Nellica Rave graduated from the department with an MFA in costume design in 2005, and immediately moved to Rochester, NY, with her husband. Though it’s not one of the cities people think of when picturing America’s cultural centers, Nellica has found a vibrant scene there and in just two short years has made a place for herself as a lynch pin of the opera scene, working for two different organizations. In an email exchange, she explained how things came to be.

— Anna-Maria Goossens

Question: I know that you are involved with the Eastman School of Music and the Mercury Opera — can you tell me a little about what you do for each company?

NR: I am resident costume designer for both the Eastman School of Music Opera Department and Mercury Opera Rochester. Although not directly affiliated, Mercury plans its season to not conflict with Eastman to take advantage of the student and staff talent. Both companies do shows of various sizes, from

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Finding her niche outside the theater meccas

Cox came to the department on a student exchange in the early 1990s. Irish-born but studying in London, she wanted to leave the country and landed a scholarship to come study at UMass-Amherst. The scholarship was intended to let students learn about something they couldn’t do at their home university, Cox recalled, so even though she was a flautist, she wrote down that she wanted to study lighting design.

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New faces: Two new faculty and a guest grace our halls

by ANNA-MARIA GOOSSENS

We were fortunate to welcome several new faculty members to our midst this September: Assistant Professor in Directing Gina Kaufmann, Five-College Visiting Lecturer in Sound Design Rob Kaplowitz, and Adjunct Professor in Lighting Design Jane Cox. Kaufmann and Kaplowitz are here to stay, while Cox is filling in ably during Penny Remsen’s sabbatical. Though they span the disciplines within theater, all believe in the collaborative model of theater-making we prize, where open dialogue forms the heart of the creative process and strong opinions are welcome. They’ve only been here for a couple of months, but they’re fitting in just fine.

Jane Cox

If lighting design lecturer Jane Cox gets lost less than her fellow newbies as she navigates the halls of the department, attribute it to the fact that this is her second time here.

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Once again our alumni continue to do us proud, racking up honors and accomplishments. As ever, please send us your updates for the next go-round, or contact us to be placed on the alumni mailing list so you can invite all of us when you have a production or special event. Let’s get right to it, shall we?

On The Fringe

UMass Theater alumni and students practically took over the New York Fringe Festival. Graduate directing student Doris Arreola choreographed and directed She-Wolves. Another piece, Helmet, included in its team Talya Kingston ’07G as dramaturg, Maryann Lombardi ’07G as director, Robbie Strano ’07 on lighting, Laurie Kincaid ’07 as a stage manager, and Troy David Mercier ’07 as a cast member. Faculty member June Gaede designed costumes for Roll With The Panches. Finally, Robin Reed ’97 invited us to come see her and Carrie Haugh ’97 in a show directed by Melanie S. Armer ’92, Scout’s Honor. Also in the cast, she pointed out, were Hampshire Alum (and UMASS stage-gracer) Chance Muehleck and Elan Moss-Bachrach, who played Eric in our 1998 production of Tales of the Lost 100 adjunct instructor) Lisa Channer.

Friends

Communication Professor Marty Norden, a longtime friend of the department, had a busy spring and summer. He appeared in Arena Civic Theatre’s April production of The Crucible as Giles Corey, the same role he played in the department’s production in 2001. The following month, he participated in the Play-in-a-Day festivities by playing yet another father of a troubled young adult — one of Marty’s ongoing specialties — in Connie Congdon’s mini-play Po Mo Home. In June, he teamed up with Troy David Mercier and others to appear in Darren Harned’s one-act play Ephemera, staged at NYC’s Chernuchin Theater as part of the Samuel French Off-Off-Broadway Play Festival. He then traveled to the Czech Republic, where he gave a presentation at Prague’s world-famous FAMU filmmaking school and a scholarly film paper at a conference at Masaryk University in Brno.

Alumni

Melanie Armer ’92 has taken a new position as an Associate Producer in Contemporary Programming at Lincoln Center Theater.

Jeannie-Marie Brown ’06G will be a tenure-track Assistant Professor at Millsaps College in Jackson, MS.

Margo Caddell ’06G has been offered a permanent position as faculty Lighting Designer at Tufts University.

