Arts and the Final Curtain Call

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Recommended Citation

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Arts and the Final Curtain Call

Capstone projects are created by senior theatre arts and art & design majors.
The New World Theatre has been transformed. It is English farmland, the 1940s. The scent of straw rises from the bales heaped one upon another. A creaky wooden cart tilts precariously. To the left is a barn wall, and beyond that a fence surrounds a verdant pasture. Five young girls in khaki breeches and green sweaters stride about the stage. Their red armbands bear three letters: "WLA."

The girls move into a tight circle, their backs to one another, the lights dim. They begin to sing "Silent Night," their voices rising in high, clear harmonies. Some sing in English, others in German, and another in Italian.

"The other job we have is learning to cut elm trees, to make coffins," one girl says quietly, in a lilting British accent. "The pilots ask us for dates galore, but not for long. They are brave."

This is "Lilies on the Land," the senior capstone project of theatre major Alex Rexford. "Lilies" tells the story of the Women's Land Army of World War II, a group of heroic women from different walks of life all working the land for the war effort.

As a BBC radio broadcast declares victory in Europe, the girls onstage cheer and embrace one another.

"You have to be there to know," says one. "The Forgotten Army? I'd do it all again."

The dress rehearsal audience claps, and the girls laugh in the darkness of the blackout.

"That was so much better than last night!" says Rexford encouragingly. "I loved watching you interact. Your lines and your delivery are more confident. Take a break, and then we'll do it all again."

The girls run out, laughing, singing snatches of "Hamilton." Their chemistry and camaraderie is tangible, as is the passion and dedication that has gone into making this project happen.

"I always knew I wanted to direct a show," says Rexford. "I connect deeply to stories and the way they come to life on stage. It's been a positive and loving environment to be part of."

THEATRE ARTS

Senior capstone projects have been a highlight of Dordt's theatre program for years.

"Students learn best by doing," says Ter Haar, chair of the theatre department. "Having the chance to propose and carry out a project that is your passion gives significance to your entire education. We enable our majors and some of our minors to propose a complex project and then fully support it. Whether it’s scenic design for a mainstage show, or a show they direct—the sky is the limit for what students can do. And then the fruits of their labor are shared—not just with a class but with an entire audience."

Theatre students begin brainstorming their senior capstone project during their sophomore year. They can direct or produce a show, design a set or costumes, be a technical director for a show, or even write a play. As juniors, students draft a proposal so that the department can begin thinking through the logistics of the projects.

At the end of each academic year, all theatre students volunteer for design positions for the next year’s productions. Laura Berkompas, Dordt’s technical director, assigns the roles. Already during the summer, student directors of studio productions begin to conceptualize their assignments. They read the script multiple times, research how others have approached the play, and do character analyses. The results are compiled in a director’s notebook that becomes part of a theatre major’s résumé for graduate school.

When school resumes, the design meetings begin. Student directors present the ideas they’ve developed, hear the design team’s responses, and come up with concrete ideas for the show’s design. Within days, auditions are held, the show is cast, and rehearsals and tech work begin.

A faculty mentor works alongside each
student throughout the process. The theatre professors attend rehearsals and watch not just the show but the student directors themselves. The professors comment on the approach and alert them to issues they might face. At the end of the production, students write a reflective paper and engage in a final, in-depth conversation with their mentors before receiving a grade.

"It's very rare to be an undergraduate and have this kind of experience," says Ter Haar. "It can even be life-changing—it makes some students realize this is something they could be called to for their vocation."

"I've been looking forward to doing this ever since I found out about the opportunity," says Rexford, who has also participated in other students' capstone projects. "To finally be here—doing it myself—is surreal, but incredible. It's a great environment to test the waters because you have wonderful faculty helping you every step of the way. They've done this a million times, and they're essential to helping us figure out what we're doing. I never once felt like I was going to fail because I had them supporting me."

Theatre major Annie Sears read dozens of play scripts to find just the right one for her senior capstone project. Finally, she settled on "Eurydice"—a retelling of the classic Greek myth that focuses on the titular character's relationship with her father, who died just before the play opens. In this version of the myth, when Eurydice enters the underworld, she loses all memories. Much of the story revolves around her father teaching her how to remember through words, stories, music, and dancing.

"The language is what really drew me to it," says Sears. "It's so poetic; everything is a metaphor. She can't remember what a father is, so he describes it as a tree in a backyard—the one under whose shade you would sit. It's also unlike anything Dordt has done in my time here—it's abstract, almost avant-garde, and it spurs a lot of questions about the nature of memory and reality. How does memory shape us? What do we have if not what we remember? I wanted to push and stretch our audience—to show them what theatre can be and do. I think this show accomplished that."

Sears describes the collaborative process that went into designing such a unique show, including elements like fruit falling from the sky and a child-lord of the underworld riding around on a red tricycle.

"The script says the underworld is more like Wonderland," explains Sears. After researching different approaches, her team settled on using over-saturated colors, smoke, and mist to create a world "that is more unsettling than inviting. We decided to infuse our underworld with a circus vibe. The lord of the underworld is like a ringleader; the father feels like a magician in the way he manufactures words and memories. The Greek chorus members, always rather loud and annoying, are clowns. It makes the show simultaneously disturbing and captivating."

