ARTS

"We're dreaming hard, we came so far, now I believe"
GOLDEN K-POP DEMON HUNTERS

'The Shape of Things' will explore art and love at the Underbrook

BY GILLIAN PEIHE FENG
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

"The Shape of Things," a play written by Neil LaBute and directed by Emiliano Caceres Manzano '26, will premiere on Thursday in the Saybrook Underbrook.

"The Shape of Things" examines the lives of students in a Midwestern college town, illustrating themes of love, art and the concept of "change." The play premiered in London in 2001 and was adapted into a 2003 film that starred Paul Rudd and Rachel Weisz.

"I love 'The Shape of Things' because I found it particularly quick and quite witty while still exploring themes of art, its meaning, and the limits of creativity," Isabella Panico '26, one of the show's producers, wrote in an email to the News. "To someone who has never heard of it, I'd just ask them, 'do you think self improvement is a voluntary experience?'"

Other members of the cast and crew said the play's nuanced exploration of art and love as attracting them to the project.

"I was drawn to The Shape of Things because it is a play that is unafraid to explore difficult questions," Dorothy Ha '28, the show's sound designer, wrote in an email. "How far should we go for art? How far are we willing to go for art?"

"The Shape of Things" unfolds as socially-awkward Adam meets Evelyn, a charismatic art student. Evelyn's arrival causes every aspect of Adam's life — from appearance to living habits — to change. Most significantly, Evelyn's presence alters the dynamic between Adam, his friend Phillip and Phillip's fiancéé Jenny.

Evelyn is played by Isabella Walther-Meade '26, who is also one of the producers of the show. Walther-Meade wrote in an email that she is drawn to Evelyn's moral complexity and sees her as multifaceted despite being the sort of woman "who people think are wrong."

"Say what you will about Evelyn, but she is very aware of her ability to influence other people, and her self-perception as an artist lets her take that further than we expect," Walther-Meade wrote. "She is a deeply passionate person who is willing to do whatever it takes to prove a point that she believes in more than anything, and I can relate to that, but it took me a while to get there."

Walther-Meade further noted that playing Evelyn has had an impact on the way she approaches art and how she portrays a character on stage.

"The time I have spent preparing for Evelyn has changed the way I think about art, for better or worse," Walther-Meade wrote. "I hope she does the same for the audience."

Leila Hyder '28, who plays Jenny, spoke in a voice memo about the challenges and rewards of playing a character very different to herself.

"I feel like Jenny is very different from me and I guess that's part of the challenge in a sense, but that's also what I love about playing her," Hyder said. She added that she is "excited" to portray her character's development arc on stage.

According to Hyder, the cast spend a lot of time building backstories to navigate the complex relationships between the characters. Hyder said that improvisational acting has been an important part of the process. To prepare for her character, Hyder said she keeps a notebook to sketch out Jenny's backstory and track her daily life according to the timeline of the play.

"I think Jenny comes off as a very sweet, very kind of simple girl, very level-headed, which isn't a bad thing, but I just think there's more to her than just that," Hyder said. "By the end of the day, I think I really enjoy seeing who she becomes by the end of the play."

The complex characters are backed by an experimental, relatively minimalist scenic design. According to Panico, the production is "quite stripped down," focusing mainly on the main character Adam's external and internal transformations.



LILY BELLE POLING / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
The play, which is directed by Emiliano Caceres Manzano '26, will open Thursday evening and run until Saturday.

Alexa Druyanoff '26, the scenic artist in the production, emphasized the close relationship between the show's visual elements and the character's development.

"The set is composed of painted boxes that are rotated and reconfigured by the actors throughout the show," Druyanoff wrote in an email. "Their transitions mirror the progression of the scenes and the lovers, so they create a fluctuating atmosphere that is directly connected to the characters."

Druyanoff added that the scenic designs for the production were influenced by pop art, with a focus on "abstracting the human body and classical figure."

When discussing the production's sound design, Ha highlighted the ties between character development and the production's aesthetic designs.

"I was aiming for an unsettling vibe," Ha wrote. "The music becomes more and more distorted as the play goes on, until the original song is virtually unrecognizable, to mimic the storyline of the play."

Hyder said the costumes for the play are styled after "a 2000s Midwestern college town kind of vibe."