Megan Cannon ’96 was finishing up a full year at FoodPlay Productions as Production Manager when she wrote us. “We’ve doubled our tours since I’ve been here,” she noted. “Since the Batman stunt show is no longer at 6 Flags, I’ve turned my talents to performing, and danced in the Get Ready to Wiggle Show. I even got to perform with the Wiggles from Australia in front of 6000 people — no small feat for a tech!”

Undergrad alumna (and former Theater 100 adjunct instructor) Lisa Channer ’89 has been offered an outstanding tenure-system faculty position to help lead the directing program at the University of Minnesota.

Alumnus Jason Czernich ’00 was recently in a pilot, Flocked, directed by Steave Delahoyde, whom he notes was one of the Top 5 Filmmakers to watch according to the Chicago Tribune. The pilot has made the final judging rounds, and, as of his writing, was to be screened at The Music Box theater in Chicago as part of the Chicago Comedy Shorts Festival over the summer.

Eagle-eyed secretary Denise Wagner spotted Rob Corddry ’93 in a preview for The Heartbreak Kid and found a piece he wrote to his daughter in a recent issue of Real Simple Magazine.

Jeffrey Donovan ’91 is in USA’s Burn Notice.

Melissa Hendell ’03 let us know about a Labor Day-weekend staged reading of her new play, Through the Aperture. Later in the month, she was scheduled to workshop another new project which she was devising/directing, called The Untitled Columbus Project.

Miriam Gilbert ’01 writes that she just started grad school at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. It’s a 2 year MFA conservatory program, and she is one of 14 1st year Production Design...
More theater updates

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Fellows. The school is in the Hollywood Hills, and has great connections to the LA film community. In the next two years she will design sets for 3 short films and a thesis project. “And the great thing about studying film in LA is that while I’m in school, I’ll be using many of the same locations, prop houses, studio spaces, etc, that I’ll use after I graduate, so it should help ease the transition back into the working world. Of course, I’m so excited!!” she wrote.

Erin Greene ‘02’s Greene Room Productions Theatre Production and Educational Outreach Company mounted a number of shows in the Pioneer Valley, including Of Mice and Men, for which the group teamed up with the Monson Public Library.

Sabrina Hamilton ‘96G continues as director of the Ko Festival at Amherst College. This summer’s slate of works included O Yes I Will, by Deb Margolin and The Mammy Project by Michelle Matlock, as well as a performance by the Mettawee River Project.

Midori Harris ‘05 assistant-directed Macbeth and As You Like It this summer at the Great River Shakespeare Festival in Winona, MN. When she wrote, she was in the midst of directing The Winter’s Tale in Boston for Bad Habit Productions. The production featured a number of UMass-Amherst alumni: Rachel Cummings ’06, Pam DeGregorio ’06, Derek Fraser ’06, Kevin Kordis ’07, Timothy McDermott ’06, Thomas Naughton ’06, Adam Sanders ’06 and Shannon Stillings ’06.

Jen (Deane) Hawkins ’95 emailed that she has been working as a Los Angeles Public Defender for almost two years now. “I love it but it doesn’t leave much time for my REAL love — acting,” she wrote, She hasn’t left the field completely, though: “Recently I did a play in Los Angeles where I played a woman who got murdered — among other things — which was a great experience and a role that really expanded the acting muscles.”

We always have a couple of births to announce, but I think this notice from Halina Kusleika ’91 ranks among the most exciting: “Daughter number 2 arrived on April 3rd. Not to be overshadowed by her big sister who was born on New Year’s Day, this one made a hurried debut in our car just outside the emergency room of the hospital! Her name is Rhiannon Sage Kusleika.”

Marta MacRostie ‘06 is performing with her band around the Pioneer Valley.

Michael Marceline ’07 headed to the Berkshires for two weeks this July to do a residency at the Berkshire Fringe Festival. While there, he worked on his play, Cowboys (Straight, Queer, Quixotic, & Otherwise Allegorical), in preparation for a reading.

Bethany Marx ’07G worked at the Indiana Repertory Theatre as a First Hand.

Tim Matos ’99 was pleased to let us know that he was selected as one of twelve playwrights to attend La Mama E.T.C.’s first annual playwrights retreat in Umbria, Italy this past August. He planned to use the time to work on his piece, Frost Heaves Melinda.