"It feels like my entire college career has led up to this," says Sears. "As a director, you have to apply your knowledge from all disciplines: leadership, organizational skills, design, and acting. This is one final hurrah in which I can use everything I've gleaned from my time here. It's meaningful and valuable to have that last thing that is yours; I'm so grateful for that."

ART AND DESIGN

In art, the senior capstone project happens during the fall semester. Under the guidance of art professor David Versluis, seniors propose an idea for their senior exhibit. Versluis walks students through what he typically does to prepare for an exhibition, helping them think through both the exhibit itself and how the work will function in that space. Student exhibitions have included electronic digital media such as videos and photography, and traditional media such as painting, drawing, graphic design. All projects are displayed in the Campus Center art gallery.

Solo senior art exhibitions are a fairly new development at Dordt. Versluis recalls that when he began teaching here 17 years ago, all seniors participated in one senior exhibit. Now, rather than having 10 students exhibit a couple pieces each, each student displays his or her full body of work.

"My creative coursework demanded a lot of introspection," says Annie Sears. "I developed close friendships and became more thoughtful. My time at Dordt made me empathetic."
"The senior project allows students to assemble their work and contribute to the college community," says Versluis. "The gallery is a major venue on campus, carrying a level of prestige. Students take that seriously and realize what a unique opportunity it is."

The art department holds well-attended receptions for the art exhibits.

"The receptions show the community spirit of the college," says Versluis.

From a professional standpoint, the exhibitions also provide a way for students to learn the art of curating, organizing and displaying an art exhibition.

"It helps them relate to museum artwork in a different way," Versluis says. "A professional curator is always thinking through the fine details of layout, and is familiar with enough artists’ works to propose an exhibition for a gallery. That’s a bona fide job for an artist, and it’s something we help them experience through their senior shows."

Art major Ariel Gomes decided to explore his affinity for architecture and graphic design in his senior project. Using a computer program, he designed four residential buildings. All of the homes share common elements of modern architecture—large bay windows, open-concept living spaces, tall ceilings, exposed beams, and natural elements inside the living space. The first building follows a barn shape, the second is a home on the coast, the third is a cabin with south-facing windows to absorb heat during winter months. The final design is a home within a greenhouse, making the residence energy-efficient in locations with a mild climate.

"My parents are missionaries in rural Africa," Gomes explains. "My dad always planned the buildings we worked in. Growing up, I got to see the design process and implementation, so I was always interested in it. I love how much thought goes into architecture. You create spaces that dictate how people interact with their surroundings; architecture affects people on a daily basis."

Through "Littles," Lydia Van Wingerden wanted to remind viewers that "we are little and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, yet each little thing is unique and beautiful."
“My senior project taught me a lot that I would not have learned in the classroom. I was able to take what I’d learned in different classes I’d taken at Dordt—graphic design and engineering—and put them together,” he says. “It meant that by the time I graduate, I have physical architecture projects to take with me.”

After graduation, Gomes plans to work as the graphic designer for First Reformed Church in Sioux Center for a couple of years before applying to graduate school in architecture.

For her senior capstone project, art history and education major Lydia Van Wingerden painted 200 miniature watercolors, playing with a wide range of techniques, vibrant colors, and subject matters—from abstract to realistic. Each piece is less than three inches in size.

“This is a piece of me that people can take with them,” she says, “to keep us connected.”

SERVICEABLE INSIGHT

In an educational world that is increasingly vocational, Dordt’s commitment to the arts is unique, says Ter Haar.

“Storytelling is such a part of the fabric of how God has created us. At Dordt, we talk about serviceable insight—how can we become better storytellers: discerning, probing, forthright, and honest? This knowledge is going to enrich our students in their lives as teachers and workers in the church—as God’s servants. This is how Dordt is distinct.”

When asked how a Dordt art education was meaningful to them, students pointed to two themes: in-depth training and community.

“A lot of it is about solidifying what you believe,” says Van Wingerden. “To look at challenging pieces of art and appreciate them for what they are, you have to understand the difference in the worldview you are coming from versus where the artist is coming from. Francis Bacon painted some really grotesque paintings. Looking at that from the perspective of a beauty-maker, how do we appreciate his artistic value while still holding onto the values that we know?”

Understanding other worldviews helps you understand your own.”

“Our professors ask us challenging questions,” adds Gomes. “They really try to implement a Christian perspective in how we think about things, like, what is the role of art in the church? How can we, as artists, be good stewards of creation?”

Gomes found the sense of community in the art department immensely valuable, both because of the mentoring he received from his adviser and because of the smaller class sizes.

“Glorifying God with our talents first and foremost means loving our neighbor. At Dordt, we teach students to do that by sharing their artwork with the community. I find that to be particularly Reformed—it’s about common grace.”

—David Versluis, art and design professor

Sears found the same to be true in the theatre department. Theatre students hang out in the theatre pod; professors leave their doors open and often pop out to interject their thoughts in student conversations.

“‘We’re really privileged to have that space,’ Sears says. ‘We’re instrumental in one another’s lives, and that’s really special. And our professors know us well. We truly do life together.’

“Glorifying God with our talents first and foremost means loving our neighbor,” says Versluis. “At Dordt, we teach students to do that by sharing their artwork with the community. I find that to be particularly Reformed—it’s about common grace. And students come away with that understanding. It enhances the atmosphere and culture of the college.”

KATE HENRECKSON

Ariel Gomes is also a gifted musician. Here, he is pictured playing two acoustic guitars simultaneously.