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Revealing a moment in America: UMass theater creates a community to capture one

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Dora Arreola and Jason Lambert rehearse for "1905" at UMass' Curtain Theater. UMass theater professor Gina Kaufmann directs her cast during a rehearsal at Curtain Theater.

Dora Arreola and Jason Lambert rehearse a scene.

Under bright lights in the Curtain Theater at the University of Massachusetts, actor Jonathan Fielding trails Sarah Wiggin across the stage, holding up his hands as if filming her with a movie camera. He speaks to her in German-accented English.

"You are home. And you are very tired," he says.

Wiggin, who looks exasperated, pulls up the collar of her brown, corduroy sport coat.

Fielding stops suddenly and turns to director Gina Kaufmann, who sits offstage. Kaufmann had encouraged the pair to experiment with adding new dialogue to a scene from the play "1905," set to open Friday at UMass. Fielding now questions whether the new dialogue is working. A thoughtful discussion between actors and the director ensues.

Members of the cast and crew of "1905" say that this kind of open collaboration has been the primary feature of the play's construction. In fact, the play - originally created for the stage by the New York-based theater and dance company Misa Table - has grown into a multimedia performance, featuring theater, live music and film, and incorporating the talents of Misa Table as well as an array of local artists.

The music, film and theatrical elements come together to explore the unlikely sense of community that developed among immigrants from Russia, Germany and Mexico in rural Nebraska in 1905. Among the six characters are single adults, a brother-and-sister pair and a married couple. Each finds meaning in each other's company. But as the men slowly drift apart, the women move closer together.

Overall, the play offers a portrait of a community torn between old-world traditions and more modern concerns - a community strikingly similar to our own.

History

The most recent version of the play began in 2006, when Kaufmann, a UMass theater professor, saw a Misa Table workshop production of it in Sacramento, Calif. Kaufmann was intrigued by the themes of the

play.

"One of the themes is the way that changing technology changes community," Kaufmann said. "We may look back on the technology available 100 years ago with an air of misty nostalgia,"

But for Kaufmann, who claims that she often feels like she can't possibly keep up with today's new technology, it has been interesting to learn that people in 1905 may have felt the same way.

Misa Table's co-founder Jason Lambert explained that exploring issues related to technology was important during the play's creation, since one of the company's goals is to look at the common challenges different societies grapple with.

The collaborative model

Lambert describes Misa Table as "a group of artists interested in collective research, writing and studio work." They construct original theater works using a collaborative model in the tradition of Theatre de la Jeune Lune in Minneapolis and the Lecoque School in Paris.

For a typical production, the group gathers original and found texts to find a story. In the studio the writer/actors use improvisation and movement to explore important ideas and themes. The setting for "1905" developed organically, Lambert said.

"If you put your finger on the center of the map [of the U.S.] and aren't trying too hard, you might end up in Plano, Nebraska," the setting for the play, he said.

The title, "1905," was arrived at similarly. It was 2005 when the group started writing. They simply went back 100 years. The play's themes arose as they researched and considered their characters' lives in the context of that place and time.

In their research, Lambert said, they discovered that during the year 1905 there was a great flowering of technology in the United States. Nickelodeons were gaining popularity. Films like "The Great Train Robbery" were appearing in theaters and grange halls across the country.

Meanwhile, immigrant groups from places as diverse as Russia, Germany and Mexico were forming communities in the Midwest.

Members of Misa Table incorporated elements of the cultures, time period and location into their writing and studio practice. They explored ideas related to community, like family, friendship and the ways technology affects people's ability to connect. They looked at the technologies of silent film and the zoetrope, a device invented in 1834 that produced an illusion of action from a rapid succession of static pictures.

But Lambert concedes that at a certain point the group needed specific kinds of expertise.

"It became clear after Sacramento that we would invite someone in to direct," he said. "We didn't have all of the design and production elements in place. And that's where UMass comes in."

The UMass connection

Paul Besaw, Misa Table's choreographer and co-founder, approached Kaufmann about directing. The two were friends and shared similar ideas about collaborative theater.

Enthusiastic about the prospect, Kaufmann applied for and won a Visioning Grant from the university's

College of Humanities and Fine Arts. She invited Misa Table members to western Massachusetts and then asked herself, "Who can I work with here to really make the collaborative pieces come together."

She asked Luis Rodriguez to compose original music. A graduate student in the music department, he had been a composer for theater in Puerto Rico. Undergraduate Melissa Cleary Pearson came on as stage manager. Students Sabrina Gogan and Dora Arreola joined the cast. Theater professor Miguel Romero designed the set. Emmy-nominated filmmakers Steve and Elizabeth Wilda were called in to create original, silent-film footage to be integrated into the performance. Erin White designed the costumes for the film.

"I don't think I've done a show with so many technical items," Kaufmann said. Nor with such a whole-group collaborative approach.

Actor and former UMass graduate student Arreola said she also participated in script writing and choreography. For Arreola, there was also a meaningful cultural component. The character Arreola plays is from her own home country of Mexico. She said putting the performance together has been a great opportunity for her to bring in aspects of her own culture and language. She has especially appreciated the collaborative aspects of the play's development.

Undergraduate actor Gogan - who also wrote a letter to help get the grant - agrees. "Everyone is open to comments and collaboration," she said. "Gina will throw an idea at us, and we're encouraged to follow our impulses."

Music and film

Collaboration carried over into the music and film as well. Composer Rodriguez says that in addition to researching the music of the other cultures represented in the drama, he also went to every rehearsal. As he watched the characters grow he became interested in how they dealt with their problems and issues. He assigned a specific color and then tone for each character, and developed a relationship of tones and notes that helped him understand the relationship of the characters.

Rodriguez chose some instruments based on tradition in the cultures represented. For example, clarinets are common in Russian music, he said. He chose others based on gut feeling. "When I saw the play, I felt, I need an accordion for this," he said.

The filmmakers brought their own collaborative expertise to bear on the project. Elizabeth Wilda is a documentary filmmaker. Her husband, Steve, is both a filmmaker and a fine artist.

Kaufmann, the ringmaster, said that the wealth of collaboration has made her task both more challenging and more rewarding. "I have to hear so many more voices than I'm used to hearing as a director, which is sometimes overwhelming," she said. "But if I allow myself to take all of that in, the storytelling is richer for it."

About this performance

WHAT: "1905"

WHEN: Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sunday at 2 p.m.

WHERE: Curtain Theater, UMass, Amherst

COST: \$15; \$7 for students and seniors

MORE INFO: Tickets can be purchased by calling the UMass Fine Arts Center box office at 545-2511. Audience members are invited to stay for a Q & A session with the artists after each performance.

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