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Classes Combine—Greek Tragedy Comes to Life

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. —While learning about the inner-workings of Greek tragedy can be a little intimidating, even scary at times, this year Nancy Sultan, professor of Greek and Roman studies and Sara Freeman, assistant professor of theatre arts, found a way to make it exceptionally frightening—and fun.

Sultan and Freeman joined forces about a year ago to create a comprehensive exercise for their students that functioned as a method of research and an exploration in ancient theatre. With the help of students from a properties course taught by Curt Trout, associate professor of theatre arts and scene design, the collaborative project culminated in a performance of a Greek tragedy on September 26.

“Both my class and Sara’s class cover Greek tragedy, and prior to this project neither of us had any assignments in which students had the opportunity to produce a drama,” said Sultan. The professors worked over the summer to map out the logistics of combining their two courses and to choose the 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,” said Sultan. They chose the Binding Song, an incantation or spell with language derived from ancient curse tablets. The Binding Song comes from the play *The Eumenides* which is part of a trilogy called *The Orestes* written by the playwright Aeschylus in 458 BC. “We selected it in part because it is so theatrically exciting and unusual and because it’s a monumental work in Greek history,” said Freeman.

The Binding Song represents an art form that is nearly 3000 years old, and so the performance hardly resembled a play in modern theatre and required a significant amount of research before staging. The 40 student performers were divided into three 12-person research groups: masks, costumes and music in order to make the play as historically accurate as possible.

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,” said sophomore Katie Wemlinger, who is member of Sultan’s Greek Tragedy class and part of the group responsible for the music. Each group was also assigned a portion of the performance to memorize and to add dance or movement to.

All three groups combined for the opening of the play and then performed individually. Each group 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 performance. “We had conceived this as a class project and as