



Performing Political Theory

A good professor is a bit like the producer-director of a successful stage play—breathing life, meaning, and relevance into what otherwise would be empty words expressing unfamiliar ideas. Inspired by Gordon Kampe’s environmental opera *Zivilcourage*, **Khristina Haddad**, associate professor of political science, recently produced a new take on Political Science 120: Introduction to Political Thinking. Through the hands-on process of staging and acting dramatic pieces, students experience political theory in action.

Professor Haddad saw *Zivilcourage* (“moral courage,” about political thinker Hannah Arendt) performed in Germany in the summer of 2009. “This opera made political theory come alive for me and others in the audience. I thought, ‘how can I teach political science differently?’ It completely embodied the experience of moral courage—the courage of the unarmed civilian, associated with a high level of political engagement.”

Haddad wanted her students to experience that kind of engagement with the world—not an easy task in a controlled classroom setting. The class’s first assignment: to mess up the classroom. The lesson was linked to a text by political theorist Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, about the disciplinary power of social institutions.

“It was very difficult for my students to do,” said Professor Haddad, who received the 2008 Lindback Foundation Award for distinguished teaching. “I asked them to try again, and told them they would understand the meaning by the end of the semester: School is an institution that heavily socializes behavior.”



Later assignments involved staging plays that interpreted the political thinking of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and the Platonic dialogue *The Apology*. **Nicole Tabor**, an assistant professor of English who teaches courses on dramatic literature, provided valuable input regarding theater pedagogy.

Like *Zivilcourage*, the class’s performances were not limited to one location or space, but moved around campus.

“*Zivilcourage* begins in the courtyard of a church and ends in a public square where performers can no longer be distinguished from audience members,” explained Haddad. “This conveys the role of a specific space in shaping political perspective. By moving to different settings, performers and audience see and hear from a variety of perspectives.” Each exercise reinforced the message that people are not automatically fit for political action; involvement takes practice.

“It was a really neat class!” said **Steven Feldman** ’11, a work-study student who assisted with class planning, syllabus design, and coaching. Now an intern at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, Feldman says the political discussions feel very familiar: “I was helping run a rather large interfaith conference yesterday, and everyone was talking about framing issues.”



Students in Professor Khristina Haddad’s political science class learn political theory through action.

PHOTOS BY KHRISTINA HADDAD

February 24-27

Student Cabaret

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8:00 P.M. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday;
2:00 P.M. Sunday • An evening of singing, dancing, and laughter! Student initiated, directed, acted, designed, and produced.