



Winter 2004

Faculty and students combine talents to recreate a vivid past

Chelsey Iaquina '05
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

Recommended Citation

Iaquina '05, Chelsey (2004) "Faculty and students combine talents to recreate a vivid past," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol13/iss4/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

Faculty and students combine talents to recreate a vivid past

By Chelsey Iaquinta '05

While learning about the inner workings of Greek tragedy can be intimidating, Nancy Sultan and Sara Freeman, assistant professor of theatre arts, have found a way to make it more accessible, and memorable.

Sultan and Freeman joined forces this fall to create a comprehensive exercise for their students that functioned as a method of research and a first-person exploration in ancient theatre. With help from students from a properties course taught by Curtis Trout, associate professor in theatre arts and scene design, the project culminated in a September performance in the University's Laboratory Theatre.

"Both my class and Sara's class cover Greek tragedy, so it was natural for us to collaborate," says Sultan. The professors worked over the summer to map out the logistics of combining their two courses and to choose a selection from Greek tragedy that would offer the best experience for their students.

"We finally decided on a chorus which was one of the scariest curses, according to the ancients," says Sultan. They chose the chorus from Aeschylus' play *The Eumenides*, produced in 458 B.C. "We selected it, in part, because it is so theatrically exciting and unusual and because it's a monumental work in Greek history," says Freeman.



Megan Keach '05 (center left) performs her solo in ancient Greek as Furies prepare to curse Orestes. (Photo by Marc Featherly)



School of Theatre Arts professors Curtis Trout and Sara Freeman collaborated with Sultan in recreating the "scarey" chorus. (Photo by Mark Romine)

The play is the last in a trilogy about the family of Agamemnon, who is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and then avenged by his son Orestes, who kills his mother in the second play. In the third play, a host of Furies from the underworld arrive to curse Orestes for committing matricide. Their chorus, performed by the students, is what scholars refer to as the Binding Song "because it's an incantation, an actual curse spell," says Sultan. "The language in Greek is exactly the same language that we found in curse tablets."

To make the play as historically realistic as possible, the 40 student performers conducted extensive research. "We've looked at history textbooks, we've looked at videos and pictures," says Freeman. "Nancy taught us how to work out the meter of the poetry from ancient Greek, and then we started slowly trying to use the information we found as inspiration for us to create the performance."

Trout's class helped to produce the masks, which were thought to take on their own identity and power in ancient Greek theatre.

The costume group decided on black and gray clothing with bloody handprints (red paint), while the music group found instruments that would be similar to the types used in ancient Greece. This group also designed a melody that could be incorporated into the chorus.

“We researched and listened to recordings of performances of Greek plays and found instruments such as drums, rattles and wind instruments to recreate the sounds we heard,” says Katie Wemlinger '07, whose group was responsible for the music. Each group was also assigned a portion of the performance to memorize and to add dance or movement to.

The three groups rehearsed together for a total of four hours and then all of the students combined for a two-hour practice on the day of the performance. Despite the short rehearsal time, the professors were pleased with the final performance, which was attended by IWU President Richard Wilson and other guests. “We had conceived this as a class project and as an experimental project; we were never aiming for a finished, super-polished product,” says Freeman.

“It’s hard to understand how terrifying the play is when you’re just reading it. Our aim was to help the students feel it through the performance,” says Sultan. Their goal was not lost on Wemlinger, who was still hearing the methodical chants in her head more than a week later. Sultan and Freeman feel the lasting impact of the performance will provide students with a foundation for their studies during the rest of the semester. “An exercise like this really begins to live in the students’ heads, and they internalize it in a certain way,” says Freeman. “We are going to do a lot of plays this year, but this will be the play that, 10 years from now, the students will remember.”

As for Sultan’s class, she says her students will continue to study Greek tragedy and comedy, but with a new outlook. “When you vicariously feel suffering on the stage through drama,” she says, “you come out a different person because it has such a powerful effect on you.”



Sultan’s students often perform dramatic renditions of classical literature and myths. For her “Greek Myth and Hero” class, Nicole Buscemi '97 (above) leaps for joy as a Maenad from Euripides’ *Bacchae*. (Photo provided by Nancy Sultan)