In the first class "and every class for the first month," McCants said, "everyone was in tears. But that shared sorrow really united us."

It also prepared the students emotionally for the next step in the process: the interviews. In all, the 12 students conducted 26 interviews, talking to local citizens of all backgrounds, ages and life experiences, including a Catholic deacon, an undocumented immigrant, a doctor, a music teacher and a military veteran.

"We give voice to people who would never find themselves onstage," said Salvatore. "We locate voices that would not normally find themselves acknowledged. There's something very empowering about that."

The students asked each interviewee the same five questions:
Define the word "hope" as if you were going to find it in a dictionary.
Describe a moment from your life when you needed hope. What is the relationship between hope and memory?
Describe an experience that you've had at a pawnshop.
What is your most prized possession, and how have you come to have it?

They were astounded by the answers they received. "The openness of people and their ability to bare their souls to strangers — we were constantly amazed that people will open up so much," said Elliott. "It takes a lot of trust and respect."

Salvatore and Witt taught the students to be scrupulous in their transcriptions of the interviews. "That authenticity," Elliott said, "the struggle in their voice. We wanted to really honor what they were telling us in their stories." The students learned, too, to recognize good dramatic material.

"Robin and Joe talked a lot about 'finding the gold' in interviews," said McCants. "When you're sitting there and you hear it, you know it — that's the gold."

By November, the interviews were complete, and it was up to Salvatore to turn all that "gold" into a coherent piece of theatre, with a dramatic arc and compelling characters. As of the writing of this article in January, the play

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was in its second draft — a version "very, very different from the first draft," he said.

## ONGOING REVISION

The play will be performed April 18-22 in Robinson Hall on the UNC Charlotte campus, and Salvatore said he may be making adjustments right up until show time. That constant revision, Witt said, is an important lesson for her students.

"Inquiry has to be constant. The exploration is non-stop in the creative process. Everybody wants to be done, but for artists you can't ever want to just be done."

Beyond teaching the lesson of unending inquiry, interview theatre presents a challenge to the students who will act in the final production. Vesce calls it acting from the "outside-in."

"It's an imitative form of acting that represents the people interviewed. The characters are defined by their behavior — through gesture, vocal inflection, body language — that's the way into the character. Most acting is 'inside out,' where you try to find the motivation of the character. The actor goes away. You don't realize the actor is working. In interview technique, you defy that principle. You actually show the actor playing a character, often by having the actor play more than one character."

But perhaps the greatest lesson of all is that of compassion. Celeste McCants tells about a young woman she interviewed who had been trying to have a baby for two years. Soon after the interview, McCants learned that the woman was pregnant. She announced the news to the class, and the whole class celebrated.

"That unity that you feel with all these people," she said, "the people you read about, the people you interview. There are these things that we're all going to feel — that hope, that loss, that memory — there's a connection that we all have, regardless of our differences. And I think people will get that from watching the show, as well."

*Meg Whalen is director of communications and external relations for the College of Arts + Architecture.*