

Works in the Works, November 26, 2024

The Department of Humanities

The Beastiary: Technical Direction for New Plays in Development

A talk by Prof. John McCullough, Entertainment Technology

Last Tuesday, Prof. John McCullough of the Entertainment Technology Department gave a talk on the work of technical direction in live theater as it relates to his recent project “The Beastiary.” Described as “a twisted comedic puppet pageant of consumption, corruption and the end of humankind” with medieval themes and characters, the play was produced by Ars Nova and recently completed its run at the Greenwich House Theater in Manhattan. As the production Technical Director (TD), Prof. McCullough was able to provide keen insight into the challenging and rewarding work of new play development.

As a multidisciplinary performance form that is bound by fixed production schedules and often limited resources, it may be said that theater requires more collaborative, adaptive, and problem-solving skills than any other art form. Prof. McCullough’s talk bore out this maxim, as he guided his City Tech audience through the intricacies of technical direction, a job he described as equal parts artistic, blue collar, and professional. As part of the creative process, the TD must understand the themes and plot of the play, the relationship between the action on stage and audience, and the design elements that express these themes and relationships. In collaboration with the director and lighting, set, sound, puppet, and costume designers, the TD works within the budgetary, temporal, and material limits of the production to execute the vision of the artistic team. The “governing limits,” as Prof. McCullough described them, informs a TD’s work, which requires practical skills in engineering, team management, cost analysis, and scheduling. These skills were of particular importance in the production at the Greenwich House, a small black-box theatre in a multi-use building that had very little theatrical infrastructure. Prof. McCullough’s careful description of the rigging challenges and solutions of a mechanical Hell Mouth (part scenery, part character, part puppet stage) provided an exemplum of the multidisciplinary nature of the work. Prof. McCullough summoned his years of training and experience to safely and artistically execute the central metaphor and functional set piece of the production -- without accidentally lopping off the heads of the actors on stage.

During the Q&A the audience learned how Prof. McCullough’s sabbatical project provided learning opportunities and potential internships for Entertainment Technology majors. At the talkback, one of those students spoke with pride and aplomb about his experience working on the production. It was wonderful to see City Tech students participating in a creative,

professional enterprise at the crossroads of art, handicraft, and community. Here is a link to the trailer of “The Beastiary”: <https://youtu.be/ckT1KO2EhGA?si=DuczZEfmW71TQG4L>

Christopher Swift, 12.3.24. Written without the aid of generative artificial intelligence and edited in kind.