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MU Theatre's ode to the theatre

Take a backstage look at the free-wheeling balladry of *The Orphan Sea*, MU's new multimedia production.



MU theater students have been very involved in the formation of *The Orphan Sea*. Early on in the rehearsals, they were encouraged to improve movements and learn to work together. Photo by Timothy Tai

BY NIKI KOTTMANN
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THE ORPHAN SEA
Rhynsburger Theatre, 7:30 p.m., Nov. 12–14; 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., Nov. 15; 2 p.m., Nov. 16, \$10–12, 882-7529,

Actors recline on white sashes that serve as beach towels in front of a background of recycled sets from productions past. Behind the curtain of the Rhynsburger Theatre stage, the cast and crew of the [MU Department of Theatre's](#) latest production are preparing for the world debut of *The Orphan Sea*. The combination of actor contribution and multimedia elements make it a unique production.

MU commissioned the piece from [award-winning playwright](#)

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Caridad Svich who wrote the show. The piece uses the archetypal characters of Odysseus and Penelope from The Odyssey to tell a modern story about love, hardship and society's changes over time in a variety of multimedia platforms.

"It's a string of plays that all have to do with some aspect of tragedy and aftermath," Svich says. "They're all plays about how to live in a community."

Last spring Svich connected with Kevin Brown, assistant professor of digital media and performance studies in the theatre department, when she spoke with his classical theatre class via Skype.

Roughly three weeks later, Brown contacted Svich. He asked if she would be willing to create an original piece for MU. With the help of a grant from the Missouri Arts Council, the stage was set.

Brown, the play's director, says that involvement with playwrights of Svich's caliber can only improve the department and attract talented theater students from around the country. "I love the way she combines new and old ways of doing theater," Brown says. "Her plays are often based around classical themes but also incorporate multimedia elements, which also makes them very avant-garde."

Here's how a renowned playwright and her exceptional concepts and ideas came together to create a very distinct show.



The nine student actors weren't given specific instructions early on in rehearsals. A few workshops with Svich and Brown helped them explore characters and the script. Photo by Timothy Tai/Missourian



ADRIFT AT SEA

The play's nine student actors were not assigned parts when they walked into McKee Gym on the first day of rehearsal. No lines. No choreography. They were handed a script, told to break into small groups and given 10 minutes to plan a scene. They repeated this exercise for the next few rehearsals, during which each group performed a scene and the rest of the cast gave feedback afterward.

"The contact was fearless," a cast member would say. "Good use of space," another actor would chime in.

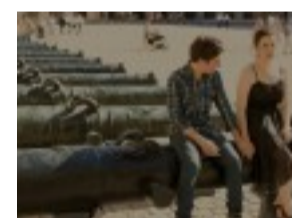
Such exercises and loose structure are eccentric, but serve to accentuate Svich's style and method. They also foster camaraderie among the cast.

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Alexandra Raffini became a theater major this semester; *The Orphan Sea* is her debut MU production. She's adapting to the freedom of a Svich production.

"It makes me feel like I'm seeing more of the director's point of view, rather than just the actor's because, in a sense, we are the directors for this," Raffini says. "Basically, you're the set. You're the everything. You're creating this whole show based on what you're doing."

The play has other notable structural quirks, such as segmented characterization.

There are three choruses, which in classical Greek theater represent the groups that comment on the action of the play. Each chorus in *The Orphan Sea* denotes a theme and a corresponding character: Odysseus, Penelope and "the chorus of the city." The latter's role is to comment on the societal implications of the characters' actions.

"It's told through a couple who are apart, who come back together and who land in a city, in a very simple sort of way," Svich says.



The director, playwright and actors group together to discuss their characters. Photo by Timothy Tai

THE ELEMENTS

But the simple aspect of the play is the storyline. Svich emphasizes technology and movement in her pieces, and *The Orphan Sea* will be no exception.



Svich and Brown incorporate multiple screens and projectors into the backdrop, blending both live and pre-recorded video and audio voice-overs with the actors. Some screens play footage that was shot earlier, while others show a live projection of off-stage actors. Costumes are simple, able to serve as a moving screen, capturing film scenes that are projected onto them.

During rehearsal, the actors were given some specific choreography for a few dances, but were otherwise told to come up with what Svich calls their own movements. Raffini describes it as portraying metaphors through one's body, which she found very difficult.

After being split into groups for a scene that represents a scenario about losing someone you love, one group put Odysseus and Penelope in the middle of the stage, back-to-back. They had one actor puppeteering their every movement while the rest of the group circled around them continuously. The group said afterward that their goal was to try to create a simultaneous sense of connection and disconnect by having the actors portraying the

couple touching but not able to see each other.

The actors received so much freedom that they almost didn't know what to do with it. While rehearsing the sunbathing scene, the actors weren't sure when to switch from walking in a circle to a straight line. Brown told them that there was no "set pacing" of lines at the moment, so they would have to feel it out together.

"We have very few props," Raffini says. "The people who are on stage with you are the best props you can have. It's all about working with those people to create those images and the metaphors that the audience is going to see."



MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT: CARIDAD SVICH

Known for imparting unconventional and multimedia elements in her pieces, playwright Caridad Svich has used creative methods and a unique perspective to make a name for herself in the theater world.

An award-winning playwright, her accolades include the American Theatre Critics Association Primus Prize for her play *The House of the Spirits* in 2011, and she has won the National Latino Playwriting Award twice. In 2012, Svich earned an Off-Broadway Theatre Lifetime Achievement Award, or OBIE, and a number of other honors. She is also an established poet and lyricist.



Caridad Svich, writer of *The Orphan Sea*.

Early on, Svich found herself interested in classics, something that has molded her work and led to the incorporation of classical themes in her works. As a fourth-grader, Svich read Shakespearean plays. Fascinated by the seemingly endless possibilities of playwriting, she soon began studying scripts.

Svich is a diverse talent and has an eclectic knack for creating acclaimed pieces has driven her career. It is also what ultimately brought her to Columbia to direct MU's newest play *The Orphan Sea*, inspired by Homer's epic characters from *The Odyssey*.

"There are so many things you can do in three dimensions, live, and with text and with sound and with light," Svich says. "It's in the moment, but it can also live as a record somewhere as literature, so the duality of that intrigued me."

— NIKI KOTTMANN

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