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Wii wizards MSU director, set designer and students give 'Tommy' a 21st-century upgrade



The look on his face said it all, but Kirk Domer opted to use words to emphasize his shock. "I ran out of space on my hard drive," said Domer, associate chairman and scene designer in Michigan

State University's Theatre Department, holding up the small, rectangular device.

Domer knew going in that designing the set for MSU's production of The Who's rock opera "Tommy" was a huge undertaking, and his newly filled external hard drive was proof of the many hours he spent at his computer working on designs for the show. MSU's "Tommy" won't resemble shows of the past because of technology's huge role in this production. Director Rob Roznowski, Professor of acting at MSU, came up with the idea of updating the rock musical while playing Nintendo Wii with his niece. He imagined the choreographic possibilities of putting two Wii-like remotes in the hands of the title character instead of hunching him over an outdated pinball machine. He began working with Domer a year ago to bring his vision to life. The stage, which looks like it's set up for a rock concert, features several large projection screens, some as large as 50 feet wide, that will display the three-dimensional world Domer created for the show. However, he didn't create all of the images by himself.

'The Who's Tommy'

April 9-19 7:30 p.m. Wednesday & Thursday 8 p.m. Friday 2 p.m. & 8 p.m. Saturday 2 p.m. Sunday MSU Theatre Department, Concert Auditorium, MSU campus \$17.50 1 (800) WHARTON www.whartoncenter.com

Domer, who teaches a digital set design course at MSU, assigned his students with creating work for the show, and as a result the students all received credit in the program.

Domer, who has been working on mastering the design programs himself, found it wasn't always easy material to teach. "I'm doing things above what I know," he said. "I'm definitely learning a lot in the process."

Teaching yourself how to do something doesn't exactly make you readily prepared to teach it to others."

Emily Movsesian, an undeclared freshman at MSU expecting to major in natural science, worked as Domer's assistant last semester. Part of her work included finding images for a collage Domer constructed to further convey Tommy's story.

Movsesian said the experience taught her a lot about the design aspect of theater and computers, an area in which she lacked confidence. "I've never seen such a digital set, but I like the way it works with the main themes in 'Tommy,' like the media's impact on a celebrity," she said. The whole stage will consist of backdrops to catch the 3-D projections Domer and students have designed. Some of the screens will move, closing in on a section of the stage to focus the audience's attention on the actors. "Unlike traditional sets where the actors interact with the environment, the environment is now able to interact with them," Domer said. Over the course of the show's 90-minutes, there are more than 500 scenery, lighting and projection cues. "The audience is going to be overwhelmed with images, but I hope the technology enhances the show rather than impedes it," Roznowski said. After facing numerous challenges in the last year, Domer said the most rewarding part of creating the set has been its completion.



Domer

"Not a single student has given up," he said. Domer gets excited when he sees a student finish a project or understand something they didn't before. Every time a breakthrough happens, everyone is one step further to finishing, and the task gets done that much faster, he said. Next year, Domer plans to incorporate some digital elements into his design for an MSU production of "Rent," since one of the characters is a filmmaker, but he stresses that he doesn't want to

exploit this new-age set design. "Technology has a particular future in set design," he said. "There's a certain place for it, and this is it. 'Tommy' is a gaming world, and where there was once flat imagery in the original production, we make it 3-D." Roznowski agrees that there is a certain place for a technology-heavy set and that "Tommy" fits the bill. "I can easily say this project has been more ambitious than anything we've ever done, technology-wise," he said.

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