

SCHOOL OF MUSIC, THEATRE AND DANCE

Raising 'Cane'

OU theatre professor, alum explore Spain's artist community during month-long residency



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Oakland University's Jeremy Barnett, an assistant professor of theatre in the School of Music, Theatre and Dance, and OU theatre alum Jason Maracani recently spent a month living and working at the Art'N'Ground artists' residency in Rojales, Spain.

"Artist residencies provide an opportunity for an artist to focus on their work in a new place," Barnett said. "Often times this means a continuation of pre-existing projects or ideas. In our case, the change of environment gave us inspiration to adapt some previous work, and begin a new series of projects around a fresh vocabulary. And above all else, the residency gave us a month to put sole focus on learning and creating."

During the month of July, the Barnett and Maracani stayed in a man-made cave with two bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom in a community of over a dozen local artists.



Assistant Professor of Theatre Jeremy Barnett and OU theatre alum Jason Maracani discuss their proposal with Antonio Gutierrez, one of the volunteers who helped them to engineer the piece in full scale.
(Photos courtesy Jeremy Barnett & Jason Maracani)

The caves were built over the past few hundred years in the area's soft sandstone hills. While many were abandoned in favor of more modern homes, the Rojales town government in 1994 took over about 15 abandoned caves in the town's Rodeo Barrio, outfitted them with running water and electricity, and provided them free of charge to local artists and artisans.



“The community has grown to include more than 15 artist studios, entertainment venues, exhibition halls, and a tea shop,” Maracani said. “About three years ago, Jennifer Virginia Rotter and Hilarión Pedayé Armengol opened a cave of their own — the Art’N’Ground Artist Residence — where artists from around the world come to create and contribute to this special community. They’ve hosted artists from Canada, Japan, Spain, and Finland to name a few.”

While living in Spain, Barnett and Maracani explored the local caves, designed scenic pieces for a local theatre group, developed curricula for high school students in urban communities, traveled to the Island of Mallorca to visit the home and studio of Spanish painter and sculptor Joan Miró, and studied Spanish cooking techniques.

The pair also spent time learning about traditional building materials and historic forms of architecture, including the use of cane — a river grass similar to bamboo — as a building material.

“In the U.S., we build mainly with wood and steel, and this is reflected in the way scene shops are outfitted,” Barnett said. “Every shop is expected to employ capable carpenters using the building techniques common in the U.S. But there are many other building techniques that we don’t use in the U.S. that could be used to create a different scenic vocabulary.”



According to Maracani, the use of cane was of particular interest to them because it is light and

flexible, allowing it to be used to create large curving shapes, as opposed to the rectilinear shapes created with rigid wood and steel.



“The cane material naturally bends, allowing for it to be formed into organic shapes — typically arches for homes — while still remaining structural against the elements,” he said. “The residency set up workshops for us to learn the procedure of building these Spanish arches, and from there we altered the techniques to create a work of our own.”

Their work, a 15-foot outdoor sculpture created by connecting locally grown cane plants using traditional Spanish building techniques, was

unveiled in late July. The finished piece now stands on the hilltop facing the sunset, as part of the Cuevas del Rodeo sculpture garden that extends throughout the caves.

“The managing directors and the community of artists were not only enthusiastic about our proposals, but offered insight on how to carry out the ideas and volunteered to help bring them to life,” Maracani said. “We were welcomed into the community by virtue of our shared interest in art, and in turn found ourselves creating work that we felt was both true to our aesthetics and to that of Cuevas del Rodeo.”