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Lehigh's Department of Theatre is putting on a production of "Galatea" from Nov. 4 to 12. The play's director, Lyam Gabel, said Galatea is a Queer fantasia about love. (Photo courtesy of Juliana Kilgore)

Galatea Play creates space for LGBTQ+ community at Lehigh

BY JULIA CONTINO — ; PUBLISHED OCTOBER 31, 2022, 4:15 PM

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The last time Kai Davison, '22, set foot on stage was for a minor role in a middle school play. Uninterested and not heavily involved, Davison never planned to be in theater again. Now, they're the co-lead in Lehigh's newest play.

Davison is playing the role of Phyllida alongside co-lead Spencer Duff, '25, in the Lehigh Theatre Department's newest production, "Galatea."

Director Lyam Gabel said Galatea is a Queer fantasia about love at the end of the world. In the play, two young people disguise themselves to escape sacrifice, meeting and falling in love while hiding in the woods. The story features Greek gods, poetry and nymphs.

The show can be seen from Nov. 4 to 12 in the Diamond Theater at Zoellner Arts Center.

"I knew I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I didn't at least try (for the role), because it's the kind of story that I don't ever get to see," Davison said.

Gabel said he has always wanted to direct the play because he is interested in the use of theater as a tool to strengthen and celebrate community.

"I think there's a lack of spaces where (transgender) people can really be centered at Lehigh," Gabel said. "So, an important thing for me as a faculty member at Lehigh is to create a space

for trans and Queer folks, and really explicitly (transgender), gender non-conforming and non-binary folks, to feel celebrated and centered.”

Galatea is an adaptation of a 1585 play of the same name by John Lyly, which Gabel said reminds him of the fact that trans people have always been around and will always be around.

He said the nature-centric story also reminds him that Queer and transgender people are natural.

“We have a connection to the natural world, to our bodies and to each other,” Gabel said.

After 20 to 30 people auditioned from Sept. 12 to 14, Gabel said the cast was solidified and rehearsals began. Gabel said in the past few weeks the cast has formed a close connection with each other.

Kayli Silimperi, '24G, who plays Galatea's dad Titerys, said one of the defining features of Gabel's directing style is his emphasis on mental health.

“You can tell he cares about the production as a whole and so that means caring about the actors, the crew and himself,” Silimperi said. “When you're putting art on the stage, you give a lot of yourself, so it's nice to remember the underlying person that is putting on the character.”

They said the cast also feels that Gabel has given them autonomy with their roles by trusting them to have an inner sense of what the character is, wants and needs.

Sonja Hackenmueller, '26, who is the show's stage manager, said Gabel is open about his creative vision throughout the process, which differs from other directors.

“Liam (Gabel) will often say the basic ideas of what they want to happen in a scene but then he'll give free rein to the actors to go through and block what feels natural to them,” Hackenmueller said.

Gabel, Davison, Silimperi and Hackenmueller described the show as a joyful, fun experience of celebration.

Hackenmueller said the production also features unique lighting aspects that the audience wouldn't typically expect. This includes the show starting in black and white and later developing into color.

As the show dates approach, Gabel said Galatea continues to receive support from the Theatre Department and other organizations on campus.

“I think that everybody sees that there's a space needed and that the Theater Department has been that space for Queer and transgender folk in the past, and we're happy to keep providing it,” Gabel said. “Lehigh has the opportunity to become a more welcoming space for Queer and transgender people, and the Theatre Department, the Pride Center and other spaces are a part of making that possible.”

Albert Wright, '25, said they are happy to see Galatea being performed at Lehigh, because it gives the LGBTQ community on campus the opportunity to show who they are and what they represent.

"I like it because it provides representation for people that haven't been in the spotlight," Wright said. "With Queer people in general, (the focus is) usually on the gays but never on non-binary or transgender people, so it is nice that they are shining a spotlight on them."

Tickets are free to Lehigh students, and Gabel is hopeful the audience will leave the show feeling positive and introspective.

"I often use theater as a form of escapism," Silimperi said. "It's a way for me to connect with myself but also with others in a way that makes a little bit more sense to me. This is the first time though, that I feel from the beginning a personal connection with the story. I feel like I've told a lot of other people's stories, but this is the first time that I feel like I'm telling a piece of my own story."