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Learning by Design by Kelly Hochbein

A bottle tree. Parachutes. Light. Paper. A scenic designer, says Melpomene Katakalos, is a “good communicator with the eye.”

“As a designer you have a responsibility to create reference, to create a context, a total environment,” says Katakalos, an assistant professor of theatre who primarily designs new plays. “The designer’s job is to make it look effortless.”

Set design is about more than just what looks nice, says Katakalos. It’s about dramaturgy: learning about the context of a play, its time and place and the emotions associated with it. Designers look at pictures, but they also read and develop a keen understanding of a play’s setting.

“I’m a curious person,” says Katakalos. “And so I love that with every single play I do I’m going to learn about something new that I didn’t know before.”

Katakalos learns quite a bit in her professional work, which involves “design as a generative part of theatre.”

“Often when people create theatre, the designer comes in during the production process, which means that play has already been written. ...I’ve been working with directors and writers where I’m part of the process of creating the actual piece of theatre. A lot of directors and actors and writers work collaboratively in that form, but often designers do not,” she explains. Katakalos adopted this approach when, years ago, she was involved with a poem-based play whose playwright wasn’t immediately available. Rather than involving actors right away, Katakalos and the director decided to approach the play from a design standpoint first. The play eventually involved two actors, but it allowed the entire theatre to become an acting space through which the audience moved. This first foray into a generative approach to theatre soon became her standard.

New productions, new lessons

Last year, Katakalos designed the set for *Caught* at the InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia. The Barrymore Awards, Philadelphia’s nationally recognized professional theatre awards program, recently acknowledged her work with a nomination for Outstanding Scenic Design. The playwright, director and overall production of *Caught* also received nominations for awards, which will be presented November 2.

“That play was an incredible experience,” says Katakalos of *Caught*, which she calls a “very meta, very self-aware play” about the U.S. relationship with China. The subject is a Chinese dissident artist, which made Katakalos’ subsequent experience that much more interesting.

Katakalos traveled to China in September 2014, a month before *Caught* premiered in Philadelphia, to participate in the Beijing Fringe Festival. With limited resources and without a budget, actors, or time to rehearse, Katakalos and her colleagues—the only American group in

the festival—decided the audience would create the work as active participants. However, obtaining permission from the Chinese government to produce the play proved the biggest challenge.

“[I experienced] that feeling of what censorship might feel like,” Katakalos says. “The pieces of the art that were sort of controversial to the Chinese government were completely unexpected. I thought that naming names or being really specific with our imagery was what maybe the problem would be, but it was really about exploring one’s individual humanity. ... We’re so about the individual here [in the U.S.] that it’s almost boring. [In China] it’s just not done. So even though I had done all this research [in preparation for *Caught*] and learned a lot about Chinese dissident artists and what that might mean in terms of self-expression, I still got it wrong. We still had no idea that what we were doing was so controversial.”

After a weeklong wait, the group received their permit the day before their scheduled performance. *Labyrinth: Defining Humanity*, a unique and interactive theatrical experience inspired by the collected memories and impulses of the audience—and a true learning experience for its creators—received an overwhelmingly positive response. The play, presented in both English and Mandarin, finished in the top eight of 40 entries at the festival.

‘This has legitimacy.’

This semester, Katakalos is applying her talents and perspective as designer to teach Introduction to Theatre, a first among the variety of theatre courses she already teaches at Lehigh. The designer’s take on the class is somewhat different from the typical survey course. Students learn about theatre by practicing several of its components: reading a play and adding a scene, performing a monologue, designing a set, working with a team to produce a piece of theatre.

“These are students who are not often majors, so I wanted to teach them to be good audience,” she says. “How do you teach people to be a good theatre audience? You teach them all the different components of theatre and really let them engage and understand what those people actually really do.”

Katakalos, who has been recognized for her work with two San Diego Playbill Awards, two Bay Area Critics Circle nominations, and the honor of Best Set Designer for 2008 from the East Bay Express, appreciates Lehigh’s approach to theatre.

“What’s great about Lehigh is that theatre here is academic,” says Katakalos. “It puts it in a vein of importance—this has legitimacy. The university has recognized this as work. That’s what we do to put on a play.”

In designing Lehigh’s upcoming production of Tony Award winner Jeanine Tessori’s musical, *Violet*, Katakalos explored the history of roadside America and the Civil Rights movement, bus stations and boycotts and the signage and architecture of the 1960s. She will travel to Singapore this winter on sabbatical, where she will participate in a festival as the designer of *Shape of a Bird*, a new experimental play by Jean Tay based on *Antigone*. The play involves puppets and its design will likely include paper.

And chances are, Katakalos will learn something new along the way.