A world premiere production of Molière’s comedy Don Juan, translated by professor emeritus Virginia Scott and directed by Linda McNerney ’98G, was presented at Old Deerfield Productions in July.

Natasha Norman ’07 was part of a team that contributed a short film based on the game Mike Tyson’s Punch Out to the Nintendo Short Cuts Showcase.

Toks Olagundoye (who didn’t attend UMass but spent lots of time with us) sent us word of One Nation Under, her recent collaboration with At Hand Theatre Company of New York City.

Dramaturgy MFA Yael Prizant ’00G just completed her PhD at UCLA.

Sam Rush ’97G and his cohorts at New Century Theater turned in another well-received season. Graduate student Sarah Nelson designed costumes and David Wiggall provided sound design for some of the productions.

Lian Sifuentes ’02 was featured on the front page of the New York Times Arts section for her most recent piece, a performance art piece performed in Times Square that was simultaneously being turned into a film.

Sheila Siragusa ‘03G will be a tenure-track Assistant Professor at Central Connecticut State College in New Britain, CT.

Students

Directing graduate student Shawn LaCount directed Mr. Marmelade at Company One at the BCA Plaza this summer to positive reviews.

Undergraduate Alexander Nicosia was at Hackmatack playhouse doing summerstock: All Shook up, Big River, and South Pacific. He isn’t around during the fall semester because he is in Moscow studying at the Moscow Art Theater through the Eugene O’Neill School (National Theater Institute).

And from the “there’s a smart aleck in every bunch” desk comes MFA directing student Aaron Schmookler’s update: “On July 28th, I married Jessica L. Blinn. We’ve been happily married

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now for over 2 weeks.” Congratulations, Aaron!

**Staff**

- Assistant Technical Director **John Iverson** directed *Man of La Mancha* at the Memorial Hall Center for the Arts in Wilmington Vt.
- Assistant Costume Shop Supervisor **Felicia MacNeill** designed costumes for a local television commercial for Azure Green (azuregreen.com) for Big Picture Agency.

**Faculty**

- In addition to being part of the Fringe crowd, **June Gaekle** designed costumes for *Winnie the Pooh* at North Shore Musical Theater.
- **Rob Kaplowitz** started the new school year auspiciously by becoming not just our new sound design faculty member, but a father: Son Niall Thomas was born to wife Kittson O’Neill on Sept. 3
- **Julian Olf** reports that a new short sketch of his, a James Bond spoof called *The Assignment*, appeared this September in a series of site-specific plays called *Asphalt Jungle Shorts III*. On eight days and nights in Kitchener, SW Ontario, a number of plays was presented in different parts of the city, with the audience moving about from site to site. His play, which was intended for performance in an urban cemetery, has been moved to an indoor garage. In the producer's words, “Car pulls up. Bad spy music spills out as the door flies open. A bit like that.” “Sounds like great fun. Too bad I can't get to Kitchener for the event,” Julian says. That's not all he's been doing, though. This summer two of Julian's short plays received productions in three cities: *1-900-SEX-DATE*, in New York City and Northampton; *SWF: A Love Story For The Stage*, in Boston. He is working with Joel Zwick (director of *Big Fat Greek Wedding*) and Hershy Felder (creator and star of *Gershwin Alone*) on a new one-man show about the life of Beethoven.

- **Dramaturgy professor Paul Walsh** clearly doesn't believe in the sentiment, “summertime and the living is easy.” To wit: During late May and early June he served as Artistic Director in the 21st annual New Harmony Project, a new play development workshop centered in New Harmony, Indiana, and dedicated to “serving writers and celebrating the human spirit”. He oversaw two-week developmental workshops of three full length plays (*And L.A. Is Burning* by Y. York, *Timberland* by Austin Bunn and *In the Same Room* by Anna Ziegler) and consulted with five additional writers-in-residence on projects they were working on. He led ten post-reading discussions, consulted with each of the professional production teams (playwrights, dramaturgs, directors, casts), mentored student dramaturgs and other theater students from the University of Evansville and Purdue University, and led closed discussions of the plays and of the vision and future of the New Harmony Project with members of the New Harmony Board of Directors. In addition, he served as liaison between the New Harmony Project, the NHP Board of Directors and funders, and the townspeople of New Harmony, Indiana.

