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New theatre professor sets the stage by Emily Groff

Melpomene Katakalos is running late, but she has a good excuse—she was out collecting windshields. That’s all in a day’s work for Katakalos, a new assistant professor of theatre at Lehigh. After all, she designs productions in the department. The windshields are for *Top Girls*, which Augustine Ripa, professor of theatre and associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences, is directing this fall.

In addition to working on plays at Lehigh and on professional productions in New York and Philadelphia, Katakalos teaches classes on scenic design. “I teach design through sculpture,” she says. “I approach it from a perspective of intuition and visual memory. We’re creating an experience and soliciting a visceral reaction from the audience. It challenges students to use a new way of thinking about writing and plays.” Students in Katakalos’s classes build “Cornell boxes” as inspiration for their designs. The boxes are named for Joseph Cornell, a self-taught artist who creates shadow boxes and dioramas with found objects. The boxes help students get used to the ¼-inch scale they’ll use to build models of their scenes and also let them think about objects in different ways. “Cornell takes everyday objects and transforms them into something new and beautiful,” Katakalos says. “I find this helpful for theatre because we’re constantly working with real, recognizable objects that are transformed by being on stage.”

Pam Pepper, chair of the theatre department, says: We are thrilled to have a designer and teacher of Mellie’s caliber and experience. Her commitment to collaboration, producing new dramatic works and the creation of a vibrant hands-on teaching/learning environment makes for an excellent fit in our department. Our students will benefit greatly from her presence.

Theatre as a collaborative effort

Katakalos first discovered scenic design as a teenager in New Jersey, where students who wanted to act in her high school’s plays also had to paint the sets. “After one play, I didn’t want to act anymore. I just wanted to design sets,” she says. Her new passion led to an internship at Plays in the Park, a government-sponsored theater that stages plays in parks in Middlesex County, New Jersey. After getting a bachelor’s in fine arts degree in theatrical production arts with a concentration in design from Ithaca College, Katakalos moved to London. There, she found pub theater—new work done by young people in small venues. She decided she wanted to form a theatre company to do similar work, so she moved to San Francisco and co-founded Crowded Fire Theater Company in 1997. “I like the idea of theatre as a collaborative effort,” she says. “Designers can be involved at the seminal points of playmaking.”

Katakalos received a master’s of fine arts in scenic design from the University of California, San Diego, where she also discovered a love of teaching. She then taught at the University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley Repertory School of Theatre and Sonoma State University.

She came to Lehigh because it will allow her to continue to design plays while also concentrating on teaching. “At Lehigh, we have a lighting designer, a costume designer, directing and acting professors, plus a great scene shop and facilities—it’s a fully loaded department. We have everything we need here,” she says. “Plus, New York is so close, as is Philadelphia—it’s a perfect location.”