

# Play takes musical ‘Odyssey’ into cyberspace

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By [Suzy Evans](#)

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The night begins like any other dress rehearsal. Actors casually walk onstage to fix the spacing of a dance number. Members of the technical crew run back and forth to make last-minute adjustments before the evening’s scheduled run-through. The faint crackling of microphones can be heard alongside actors’ giggles from the green room.

“Places!” the stage manager calls for the final time as the house and stage lights lower in preparation for the impending spectacle.

Suddenly, a flowing orange and yellow light, resembling digital lava, permeates the downstage screen set up in place of a typical curtain. And as this screen rises, the leading lady starts to sing a jazz song amid a plethora of projected digital images, videos of talking heads, cosmic sound effects and other eccentricities not usually seen or heard onstage.

However, director Mel Shapiro would not have them anywhere else.

Shapiro, a UCLA theater professor and Tony Award winner, is the writer and director of “Homer in Cyberspace,” a modern adaptation of Homer’s “The Odyssey” that fuses elements of ancient myth with contemporary technology.

“It’s an eclectic mixture of styles,” Shapiro said. “It’s not one thing.”

In the show, O, short for Odysseus, finds himself cursed to be lost in cyberspace, a world held captive by the iGods, the gods of technology. The mGods, gods of mythology, are hostage to the iGods’ desires, and O must set the mGods free to finally return home.

The show will premiere tonight in the Macgowan Little Theater on campus.

## Creating a new world

Shapiro started developing his concept for this musical two years ago when he wrote and directed the play “The Blogger’s Project.” A section of this show was based on “The Iliad,” which ignited Shapiro’s long-held desire to write a musical inspired by Homer’s works.

“The Blogger’s Project” also involved the UCLA Center for Research in Engineering, Media and Performance, a collaborative effort between the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television and the UCLA Henry Samueli School of Engineering and Applied Science.

The center used gaming engine software for the show to create digital environments to project onto screens set up on the stage. The same form of technology will be used in “Homer.”

“The intent was to create something otherworldly,” the center’s executive director Jeff Burke said. “We have a lot of complex things to resolve that are not necessarily things you would encounter in a theater production: software development, game development, 3-D graphics.”

Game engine software is the software used to create video game environments so that the visual environment of the show can be rendered in real time instead of the prerecorded nature of film, Burke explained.

With “Homer,” media elements such as live video, recorded video, photos and moving images from the gaming engine will be projected on the stage. Unlike in “The Blogger’s Project,” these elements will not appear simply on basic screens, but on a variety of different surfaces, including ship sails, creating a digitally aesthetic environment.

“That was an important change for us,” Burke said. “When we did ‘Blogger’s’ it was primarily using a large screen. We wanted to get to a place where things were much more integrated.”

The game engine technology also allowed the engineers to enter these constructed worlds from any angle and then project those images onto the stage. In order to create the media for the show, a few of the engineers drew inspiration from “World of Warcraft,” a popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game famous for its digitally interactive environments.

“It gave us a real tool in being able to take a look at how things have been done before and see if we want to do it that way,” guest artist and 3-D animator for the project Craig Wells said.

However, developing these environments was not an easy process. Concept brainstorming began in December, and each digital element and world produced for the game engine was fed through three different software programs before it was ready for the stage.

And even with the extensive testing and rehearsal, the dependability of technology can never be trusted 100 percent of the time.

“You can’t prevent a machine from keeling over, but we do spend a lot of time rehearsing and making sure things are as stable as we can,” Burke said. “One of the reasons to put this kind of stuff into a main-stage production instead of something experimental is the stakes are higher.”

Though there may be risks involved, research center team members relish in the environments they’ve created.

“I’d like to be there,” said Vids Samanta, a computer science doctoral candidate, of the world he’s helped create for the show. “We just want to go in there and stand on the stage and interact with it.”

## **Building bridges**

“Homer in Cyberspace” marks not only the second collaboration with the Center for Research in Engineering, Media and Performance, but also the first collaboration in a long time between the music and theater departments. While Shapiro wrote the book and lyrics, Roger Bourland, chair of the music department, wrote the music for the show.

“It would seem that the music department and the theater department would have a natural flourishing relationship, but for one reason or another we never really did,” Shapiro said.

Before meeting Bourland, Shapiro had planned on using multiple composers for the piece. However, after Bourland expressed interest, the two began working on the project right away.

“It immediately worked really well,” Bourland said.

As a result of this collaboration, the show received the UCLA Arts Initiative Grant, a funding source created by Executive Vice Chancellor Daniel Newman to encourage departments to work together.

Both Bourland and Shapiro hope that this project will spur future endeavors between the departments.

“It’s mostly between two professors, but that’s where it starts really,” Bourland said of the collaboration. “The next step is to start building bridges.”

### **Last batch of experimentation**

In the last few days before the show opens, entire scenes have been rewritten, bars of music have been added, and the digital media elements continue to be tweaked and tested.

And though the process is hectic, Shapiro revels in what he called his last batch of experimentation.

“Where else can you experiment like this?” he said, referring to the open-mindedness of university theater. “You’re not bound by naturalism or the conventions of musical theater as we know it. ... You can just invent the thing as you go along.”

And that’s exactly what he did. Bourland described the 23 songs in the show as “stylistically all over the place,” and he jokingly blamed Shapiro’s lyrics.

“It was Mel’s fault,” Bourland said of his impulse to write in many different styles, including jazz, 50s doo-wop and electronic. “I didn’t do that just to write in different styles. The texts were all different, and they made me do it.”

First-year acting graduate student Kevin Muster, who plays O in the production, finds the eclectic style liberating.

“You can try just about anything,” he said. “It’s not typical of any musical that I’ve done.”

But even if the audience goes into aesthetic overload after watching the show, Muster feels certain it will be worthwhile.

“I think it will be more of an experience than an actual play,” Muster said. “Mel’s kind of made it a futuristic but also almost a timeless piece because of the mythological gods in it as well. It’s not just about technology.”