  During the summer he received a commission from the Cutting Ball Theater, a small experimental theater in San Francisco, to translate Strindberg’s five Chamber plays for repertory production in 2009. The first of his new translations, *Burned House*, will be offered in November in a public reading at Modern Times Bookstore in San Francisco. He plans to attend rehearsals and the reading in November 2007 and participate in the public post-reading discussion of the play with members of the audience and production team. In August his translation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* went into rehearsal at Theatre Vertigo in Portland OR for a September production directed by Mary McDonald-Lewis. In recognition of his translations of Ibsen's plays, the cultural wing of the Norwegian Embassy has invited him to visit Norway this December to meet with various cultural dignitaries.

  Also this summer he presented a paper — "a diatribe really" he admits — for a special panel on “Translation and Intercultural Performance” sponsored by the Research and Publications Committee at the national conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) in New Orleans. The paper, “Erasing Cultural Nuance through Intralingual ‘Translation,’” explored what is lost in translation when the translator does not speak the language or know the culture in which the original text was written. In July, he attended the Annual Conference of Literary Managers of Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) in Toronto.

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Alumna Nellica Rave costumes the opera crowd

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a small “chamber” opera such as L’Enfant et les Sortilèges or The Tenderland, to enormous productions such as I Capuletti et i Montecchi or Showboat. My job depends on the production’s needs. I can go from being the designer and shop manager on a fully built show like L’Enfant to purchasing 60 jackets for the I Capuletti army, to organizing rental of bustle gowns and frock suits for a cast of 50 in Showboat. I coordinate with a makeup designer and hair designer to create the look of the show. I have several people at Eastman who sew for me intermittently, and I have a phenomenal wardrobe supervisor and hairdresser who do shows for both companies.

In addition to designing, I manage the costume collection for Mercury. The community group the company sprang from had a world class seamstress who built hundreds of period costumes, which Mercury uses in productions and rents to the community. It had been sadly neglected, so I co-coordinated moving the collection to a safe, accessible location. I have been sorting and organizing it. I plan to publicize it locally so it can generate a steady source of rental income for the company.

Q. How did you learn about these two places, and how did that lead to your work for them?

NR: I moved to a small city for the same reason any other theater professional does — because my husband David makes more money that I do. When I got here I picked up the alternative paper and yellow pages and actually called every theater in town. Thanks to June, I had a great portfolio, and I worked for nine different companies my first year here. Some were practically volunteer. Only assistant-designing at Eastman paid reasonably. I have to thank my husband for totally supporting us while I got established. I got fired from a job at a high school and in such a small theater community that spread my name around fast! Thankfully, everyone else who worked with me liked my work and asked me back. Damita Peace, Eastman’s previous designer, really mentored me and then took a teaching position and left me the job. Mercury didn’t previously have a resident designer position, but they were very happy with my work on consecutive shows and asked me to stay on.

Q. Can you talk a little about the differences in working for the School vs. an independent company. I assume budget plays a role, but I imagine the creative process might be run differently as well?

NR: In my case, the difference between working for the school and professional companies is the personnel. Mercury has a local volunteer chorus, so I see many repeat singers there, whereas at Eastman the students come and go. Conversely, at Eastman the production team never changes, and at Mercury it can be different for every show. When a director for Mercury is out of town it means phone conferencing early in the design process, but opera often makes that easier than other theater because the period and the characters are so established, it’s not as wide open to bizarre interpretation. For Mercury, opera patrons pay to see tradition. Budget is perhaps a bigger concern for Mercury, but that’s always been one of my strengths. Mercury grew from a community group and is trying to establish itself as a professional company, so people there have been willing to invest in quality production values, by which I mean they want fancy costumes and give me the budget for them.

Q. You designed for theater here — is opera something you had been interested in previously or is it a new interest? How does it differ from designing for theater?