"This is a story for everyone who has ever said 'I can change him,'" Panico wrote. "I hope that it makes audiences equally joyous and uncomfortable."

"The Shape of Things" will run for four performances between Thursday and Saturday.

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Bard professor gives lecture on new translation of 'The Odyssey'

BY ANGEL HU
STAFF REPORTER

Daniel Mendelsohn, a humanities professor at Bard College, gave a lecture Monday about his experience translating Homer's epic poem, "The Odyssey."

Mendelsohn's translation of "The Odyssey" was published by University of Chicago Press in April, joining the list of the 29 English translations of "The Odyssey" that have been released since the end of World War II.

In an email to the News, Megan O'Donnell, an associate communications director at the Whitney Humanities Center, which hosted Mendelsohn, praised the way his translation "offers future translators a model of how close attention to form, linguistic precision and cultural nuance can reinvigorate even the most familiar classical texts."

Mendelsohn's talk was a part of the Humanities Now lecture series, a new initiative created by the Whitney Humanities Center which "examines questions at the heart of the human condition and invites us to cross boundaries of geographies and disciplines," Cajetan Iheka, a professor of English and the director of the Whitney Humanities Center said.

Chris Kraus, a Latin professor, introduced Mendelsohn to the audience. Kraus recounted that she first met Mendelsohn in 1994 when he was a graduate student at Princeton and said that he has since "turned a nascent academic life into a thriving freelance writing career."

Mendelsohn has been teaching "The Odyssey" and its many translations since 1989 — "all of which have something to offer," he said.

Mendelsohn had not planned on undertaking his own translation of "The Odyssey" until he had published a memoir titled "An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic" in 2017. The memoir delves into the spring semester of 2011, when Mendelsohn's then 81-year-old father decided to enroll in his first-year seminar on "The Odyssey."

Through this experience, Mendelsohn described "getting to know his father as a student through 'The Odyssey'" and hearing his "grumpy reactions" to the book. After the class was over, Mendelsohn and his father discovered and boarded "a cruise that recreates the voyages of Odysseus."

"Then, my dad fell ill and died not long after we got back, so the book was sort of an account of what turned out to be the last year of his life as weirdly prismed through 'The Odyssey,'" Mendelsohn said.

Mendelsohn included snippets of his own translations of "The Odyssey" in the memoir. A few months later, he said he received a phone call from an editor from the University of Chicago Press who read the memoir, liked the snippets of translation that he did and asked him if he wanted to translate "The Odyssey" in its entirety.

"When you love a text, you have a sense of what it is in your head, and I wanted to bring that sense across to English readers who don't know Greek," Mendelsohn said.

Mendelsohn described some of his choices and challenges when attending to the meter, syntax, language and form of the original work — demonstrating how his work differed from previous translations.

For instance, Mendelsohn opted to spell Calypso's — the nymph who held Odysseus captive on her island — name as Kalypso in order to reflect the original Greek name spelled with the letter kappa.

"I think it's very important for us to experience these names in a way that slightly estranges them from what we think we know," Mendelsohn said.

Mendelsohn explained the challenges in translating the Greek word for "a meal to which many people contribute." While previous translators have opted for the word "picnic" or "potluck supper," Mendelsohn believed that those words are "stoppers" that "pull the reader out of thinking about what's going on in the text."

Mendelsohn eventually decided on the translation "neighborly feast" — a choice he attributed to his former professor Jenny Clay.

Additionally, Mendelsohn discussed his process of translating Homeric epithets, descriptive phrases that characterize a person or place in Homer's epic poems. Seeking to "peel away the varnish" of previous translations, Mendelsohn said he took a different approach to translating epithets like "grey-eyed Athena."

Mendelsohn expanded upon previous translations that emphasized the "gleaming" quality of Athena's eyes by drawing upon the Greek word for owl — which is related to the Greek word for gleaming — to come up with "she of the bright owl eyes."

"A brilliant translation reignites interest in a text, no matter how many times it's been translated before," O'Donnell wrote, reflecting on the role of translation across generations. "To me, that renewed excitement is the first step in connecting readers to a different period and culture."

The Humanities Now lecture series was founded in 2023.



COURTESY OF WHITNEY HUMANITIES CENTER
Classicist, writer and critic Daniel Mendelsohn spoke Monday about his translation of "The Odyssey."

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