

written precisely with each individual actor in mind, playing to their unique strengths and tapping the natural harmony that exists among artists who, in some cases, have been performing together for years.

And it might just be that Huls knows each of them better than anyone: For instance, Roos, at 24, has been working with Huls for 10 years, and the director first started teaching Amanda when Lawrence was in seventh grade.

LEGEND OF THE RED CANE

Having spent several evenings seated beside Huls as she prepares her cast for its inaugural show, I've arrived at a new appreciation for terms like "tough love" and "thick skin" and "mutual respect." Huls is a dynamo, and you spin with her or get the hell out of the way. Her spirit is unflinching, her enthusiasm infectious as buttery popcorn.

One afternoon, as the cast ran through the entire first act, I actually heard Huls start growling at a flubbed line; the growl grew louder and louder until Huls was forced to speak. "Don't correct yourself on stage," she reiterated, reaching for the infamous red cane propped against her leg. "Ever," she added, shaking the cane in mock-threat.

The red cane, Huls explains, is an age-old theatrical tradition, and there's a wry irony in naming the Phoinix Players' theater after the stick once used to rap actors on the noggin for continually botching lines.

Huls wouldn't hurt a fly, of course, though she might reprimand it for missing its mark. During rehearsals, seated front and center before the stage, perpetually scribbling notes and mouthing small cues to her cast, Huls is the off-Broadway version of a benevolent dictator: focused, refined, camera-shy but confident, kind but firm. She is as quick with a remedial bark as she is with a pleased laugh. Actually, she spends a good portion of rehearsals giggling uncontrollably, genuinely engaged and entertained by what she's seeing on stage.

And when there's a hitch, Huls jumps into action: "Pause," she'll shout, and the action on stage freezes;

"backing it up, please," she says, and like a videotape on rewind, the actors shuffle methodically backward, hitting each mark in reverse order.

"Guys!" Huls shouts during one of *Silver Spur Saloon's* more raucous song-and-dance routines. "Fix your blocking. Talk to each other. Figure out where you are. It looks like a traffic jam. Fix your blocking yourselves, because if I fix it you might not like it." And, just like that, the muddle is straightened out, and the number, flowing smoothly in space, improves tenfold.

Because, individually and as a group, the Phoinix Players exhibit little patience for puerile politics or passive-aggressive mischief. Forget it. A minimum of psychic baggage clutters the lines of communication between Huls and her cast, or among the cast members themselves. The professional atmosphere inside the Red Cane Theatre is clear and sharp, part workshop and part thespian boot camp, and yet what might sound, in theory, like corporal militancy is only the static-free hum of open collaboration — earnest criticism that doesn't spark crying fits, suggestions that are accepted and considered, praise that trumps flattery. Nothing among this clan of entertainers is taken personally, because — to cop a cliché — everyone on this mission is committed to the goal of creating a top-notch show. The show is everything.

"We're all perfectionists," says actor Emmelene Romer, 19, who plays a slatternly vamp in the new production. "We all want it to look as wonderful as it can," Romer says of *Silver Spur Saloon*. "We want the best from us. Everybody does the hard work. Nobody is exempt."

As Huls puts it: "We have no stars here."

This means that, in the Phoinix Players' No Diva Zone, ego inflation and hissy fits are about as effective as tap-dancing on ice. When Huls at last nailed down the new space at 11th and Chambers, after "a solid nine months" of searching, the cast immediately became the crew — laborers tasked with dismantling fixtures and removing years of distinctly unglamorous grime. "It sucked," says 21-year-old

actor Scott Perkins. "We had to tear up all the carpet. Parts of it were really, really gummy. It took about a week."

Austin Roos, who at 24 is the old man of the group, says that this egalitarian, hands-on approach advocated by Huls helps build a sense of investment in the cast members, each of whom speaks eloquently on the subject of her craft. "The art of making art is putting it together," Roos says, paraphrasing an adage by Broadway legend Stephen Sondheim.

And if putting it together means floor scrapers and cans of black paint, so be it. No one bitches. Nobody complains. One of Huls' major pet peeves is "playing the blame game," an offense punishable by push-up: "Drop and give me 10," Huls will command, grinning deviously, and the actor, laughing, hits the floor. Moments such as these, however, are rare.

"This is probably one of the most rigorous schedules that we've had," Roos says about preparing for the debut of *Silver Spur Saloon* at the end of the month. "We're just go go go."

Even when they're done in, wiped out and dripping sweat, backing it up for the umpteenth time, Huls' players genuinely enjoy the exhausting pragmatics of piecing together a brand-new show for their brand-new theater. There's no faking it. Because, amidst all the dreamy disarray of the *Silver Spur Saloon* under construction — the endless reiterations and revisions of the show-to-be — I caught a glimpse of something rare and hard-won.

"They're all good communicators," Huls says of her actors. "This group is extremely patient with each other and, honestly, they do love each other."

THEATER IS THE LIFE FOR YOU

In *Silver Spur Saloon*, Huls — who refuses to put her name as author on any of the several musicals she's penned — makes good use of the familiarity and closeness she shares with her cast, mining the wisdom of years to best advantage.

"First of all," Huls says, "I have an amazing group of talented people, so I want them all to have their moment." There is also an educational aspect to writing her own plays, having to do with the scant exposure most audiences have had to Broadway musicals from the Tin Pan era of big, flashy productions to the rousing song-and-dance routines of Vaudeville. The idea, Huls says, is to channel the seminal work of masters like Gershwin and Sondheim to create an entertaining, smart, accessible musical that will draw people in with its sense of romance and fun.

"We're writing for an audience that is as educated as they can be about musical theater," Huls explains, which is a very nice way of saying that, unless you're gay or living in New York, the Broadway musical seems as remote and frozen in time as bread lines and Rosie the Riveter. Huls is determined to change this — to get the exotic bird of musical theater off the endangered list. Hence the hard work, the continuous evenings of rehearsal, the hours and hours of repetition and detail work.

And hence the self-creation of Phoinix Players' *Silver Spur Saloon*, with its drunken cowboys and preening vamps, its rousing ballads and tap dancing, its bawdy banter and batting eyelashes. There is nothing reconstructed or postmodern about Huls' musical: It unapologetically grooves to the time-tested formula of Broadway musicals by way of Elizabethan comedy — boy meets girl, boy loses girl, shit happens but all's well that ends well — conjuring the innocent (though hardly stupid) air of optimism and glamour that enjoyed its heyday during this country's previous Depression.

For Huls, this is not an act of sentimentality or nostalgia-indulgence but a kind of revitalization. "Musical theater is about making something old new again," she explains. More than anything, she says, the Phoinix Players want to bring that brand-new shine to the local theater scene.

"Theater is an old-fashioned idea about gathering, learning and inspiring people," Huls says. "Eugene needs options. We want to be the one people choose for a night out — to laugh, to engage. We want to share talent, story and the wonder of theater with those who come to our space," she adds.

"We like to think what we are bringing to the party," Huls says, "is fun." **EW**

For info about *Silver Spur Saloon* at Red Cane Theatre, visit <http://theredcanetheatre.yolasite.com>



DANIEL HALSTEAD (RIGHT), EMMY ROMER, AMANDA LAWRENCE, RICHARD DEYHLE AND ELISE NEWELL RUN THROUGH "ANY MAN OF MINE"