

THEATER

FINDING THE DRAMA BEHIND GETTING EXHIBITED

Play takes immersive approach to exploring museum

By Joseph Dalton

When curators at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery put together the exhibit titled “The Shelf,” the winnowing was tougher than an Ivy League acceptance process. There were more than 15,000 pieces in the permanent collection to choose from. Only 24 items made the cut. Displayed on the pristine white shelf that gives the show its name are items of both fine art and decorative art, ranging from pottery and sculpture to glassware and photography.

Students and faculty of Skidmore College’s theater department have taken inspiration from the exhibit to create a new theater piece, “Off The Shelf,” which plays for six performances Wednesday to Friday, March 27-29. The hourlong production consists of a series of scenes and vignettes that examine and imagine the back stories of the selected items. Yet the show goes much further by taking audiences into nonpublic spaces of the building where hundreds of other works can be viewed and also revealing the curatorial process with actors in the guise of museum staff.

“You walk into a museum and it’s wonderful with everything in its place. But then you see what goes into creating an exhibit,” says Carolyn Anderson, who co-created the show with fellow faculty member and Garrett Wilson. Anderson cites the museum staff as additional



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collaborators in the creative process, in particular curators Ian Berry and Rebecca McNamara.

The performance of “Off The Shelf” will move from the gallery spaces to the museum’s loading dock and “preparation room,” where works of art are unpacked and readied for display.

“We wanted to reveal the energy, character and heart of the Tang’s collection,” says Anderson. “This will be a multidimensional experience in which the audience sees, smells and hears things.”

Starting last fall, theater students made repeated visits to the Tang in order to learn about the workings of a museum and the breadth of the collection. They were also assigned research and encouraged to record their personal reflections on the art. The script was compiled from the students’ work, thus making this another instance of “devised theater,” meaning that it was created by the performers.

If you go

“Off The Shelf”

- **When:** 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, March 27-29
- **Where:** Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, 815 North Broadway, Saratoga Springs.
- **Tickets:** Admission is free. Many of the performances are already sold out through advance reservations. But cancellations and no-shows are expected and there will be a waiting list at each performance. For more information, go to the calendar page at tang.skidmore.edu.
- **Also:** The exhibit “The Shelf” remains on view through April 14.

According to Anderson, the event falls into two other categories of contemporary theater. It is “immersive,” with the performers interacting with the audience, and also “site-specific,” since it was created to be performed in a particular locale, the interior of the Tang.

This is the fourth time that Skidmore’s theater department has produced an event inside the Tang. Previous outings were mounted to complement and comment on particular exhibits and all were written or directed by Anderson. “Off The Shelf” is the first such endeavor to address the Tang as a building and an institution.

The show marks a farewell for Anderson, 75, who will retire at the end of the semester, closing a 40-year tenure at Skidmore. Along with directing on average one show a year, Anderson has also taught courses on theater craft and theatrical literature, including American theater, political theater and the work of women and the LGBT community.

“It’s time to do something else,” she says. “We have new faculty coming in with fresh ideas to grow the depart-

ment and I’m delighted about that. I’m ready to do new things but I’ll always be attached to Skidmore.”

When Anderson arrived, the theater department offices were in a mobile home since it was the last department to move from the original downtown campus. She recalls that there were five people on the faculty at the time, a sharp contrast to today’s team of nine professors plus some part-timers.

Within a few years, Anderson got involved in the design and construction of the Janet Kinghorn Bernhard Theater, which opened in 1987. “We used to share space with the dance department and the student cabaret group,” she recalls. “The new building was a massive project that involved fundraising mostly led by the development office. Lary Opitz (another faculty member) and I worked with the administration and the architects to make sure things would work for us. The opening was thrilling.”

Witnessing the subsequent opening of the Tang in 2000, and the Zankel Music Center 10 years later, Anderson has become bullish on the campus scene, declaring, “the arts are alive at Skidmore.”

For all her loyalty, Anderson’s career has not been limited to one academic institution. Her works have been performed at numerous other venues across the country. Among her most widely seen shows is “Faces: A Living Newspaper on AIDS,” which was written in collaboration with Wilma Hall and debuted at Skidmore in 1988. A more recent piece in a similar vein is “Petticoats of Steel: A Living Newspaper on Women’s Suffrage,” co-authored with Jill Rafferty and created in 2007 for Capital Repertory Theatre’s touring program.

Anderson’s plan for retirement includes continued involvement at Capital Repertory, where she has been a trustee for decades, participates in the new play competition, and sits on the education committee. While a slower pace will be welcome, it’s clear that her focus is going to remain on great works of art, wherever they can be found.

“I would love to be able to sit and listen to an entire symphony or read an entire novel. When directing and teaching you’re constantly on the go,” she says. “I want to sit and reflect. I’ve always been interested in bird-watching and I need time for that.”



Some of the 24 items selected from 15,000 pieces for “The Shelf,” at the Tang Museum.

► Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer based in Troy.