The following essays appear as a feature item in On the Boards – the playbill for the ACT ONE theatre program at DeSales University.

Arsenic & Old Lace  A Christmas Story  A Tale of Two Cities

Dance Ensemble Concert  Chicago
**Arsenic and Old Lace**  September 26 to October 7, 2012

Fortunately, none of our families is as dysfunctional – or dangerous! – as the Brewster clan. Still, even without such murderous mayhem, evidence today points to a growing upheaval in living arrangements that has wrought havoc with our society’s understanding of the meaning of “family.” Some of the latest research indicates the decline in the traditional family unit: in 2011, only 65% of children under age 17 were living with two married parents, while in 2010, 41% of children were born to an unwed mother.

But the phenomenon of children being separated from their parents is not a new one. (And, fortunately, no arsenic is involved!) In fact, it plays a part in the Salesian tradition.

In the 1850’s when large industrial concerns were attracting an underpaid labor force to various places in France, the city of Troyes opened spinning mills that employed young girls from the countryside. In that same city, a young priest – **FR. LOUIS BRISSON (1817-1908)** – grew deeply concerned, because the throngs of teenage girls who came to the city had nowhere to live and no guidance or direction. Eventually, he would recruit two graduates of the nearby school run by the Visitation Sisters (a religious order founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal) to join him in providing housing and education for these youth. With Fr. Brisson, one of those alumnae – **LEONIE AVIAT** – would found the religious congregation known as the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales to carry on this apostolic work. A few years later, Fr. Brisson would also found a congregation of priests, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, who continue to be involved in the work of educating youth – even here at DeSales University!

On September 22, in that same city of Troyes, Fr. Louis Brisson will be **beatified** and declared “Blessed” – the penultimate stage in the process of being canonized a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. (Leonie Aviat was named a saint in 2001.)

As this first show of the year opens on the Labuda stage, a delegation from the University will be on pilgrimage in France for that joyous celebration of Fr. Brisson’s holy life. We will be praying that he will intercede for blessings on you and your families. And we hope you enjoy the show!

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**A Christmas Story**  November 28 to December 9, 2012

’Tis the season when our annual quest begins!

Children take great delight in it. They write letters and send them to the North Pole. They visit that man in the big red suit at the local mall. They practice their best behavior in hopes that good deeds have some exchange value. It all makes for a delightful story, as you will see through the desires of Ralphie Parker on stage.

But this season is also the story of a quest for grown-ups. It’s an annual reminder that life itself is, as Paul Ricoeur once said, “a story in search of a narrator.” And in this Year of Faith, we recall that this story is told by none other than God.
For what we believe and what we celebrate at Christmas time is the story of divine goodness toward humanity. It’s the story of a gift given even before we pine for it. It’s the story of a present that far outlasts anything wrapped in a box. It’s the story of grace come to us in person.

In a sermon for Christmas night in 1622, our patron, St. Francis de Sales explained the bountifulness of this gift. After providing evidence of our Lord’s divinity (told in the story of the angels’ announcement and the magi’s adoration) and of his humanity (in “His moaning as He lies in His manger shivering from the cold”), he said:

Let us consider the Eternal Father’s goodness. Had He so desired He could have created His Son’s humanity as He did that of our first parents, or even given Him an angelic nature, for it was in His power to do so. Had He willed to do so Our Lord would not have been of our nature. We would no then have any alliance with Him. But His goodness was such that He made Himself our brother in order that He might both give us an example [Rom. 8:29; Heb 2:11-17] and render us sharers in His glory. (Sermons for Advent and Christmas, p. 85)

A share in divine glory … that is our gift in this, and every, Christmas. For this we rejoice in the re-telling of the story, not only in this season but throughout our lives.

Enjoy the show!

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**A Tale of Two Cities**  February 20 to March 3, 2013

Famous for twelve words – “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” – *A Tale of Two Cities* takes us to a time and place (that of the French revolution) that appears distant from ours today. Yet, like any classic, it speaks of realities ever present in our world.

