Regional

Wulfsong teaches, executes designs for theater

Regardless of the play or the actors, audiences get an important clue of what to expect when the curtains go up and their eyes first catch the design of the opening scene. The responsibility of making it a memorable experience falls on the scenographer, the person who develops the overall appearance of the set. A local scenographer – and teacher of scenography – is Jim Wulfsong, an associate professor and chair of the department of theater and dance at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His approach to scene design, he said, comes from various influences.

"I approach it as architecture in some ways, in addition to as pure art," said Wulfsong, who was born in Galesburg, Ill. He obtained his bachelor's degree in theatre production from Bradley University and his master's of fine arts in theater design and technology from the University of Minnesota. Since he graduated from college the craft of designing a stage for theater has seen the incorporation of new technologies.

"We still teach that you need to be able to draw before you can just dive into the computer," Wulfsong said. "That mostly has to do with the interface. A mouse is not the friendliest thing to be able to draw or design with. It is not as intuitive as pencils, but we are getting there. You know, the next generation of input device may take us to that direction where we just start to design in the computer. I tend to do kind of a blend of both." He added that some recent productions even use projectors to "dress" the actors or dancers in their costumes.

"They are doing projects using the Connects Systems, which will sense your body movements, sense where your position is, and they can actually make that interactive with the projection, so that is responsive," Wulfsong explained. "Cirque du Soleil started to do that a number of years back with some of their shows, where the performers, as they would touch against the wall, created
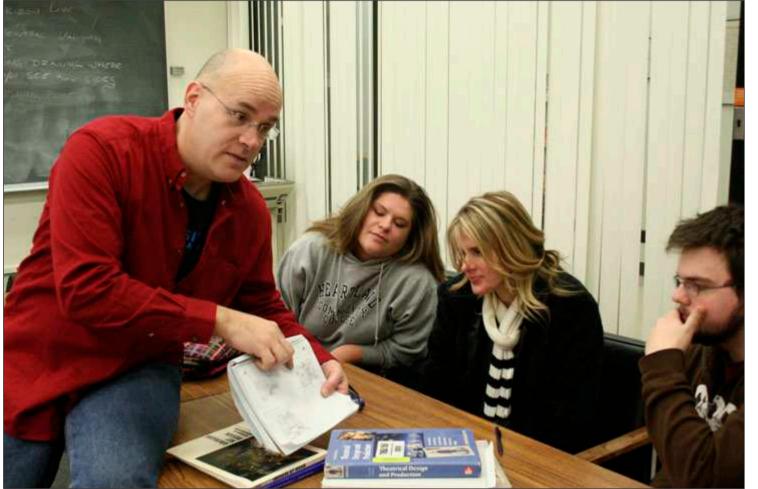

Photo courtesy of Otis Sweezey

Professor Jim Wulfsong during one of his design classes.

ripples as if they were in water."

With all this blending of technology and art, one wonders if there is much difference today between setting a stage for theater versus doing it for movies. "At their core there are a lot of similarities, but there are also massive differences," Wulfsong said. "When you are dealing with film production you have the ability to go on location. If you want to have 100 people coming over the hill

waving swords, you find the hill that looks like what you want, or you make one and you hire 100 extras. In scene design for the stage, we have to engage actively with the audience's imagination to make them 'see' the hill when it may not be really there."

Despite the universality of art, American and European scenic designers take different approaches to their crafts, Wulfsong said. "One of the things I talk

a lot in terms of the European aesthetic design, or the way designers are trained there, is in a more scenography school, where you are not just designing a set and someone else is designing lights and someone else costumes," he said. "They do think of it holistically, that a number of designers really envision the production as a whole. Here we tend to break that up a little bit more."

Scenic design, Wulfsong said, is

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always intense, time consuming and a team effort. "I think that by just having everybody working together long hours, side by side, and pulling for the same goals, that the students see more so than specifically teaching it in a class. It is mentoring. It is seeing for them the process, working together toward that common goal. They see how the designers and directors interact. And when we have a disagreement about something, they see how we work that out."

Also, no matter how much planning and hard work goes into setting a stage, the work is never really done until shortly before the performance starts. "It is very common that things will be morphing, especially during tech week," Wulfsong explained. "Tech week, or technical rehearsals, for us typically take about a week. For professional companies they can run slightly longer or sometimes much shorter. One of the things we are best at is that we work under deadlines. The show opens when the show opens."

Regardless of the actual physical work, a set designer spends countless hours researching before producing the design itself, which is why designs for the same play can differ so much from place to place. That is why, Wulfsong said, the tremendous amount of work involved in set design surprises some of his students. "I think they come in thinking, especially in the beginning classes, that they can just sketch something out and we will just build it and that is that."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.