

Assistant theater professor's play makes debut

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"Arts OR Crafts"

"Arts OR Crafts," written and directed by MSU assistant theater professor Rob Roznowski, opens at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Wharton Center's Pasant Theatre.

The play runs through Nov. 18. Tickets are \$10 for students and \$13 for the public. For more information, visit theatre.msu.edu.

Source: MSU Department of Theatre

Throughout the centuries, humanity has gazed upon the pale hue and ambiguous grin of the "Mona Lisa."

Some have seen a happy, innocent woman, while others have suspected a mysterious seductress.

To assistant theater professor Rob Roznowski, however, the portrait is a 16th century equivalent of a yearbook picture - a bored, passionless series of excellent brush strokes.

Though many undoubtedly will disagree, Leonardo da Vinci's lady of intrigue herself makes an appearance in Roznowski's play "Arts OR Crafts," arguing that she is more a work of craft than art.

"It was based on the fact that when I went to go see it, I was like, 'That's it?'" Roznowski said of the painting.

The scene is one of many in "Arts OR Crafts" - which opens Tuesday at the Wharton Center's Pasant Theatre - that aims to blur and possibly redefine the audience's notion of what is art and what is craft.

"This is the Year of Arts and Culture on campus, so I wanted to incorporate big ideas," Roznowski said. "It's getting to the question, 'Who's to say which is better, hobby or art?'"

With scenarios ranging from cavemen playing rock, paper, scissors to a rapper's explicit lyrics getting banned from the

radio, Roznowski wrote his first full-length play as a way to explore as many aspects of that question as he possibly could.

One scene shows pilgrim women talking about what future generations think of their quilt squares.

In another, theater critics try their best to outwit each other with jabs at Denzel Washington's Broadway performance as Julius Caesar - a scene for which Roznowski used real-life reviews.

The variety between the scenes came not only from Roznowski's head but virtually everyone else around him - he e-mailed friends, asked strangers and gave everyone on the cast a chance to explore the topic.

"Some said, 'Art comes from the soul, hobbies come from boredom,' but then other people would say, 'How can you say things like scrapbooking are not art when it comes from such a personal place?'" Roznowski said. "All these debates came up, and I was like, 'Well, there's my play.'"

Theater senior Kamaal Reffigee said getting cast in "Arts OR Crafts" made him think about his own take on the subject.

"I consider art not to be better than craft, but it's what the creator chooses to do with it," Reffigee said. "Both take the same amount of love and attention to detail, but crafts are things you keep to yourself. Artists put things out into the world to be shared and judged and discussed."

Working in the play also has made theater sophomore Kellyn Uhl rethink her definitions for art and craft, even as an actor.

"I think a lot of times, student actors view acting as a craft because we're learning all these different ways to attack it, and it's meticulous," Uhl said. "At the same time, if you do a scene and you have the power to move someone in the audience, then it becomes art. That's the thing we're all hoping to do."

From the beginning, Roznowski asked the cast to think of ideas for scenes or angles he might have missed.

"We got into the question, 'Are sports craft?' There are all these ideas of what sports are, but I doubt a football player would say he isn't moved when he makes a touchdown," Uhl said.

They wrote in a football scene in which, once the ball is hiked, all the players turn into ballet dancers.

"It was to show that everyone has this idea of what sports is, but there is really a lot of skill and artistry involved," Roznowski said.

For Roznowski, combining the jobs of playwright and director have resulted in exhaustive cutting and rewriting during the course of rehearsals, along with last-minute scene additions.

"There was a scene I knew I was missing, so I literally spent an entire day hiding in Jo-Ann Fabrics by the fabric-cutting table, listening to people talk about what they were making," Roznowski said.

"In the play, I incorporate their stories - they are doing it as a present, they are doing it to spend time with their kids - every time the fabric changes, the story changes."

Ultimately, the answer to what is art and what is craft is made on a personal level, Roznowski said before offering his take.

"I found a quote by John Ruskin, who is considered father of the arts and crafts movement, that pretty much sums up the play: 'When love and skill work together, expect a masterpiece,'" he said. "'If your heart is in something, expect art.'"

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