NR: I can’t say I had an interest in opera before I came to Rochester. I had seen a couple of operas, and listened to a few more. Although I did not exactly “specialize” while I was at UMass, I think I tended towards shows with some spectacle. Big, flashy and colorful always interests me more than serious
Costuming opera

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contemporary straight theater. I was always drawn towards musicals for that reason. Not having a background in opera occasionally puts me at a disadvantage when everyone else has a frame of reference for not only the plot, but the last ten productions they’ve seen. But I catch up, and I have a fresh view, I’m willing to try anything. I love the scale, the theatricality and the periods of opera, it’s really a great fit for me. I also like that they pay better than any other theater in town.

Q. You’re making a good career for yourself in a town that isn’t thought of as one of the entertainment meccas — do you have any words of advice for people who love theater/opera/whatever but aren’t going to be making the move to New York, Chicago or LA?

NR: My advice for working in theater in a small town is always to find a partner with a real job who will support the arts! Seriously, establishing a reputation for quality work and being easy to work with is my goal, and it just takes time. In Rochester the theater community is small and gossip travels fast. It’s a good idea not to bad-mouth anyone.

Q. What elements of your education at UMass do you find yourself drawing on most frequently?

NR: I am grateful for so many of the things I learned in my time at UMass. Obviously, my drawing skills, history knowledge and construction technique (thanks to Professor June Gaeke, Professor Pat Warner and Costume Shop Manager Cecilia Precciozzi-Chalfin!) serve me every time I design a show. One thing that I got from my time at UMass Amherst that I depend on and that I think UMass does particularly well was the chance to work with a variety of directors. Aside from having an artistic vision, so much of successful design is the ability to communicate, to find agreement, to get egos out of the way and understand what a director and a production need. I got many challenging opportunities to practice that at UMass, and I definitely draw on those experiences when things get tough.

Department gets new faculty

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"I didn’t, at the time," she admitted — although she speculated that perhaps it had been there subconsciously.

However, she enrolled in one of Remsen’s lighting design classes and soon discovered that she was intrigued. Remsen, meanwhile, saw potential and steered her away from her original career leanings in music.

"Penny was like, 'Stop that nonsense! Be a lighting designer!'" laughed Cox. "She is an astonishingly good teacher. Nobody taught me the way Penny taught me. She has a good knack for finding the weak spots and pushing at them."

Cox took what she learned here and earned a Master’s in her field from New York University. She has gone on to work — with renown — in New York with dance and theater companies. This fall, she received a "Bessie," a.k.a. the New York Dance and Performance Award. Cox has also been tapped to design the Broadway production of Come Back, Little Sheba, starring S. Epatha Merkerson, at the Biltmore Theater this winter.

In addition to working as a designer in New York, Cox has been teaching: workshops at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, a team-taught course for the dance department at Sarah Lawrence College, and a solo class at Princeton are among the experiences on her resume in this area.

Teaching has been part of her work even when that wasn’t officially what she was hired to do, however.

"The labor force (in theater) is made up in large part of 20-year-olds. It’s a young person’s job, being an electrician," Cox said, and she has always tried to pass on her expertise.

Here, she will work on Ondine and advise designers for all the other shows, and she looks forward daily to her interactions with the undergraduate and graduate students.

"They come very submissive and well-trained," she said, before laughingly correcting herself. "No, they’re a great group: so engaged, creative, interesting and smart!"

Rob Kaplowitz

One of Cox’s colleagues at the O’Neill was sound designer Rob Kaplowitz. Although he is new to UMass-Amherst, he has crossed paths professionally with several alumni: not only Cox, but lighting designer Ben Stanton and scenic designer David Korins.

Kaplowitz had been working in New York for some time, racking up awards including an OBIE, for lifetime achievement in his field, last May. Pondering his career in recent years however, he realized that he wanted to be able to be choosier about his collaborators and the scripts he worked on. In Rochester, he thought, would allow him to remain engaged in his profession, explore it from a new angle, and work only on the projects that truly spoke to him.

He had just reached this conclusion when he spotted an ad in his union’s newsletter for the Five College position. He had just reached this conclusion when he spotted an ad in his union’s newsletter for the Five College position. It was, he said, "the perfect option to try this idea of teaching on."

The position Kaplowitz now holds is a three-year appointment. He will be based at UMass-Amherst, where he is instrumental in creating the Sound Design Studio for which money was raised during the 2006-2007 school year through the O’Connell Challenge.
Cox, Kaplowitz and Kaufmann join the department

He will teach and advise at the other schools and is expected to remain active in the profession.

