

An actor talks
about 'racist' policies
in Hollywood
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Set designer Williams: a bona fide artist



The man
behind
the scenes

Jerry Williams is, literally, the man behind the scenes of many University Theatre productions.

Williams, a nationally recognized scene designer and University theater arts professor, is responsible for the design of many University and Eugene-area theater sets, as well as others throughout the United States.

Williams says that only a small amount of recognition has been given to set designers in this country, but that it has recently been discovered as an art form. Williams himself doesn't lack recognition, however.

"I get lots, but that's because I'm so good," he says with a smile.

University Theatre Director Grant McKernie is one who recognizes Williams' talent.

"He is an imaginative, tremendously artistic designer who can be whimsical, flamboyant or restrained," McKernie says.

Williams' most recent design is the set for University Theatre's upcoming production of Henrik Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" — a story that dramatizes the downfall of a woman struggling to control her destiny.

For most of his designs, Williams says he reads the play, talks with the director and then lets ideas "stew" in his head for awhile. What stews, he says, is the conception of a set relevant to the play and one that creates an environment for the action of the play.

Story by Dave Carlson
Photo by Michael Clapp

"You house the play," he says.

The set for "Hedda Gabler" is indeed a house, a Georgian mansion, which Williams says will be as inviting as a public building.

Because the play's style is realism, there is little room for metaphor within the set design, Williams says. But to emphasize Hedda's spiritual imprisonment he wanted a very "cool" set.

"I wanted to show little home comfort on the human level," he says. "The elegance lacks warmth and is a barren prison."

Williams says he hopes this feeling will be transferred to the audience for a better understanding of "Hedda Gabler."

The actual construction of the elaborate set is carried out by University Theatre technical director Jerry Reinhardt and a bevy of students, many of whom get course and lab credit for their work.

In his 11 years in Eugene, Williams has designed 35 sets for University Theatre, Oregon Repertory Theater, Eugene Opera and others. But Williams has not limited himself to local theater.

"Scenic design is my form of publishing and I live by the old maxim, publish or perish," he says.

By "publishing" on a national scale, Williams has received the kind of recognition that allows him to design scenes for such well-known theaters as the Cricket Theatre in Minneapolis and the Alley Theatre in Houston, where Williams worked before coming to Eugene.

This road to national fame started in the 1950s in Missouri when the young Williams was trying to decide if art or theater was his calling. At Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Williams says he was immediately labeled a scenic designer, and his two callings were melded.

Fortunately for the University this "celebrity designer," as "Hedda Gabler" director Faber deChaine calls Williams, has found a niche in Eugene sharing his knowledge and his designs.

"Hedda Gabler" will run November 15, 16, 17, 29, 30 and December 1 at the Robinson Theatre. For more information call 686-4191.