

MSU theater goes immersive in ‘Thus With a Kiss I Die’

Bridgette Redman, For the Lansing State Journal Published 9:16 a.m. ET Feb. 13, 2018



(Photo: Photo by Teriah Fleming)
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You may think you’ve seen “Romeo and Juliet” in all the different forms it has taken—William Shakespeare’s stage play, the musical West Side Story, the ballets, the operas, the movies, the novelizations, the limericks.

But Rob Roznowski, professor of theater at Michigan State University, is betting you haven’t seen it the way his students are about to present it. In fact, he’s betting if you come see it every night they’re performing it, you’ll have a different experience every time.

An experiment in immersive theater, “Thus With a Kiss I Die,” is an original work that takes actors and audience members all throughout the MSU Auditorium in the telling of a Southern college that decides to do a color-blind casting of “Romeo and Juliet” in 1958. It’s the early days of segregation and this brings a tidal wave of controversy upon the production.

The audience and actors will come together three times during the show—at auditions, at a rehearsal and at the final dress rehearsal. Between those times, audience members can choose to follow any of numerous pathways. They can pick an actor to follow, stay in a particular room, or follow different story lines. No matter what they choose, they’ll have a unique experience.

“Immersive theater has become a popular art form in many places,” said Roznowski, who is directing the piece and also conceived and wrote it. “I’ve been seeing a lot of it and it struck me this is something perfect for our actors to tackle here. There is an immediacy that isn’t in film or on the stage. They are learning a whole new set of skills.”

He said that’s been the biggest challenge for both actors and designers—the audience is literally right next to them, often just inches away. Designers have to pay greater attention to details because the audience can see what they’ve created. Actors have to help guide the audience members on how to watch the show and work to make the audience members feel comfortable while remaining in character.

“It is a long-form improvisation,” said Roznowski. “The script I gave them was time and location and what they had to hit or cover in those couple minutes.”

The cast has 50 people in it and they all have to create their own parts and be prepared to change their lines each night based on how they interact with the audience.



MSU Theater Department’s “Thus With a Kiss I Die” is a modern retelling of “Romeo and Juliet” in immersive theater. (Photo: Photo by Mallory Maxton)

When Roznowski first started planning an immersive theater project, he knew he wanted to use the entire auditorium, and that’s where his concept began.

“It’s impossible to cover up what this building is and it’s a very specific time period,” said Roznowski. “I got this idea of a southern university in 1958 where a progressive director that has come down from New York City is using progressive casting. The building itself gave me the idea for the show.”

The director casts a white Juliet and a black Romeo, creating controversy in his community. The play addresses numerous social issues of the past and present and examines their similarities and differences today. The university is a fake one and Roznowski made up the situation, but he did work with history professors in the university to accurately portray the time period and maintain historical accuracy when it came to integration and segregation.

“The play’s 40 story lines really examine every civil and social issue that we’re currently having,” Roznowski said. “There are story lines about Democrat vs. Republican, liberal vs. conservative, white vs. black, social economic disparity. Basically, we’re immersing the audience in a time when segregation had ended, a time in history where we thought things were changing so much and we thought things were changing so far. The last sequence looks at all the things we thought would happen from 1958 to now and how far we have not come.”

Upon entering, audiences can take a seat anywhere they like. They are then encouraged to follow a specific storyline, explore several rooms, follow a single character or stay in one space and let the action come to them. There will be stationary areas for audience members with decreased mobility to sit and watch if needed. Also, if audience members become uncomfortable or triggered by the subject matter, they can ask a guard to take them to an exit.

Audience members are encouraged to wear comfortable shoes. Depending on the path you take, you may be climbing stairs or standing for several minutes at a time. Those choosing a less active path will be going to four different rooms across the Auditorium. All are accessible.

The following rules of engagement are suggested:

- Actors may talk to you, but please do not talk to the actors.
- Actors may invite you to follow them, but please do not touch them.
- Actors may voice character points of view that you find distasteful or disagree with; please remember that this is an experience that explores issues of racism, bullying, homophobia, segregation, intolerance and prejudice.
- The views expressed by the characters are merely that: a character’s point of view and not that of the actor or the team creating the show.

Roznowski laughed when asked how actors rehearse a show such as “Thus With a Kiss I Die.” He said it has five stage managers and five assistant directors. Rather than the usual script, he has giant documents of minute-by-minute flow charts for each of the 50 characters. He has whole timed-out experiences for 16 different locations and charting each pathway. Some places have scripted dialog, in other places it is completely improvised off prompts he provided.

“You’re rehearsing across an entire building that you’re sharing and where other shows are performing,” he said. “You rehearse certain storylines, certain minutes, shifting based on what you need at the moment.”

Roznowski said his students have been very receptive to this type of theater and have dug into both the topics and the type of theater. They’ve collaborated with groups from New York that do immersive theater and people from Australia who help actors cool down after performing highly charged material.

“This generation and this group of people understand and embrace the idea of theater as a way to reveal and inform social conscience and to be an agenda for change, or the very least reflection,” Roznowski said.

He’s now eager to see how the audiences take to the work. In New York City, such immersive theater works as “Sleep No More,” based on Macbeth, draws in the younger demographic. He’s interested to see what sort of demographic “Thus With a Kiss I Die” draws here based on the kind of show it is.

“This kind of theater—it is kind of like virtual reality, except it is reality,” said Roznowski.

And it’s a reality he’s eager to have the Greater Lansing area experience with him and his students.

If you go

What: “Thus With a Kiss I Die,” conceived and directed by Rob Roznowski

Where: MSU Auditorium

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Feb. 16, 17, 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 18, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Feb. 20-22, 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 23, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 24 and 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 25.

Tickets: \$17 general admission, \$15 students and faculty, \$12 students, www.whartoncenter.com

There is a pre-show discussion, Sunday, Feb. 18 at 1:15, post-show discussion following the show on Thursday, Feb. 22