In July, sixteen high school students already versed in the theatre arts but wanting to take it to the next level arrived on North Campus, checking into dormitory rooms and showing up at the Walgreen Drama Center every morning for a two-week intensive that gave them access to U-M faculty members expert in all facets of theatre and drama. Admission to the Academy was by audition, either in person or DVD.

This was the first ever U-M Theatre & Drama Academy, offered through the auspices of MPulse Ann Arbor which provides annual summer programs for talented high school students who are serious in their pursuit of an art form. Theatre and drama was added to already existing summer institutes in flute, double reeds, musical theatre, performing arts technology, dance, harp, saxophone, and the vocal arts.

At 8:30 in the morning, bleary-eyed teenagers arrived at the studio of theatre faculty member Malcolm Tulip for a 90-minute session on acting and movement. If they weren’t awake yet, they soon would be.

“The students learned exercises that forced them to work their whole bodies, in controlled yet energetic and creative ways,” Tulip says. “This was their introduction to the idea that dramatic performance, if it is to be whole, must include physicality as well as an interior intellectual and emotional world.”

“We identified the physical environment each character inhabited, then made precise decisions about who they were talking to and what change they hoped to effect upon that partner.”

–Malcolm Tulip
were off to lessons with Janet Maylie on acting for the camera, John Neville-Andrews on acting and directing, Jerald Schwiebert on acting and movement, and Greg Poggi, department chair, on play analysis. Guest teachers Lee Stille from Eastern Michigan University and Paul Molnar from the Michigan Shakespeare Festival taught voice and stage combat, respectively.

By late afternoon, the students were back in Tulip’s studio for more movement work. “They were all asked to prepare two monologues,” he says. “These speeches were then worked from many different viewpoints. We identified the physical environment each character inhabited, then made precise decisions about who they were talking to and what change they hoped to effect upon that partner. We pushed them to expand their emotional range through improvisation.”

As the two weeks progressed, students transformed these monologues into vibrant dramatic scenes, with coaching from John Neville-Andrews. “We only had five days to rehearse and stage the chosen scenes,” he says. “The students worked incredibly hard, demonstrating an earnest dedication for the task at hand and producing with remarkable speed.”

Within only a few days, students had memorized their lines and were on their feet, bringing the scenes to life. “They responded to the materials with ease,” Neville-Andrews says, “making compelling acting choices that belied their youthfulness. It was a joy to see them work as an ensemble, collaborating and supporting each other.”

On the last Saturday of the two-week academy, the students performed their scenes on the stage of the new Arthur Miller Theatre, before an audience of parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends. “The audience members marveled at the growth of these young artists who after only two scant weeks were portraying wonderfully realized characters and giving such accomplished and enjoyable performances,” Neville-Andrews remarked.

“It was one of the greatest experiences I’ve had in theatre,” said one academy participant. “I feel so privileged and lucky to have been exposed to such expertise, as well as to have spent so much time around the talent of my fellow campers.”

The program was such a success that it will be offered again in the summer of 2008. “This is a wonderful way to promote the Department of Theatre & Drama and the School, to showcase our marvelous new facilities, and at the same time recruit talented students from around the country,” said Poggi.

For more information, visit www.music.umich.edu/mpulse/. Priority deadline for sessions is February/March but sessions continue to accept applications as long as openings remain.