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Bess Wallerstein stages another on-site play, this one at H&R Block Artspace

ROBERT TRUSSELL

Environmental theater returns.

Bess Wallerstein, co-founder of One Time Productions, last year directed Sam Shepard's "True West" in an Airstream trailer in artist Johnny Naugahyde's backyard. In 2005 she staged Tina Howe's "Museum" in a Crossroads art gallery.

Now she's assembling a show in the H&R Block ArtSpace at the Kansas City Art Institute. The piece is called "Arts or Crafts," by Rob Roznowski, and it asks the viewer to define the difference.

"It's a seemingly simple play, but this is one of the more difficult plays I've worked on," Wallerstein said. "It has 23 scenes, and each scene is very different and each one asks, 'Is this art or is this craft? And what is art? And what is craft?'"

Wallerstein said she discovered the play when Rachel Cain, a local actress, director and educator, brought it to her attention. Cain earned her master of fine arts degree from Michigan State University, where Roznowski directs the acting program and where "Arts or Crafts" was first staged. Cain is an assistant director on "Arts or Crafts."

Wallerstein said Roznowski has done some rewrites and hopes to get to Kansas City to see the show.

The piece opens with a monologue by the Mona Lisa and moves on to a discussion among ancient Greeks about the nature of architecture. There's also a scene of four critics debating art versus craft.

Wallerstein is staging the show in the round in what she described as a white box.

"We're gonna come in and breathe some life into it," she said. "I thought that for this piece, partnering with the KC Art Institute was the way to go. Because the Art Institute is teaching young artists who are developing their art and their craft."

Wallerstein said the first production at Michigan State used a large cast, but she's working with only six actors — Ben Orscheln, Chioma Anyanwu, Janet Henry, Joel Moses, Teisha Bankston and Mark Manning.

"It's a wonderful play for all of these people to be showcased because they all play different characters," she said. "I like the challenge of having these actors really stretch themselves. These are very short scenes, but this cast has definitely risen to that challenge. They've done some great character work."

Wallerstein said if she sends the theatergoers home with more on their minds than when they arrived, she'll have succeeded.

"It's a play that is asking a question instead of trying to find an answer," she said.



Janet Henry plays a dancer at a fair in "Arts or Crafts," a show from One Time Productions.



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THE SHOW

"Arts or Crafts" begins previews Tuesday, opens Thursday and runs through Oct. 11 (no performance on Oct. 4) at the H&R Block Artspace, 16 E. 43rd St. Tickets are \$15 for the general public, \$7 for students and \$5 for KCAI students. To reserve tickets send an e-mail to OnetimeproductionsKC@gmail.com. For more information go to www.onetimeproductions.blogspot.com.

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