

Arts + Campus

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NEW SCENE SHOP BRINGS THEATER TO LIFE

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Department of Theatre Builds New Scene Shop



Michigan State University's newest building is not one many people will get to view from the inside. But what is being created there could transport them to a different time and place.

The 9,370-square-foot facility is the new home for the Department of Theatre's scene shop (or formally named the Performing Arts Teaching Laboratory) where all the sets for the department's theater productions and the College of Music Opera program performances are built.

This state-of-the-art scene shop, which opened in January, pushes both the quality of performances as well as the learning experiences for students to a whole new level.

"With a scene shop that is 9,000 square feet, that really puts us on the map to be a national leader in theater production," said Christopher Long, dean of the College of Arts and Letters. "This state-of-the-art student laboratory for theater production and design will make a transformative difference for the learning experiences of our students as they think about set design."

The mere size of the building sets it apart and makes for a unique learning environment. It also allows for two shows to be worked on at the same time, which they weren't able to do before.

"This is a spectacular space to construct the scenery for our shows," said Kirk Domer, chairperson of the Department of Theatre. "The fact that we have a scene shop this large is unique within our peer institutions because the new building is larger than our largest theater. But the greatest part about the facility, square footage aside, is its 22-foot clearance, which is very important so we can actually construct scenery as part of the learning process without the stress of opening night. The fact that we can assemble it fully here, takes out the guess work."

Along with the new space, there is new equipment, technology and tools to work with, including a full welding area with fume hoods for the gases that are put off, CNC (computerized numerical control) router that can do complex cuts in a fraction of the time it would take by hand while also allowing for more complex designs, an expansive woodworking area and a full-size paint studio with state-of-the-art fume hood for painting full-scale scenery.

"There's a lot more to this space, more tools, more training on different tools," said Melissa Hunter, a recent theatre design graduate. "There's just a lot more space to build and we have such great technology. The experience I have received here will be such a great transfer to my future career."

Domer credits the university, College of Arts and Letters and Department of Theatre donors with helping to make the new scene shop a reality.

"The fact that we have some of the latest and greatest tools is a testament to the funding mechanisms put in place," Domer said. "We received funding from the university, the College of Arts and Letters, and our own Department of Theatre donors, so we are able to teach the latest and greatest technologies to our students."

Because the new facility is located in its own stand-alone building, students have the added learning experience of moving the sets.

"Scene shops are usually located adjacent to your theatre. So you build the scenery, you move it across the hallway and it's there," Domer said. "We're in a completely different building. In fact, we perform in three different buildings on campus, so our students also learn about touring productions. They know how to build, how to tear it apart and put it back together again as part of the educational process."

For more than 75 years, there has been a scene shop on MSU's campus. The first one was in the basement of the MSU Auditorium in a non-ventilated space, with one exit door and about a quarter of the size of the theaters they were constructing sets for, so they had to build modular scenery to load into the facility and then make it bigger. The second scene shop was in the old state police post on campus, which was twice as big as the auditorium basement, but still was not quite as wide, as deep or as tall as the largest theater.

The old state police post recently was torn down to build new housing on campus, which prompted the new scene shop facility to be built.

"Our new laboratory was constructed in approximately 12 weeks, and the MSU Infrastructure Planning and Facilities did a fantastic job," Domer said. "I couldn't be happier."