

# THE ENGAGED SCHOLAR *Magazine*

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## "As the Iron Cools" Auto Industry Performance Project

**Robert J. Roznowski**  
Department of Theatre  
College of Arts and Letters



Daniel Roth (left), producer of "As the Iron Cools" documentary theatre project, and Robert J. Roznowski.

Too many Michigan households know firsthand the sad saga of the declining automotive industry. However, it isn't every day that the oral history of unemployed Michigan autoworkers and others associated with the industry is collected and becomes the basis for a theatrical production.

But this is just what happened in the case of "As the Iron Cools," a documentary theatre performance led by **Rob Roznowski**, MSU Theatre Department assistant professor and head of acting and directing, and graduate assistant Daniel Roth, who first had the idea to focus on the Michigan auto industry and who acted as the play's producer. Roznowski and Roth worked with 12 students (from various disciplines) in a THR 410 Oral Interpretation class, the United Auto Workers, and various executives from the auto industry to create this piece of documentary theatre. The production portrayed, in poignant detail, some of the real-life impacts of job loss on unemployed auto workers and others affected by the economic downturn in the industry.

**"The one thing I  
learned about working  
in a drop forge is  
never to work in a  
drop forge."**

**Joe Halsted, UAW  
Local 61**

The students conducted and videotaped interviews with 15 people from a crosssection of members of the auto industry to gather their oral histories. Then, using these recordings as the basis for dialogue and vignettes, the students wrote scripts and dramatized the histories to tell various stories, from union auto worker to "Big Three" executive. The students created and directed the production.

This production, which included both live theatre and documentary film, highlighted the individual and statewide impacts of the auto industry's decline. It also provided a way to give a voice to members of the auto industry community, who took pride in seeing their life and work experiences, both positive and negative, shown in such a creative way. The presentation allowed the audience members to share on an emotional level.

In addition, the video recordings produced from the interviews have been transcribed and preserved as a small but important part of the oral history record of a great and longstanding Michigan institution—the auto industry.

Based on this experience and his previous outreach programs, Roznowski sees many possibilities for similar future community collaborations. "Collaborative theatre allows the arts to illuminate community and social issues in a holistic way," he said.

The "As the Iron Cools" project was funded by a grant from the College of Arts and Letters.



The Arts Marathon Weekend, held April 18-20, 2008, boasted 48 hours of continuous arts programming to showcase the best of the MSU art scene. Nearly 100 events were available, including many for children. Rob Roznowski was one of its organizers. He said, "The arts scene at MSU is vibrant. The event was constructed to highlight the Year of Arts and Culture at MSU, and to give those on and off campus a chance to experience the many great performances, exhibitions and presentations that MSU offers in a consolidated time frame."



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Kellogg Center, Garden Level • [East Lansing](http://www.msu.edu), MI 48824-1022

Phone: (517) 353-8977 • Fax: (517) 432-9541 • E-mail: [esmag@msu.edu](mailto:esmag@msu.edu)

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