Familiar dichotomies inhabit the cities, then as now: aristocracy/peasantry, rich/poor, powerful/weak, majority/minority, and the list could go on. But one encompasses them all – the secular and the sacred.

The secular grapples with those innumerable divisions among us. Each has its tensions. Each has its failings. Each has its revolutions.

So, too, the sacred. Its tension is to experience Faith in a world of knowing ever more exclusively dominated by evidentiary science and law. Its failing is to lose Hope when confronted by the tragedies and calamities experienced by mortal and fallible beings. Its revolution is to re-establish a civilization of Love where charity becomes the hallmark of how we all treat one another in the quotidian realities of life here below.

Living near France two centuries before the revolution, St. Francis de Sales was no stranger to these dichotomies. In 1593, in the aftermath of a religious revolution, he famously pronounced his own battle cry in favor of the sacred: “*It is by charity that the walls of Geneva will breached, by love the city will be invested, by love it will be won over! ... Breach the walls of Geneva with our ardent prayers and storm the city with mutual charity. Our front lines must wield the weapons of Love.*"
As Pope Benedict XVI points out in his Message for Lent 2013, faith is our response to the love shown by God to us, and charity is how we live out that faith. To transform the times in which we live and the cities which we inhabit, that tale needs continually to be told and lived.

**Dance Ensemble Concert** March 15-17, 2013

BEAUTY is an essential fabric to make-up as persons. It’s also a necessity in terms of our social cohesion as a people. As Hans Urs von Balthasar once wrote, “In a world that lacks beauty ... goodness too has lost its magnetic force and men and women are left perplexed”.

That the world is perplexing is obvious to anyone who follows the news! Our dance ensemble concert offers a respite ... and perhaps a reminder. By bringing beauty the Labuda stage, these dancers offer all of us a window onto another world, one where the truth of who we are and what we know surpasses science and technology, one where the goodness of human ability and ingenuity takes shape in choreographed movement.

Though it may be only last a brief time, this concert aims to awaken beauty within us. Instead of being perplexed, we have a chance to be mesmerized at such talent. For that we are grateful.

*Enjoy the show!*

**Chicago** April 24 to May 5, 2013

Chicago: the Second City, the Windy City, source of musical greatness, athletic prowess, schools of thought, manuals of style, infamous politics, and so much more.

Chicago: the life of a big city, replete with culture and corruption, celebrities and criminals, and “all that jazz.”

Chicago: the longest-running American musical in Broadway history, now produced in the little village of Center Valley.

This blockbuster of American musical theatre delights audiences with its tabloid tales and its “razzle dazzle” artistic talent. And it does so, fortunately, at a distance, where enjoyment does not require emplacement, for who would really want to trade values for vaudeville or justice for show-business.

Our patron, ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) never visited Chicago! Still, the culture clash between the drama of big city living and the solitude of the countryside played a part in his life, too. He made several ecclesiastical and diplomatic missions to the capital city, where he was instrumental in forging peace treaties and arranging royal weddings and came to be renowned for his preaching and teaching. As a result, a plan was conceived to make him the next archbishop of Paris. The cardinal desired it; the king was pleased with the prospect. But the saint had other ideas! Concerned only with divine Providence, he
preferred not the enticing glamor of the court but only to remain in his “nest” at home in the small town of Annecy.

And he would famously advise others that the peaceable way to progress in life is to *bloom where you are planted*. To one of his spiritual daughters (Madame Brülart) he writes: “Don’t sow your desires in someone else’s garden; just cultivate your own as best you can. Don’t long to be other than what you are, but desire to be thoroughly what you are. ... What is the use of building castles in Spain when we have to live in France?”

On stage is a musical trip to the big city, which we hope you enjoy. But it is at home where we find our own nest and the garden in which we can cultivate the beauty of our everyday lives.

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