"As an instructor, my value is based on my real-world experience," he said. "If I were to stop, I would lose my value to the program."

Sound design is a nascent discipline, Kaplowitz noted, pointing out that the 2007-2008 Tonys will be the first to honor sound design. In the theater, he is an advocate for having the designers involved early on. That allows him to "make the mistakes I need to make" and present a director with a cache of choices that ups the odds that they'll find the right element. "When it's done badly, (sound design) is decorative, and when it's done well, it's essential," Kaplowitz said.

Like Cox, Kaplowitz originally started in music before switching to his chosen field. Like her, he has been teaching more or less since graduating, at O'Neill and NYU, among others, and finding that it was an extension his interactions with other theater artists.

He admits he doesn't have an educational background, taking as his guiding philosophy something he is committed to in his design: "My goal is to make the strongest choices possible," he said, and he hopes to convince his students to do the same in class.

Kaplowitz takes a hands-on approach in class, asking students to do their own designs and then talk about how they came to the choices they made. One of the unexpected bonuses of having people in the class who are just "tasting" sound design instead of looking at it as a possible career is that the group seems to be less concerned with "getting it right" and freer in its approach.

"I'd rather they don't fulfill the assignment spectacularly than if they fulfill it in an ordinary way," he said.

Gina Kaufmann

Gina Kaufmann is the third of our new faces who'll be working on Jean Giraudoux's Ondine in the spring. Unlike the others, she has no prior connection to UMass Amherst. Though tenured at Sacramento State University, she was looking for a change of pace and learned about the opening in the department through Artesearch Magazine. She almost didn't apply because the deadline had passed, but took a chance that the right candidate hadn't come along yet.

Gina Kaufmann

"I was so excited about who my collaborators would be. I had a really instinctive response of 'I want to work with these people.' They are genuinely supportive, genuinely working as a team, and they are passionate about teaching," she said. That pairing of support for creative work and mentoring students was extremely important, Kaufmann said, adding that she also liked that the department seemed to have "a good balance between the big picture and the details."

Kaufmann has been performing much of her life — at 9, she toured with People and Puppets — but like her fellow newbies, originally saw herself in music, as a singer.

She began directing in college and moved to New York after receiving her undergraduate degree to work mainly with new playwrights and plays. She eventually decamped to Maine, where she opened a cabaret theater and served as its artistic director. After four years, she headed to graduate school at the University of Texas-Austin, a time she cherished.

"It is amazing, after struggling for seven years between undergraduate and graduate school, to have that space to do your work for three years," she said.

During the summers off, Kaufmann headed northeast, working at Williamstown Theater Festival as an assistant director. "It was just as important as being in school," she said.

Leaving graduate school, she headed back to New York, directing, at Soho Repertory Theater and Dixon Place among others, then to a set of guest teaching positions before spending four years at Sacramento. She directed at the Sacramento Theatre Company, a LORT theater — Tartuffe and Private Lives. While in California, she also directed The Comedy of Errors at the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival.

Among the benefits of relocating here will be a chance to reconnect with Shakespeare and Co. in Lenox, with whom she has worked in the past. The company, she said, "has influenced my teaching a lot."

"The teachers have a way of being open to the students. There's a lack of being threatened by disagreement. They feel really open to what (students) are bringing into the room," she said, which has rubbed off on her. "I used to be more like an arrow, but I don't feel that way anymore."

Now that she's here, she is getting to know the department. Although she didn't propose it, Ondine has proven a boon.

"It's a big cast — I'll get to know the students. And I have Rob and Jane and two fabulous graduate students (on the design team). Ondine's going to be a great way to jump into the department artistically," Kaufmann said.
One Fish, Two Fish, Horton Sees a Blue Fish

MFA scenic design student Sam Laird constructed props for Papermill Theatre’s run of Seussical. They will be auctioned in the winter for the North Country Center for the Arts Annual fundraising auction in New Hampshire. The Props include 4 Seussian fish, Vlad the black bottomed eagle, and an elephant bird. Living in the land of Seuss around here (the good “Doctor” was born in Springfield, MA), we had to share some of these fun creations.

Also in this issue: New faculty, costume designing in upstate New York, updates