

FACULTY IN FOCUS

Comparative Cultures

When most people think of Islam, they likely think of the Middle East, especially since the events of Sept. 11, 2001, brought the religion to the forefront of the daily news. But for Spanish professor and chair of Romance languages Leyla Rouhi, Islam is also represented a little farther West and across a much broader time frame.

Rouhi, a native of Iran, has spent part of her career studying Islam and its interaction with Spain in the Middle Ages. Although Spain hasn't been under Islamic rule since 1492, the country had a vibrant Muslim population for more than 800 years. Rouhi became interested in medieval Spain because its history was similar to Iran's, inasmuch as both countries were assimilated into the Islamic Empire early on. Whereas Iran remained largely Muslim, Catholic Spain eventually ousted Islam during the reconquest and Inquisition.

As a professor of comparative literature, Rouhi is interested in how Spanish fiction of the medieval and Renaissance period engages with its Muslim (and multicultural) heritage. Drawing on the work of fellow scholars, her research and teaching address questions such as why the greatest hero of Christian reconquest in Spain (El Cid) has been immortalized under his Arabic name and why the supposed narrator of Cervantes' *Don Quijote* is an Arab.

Training in language and literature can help explain what Rouhi considers to be misunderstandings regarding Muslims—or any culture considered to be



Leyla Rouhi

“foreign”—evident in mass media. For example, most English-language newspapers translate the Hebrew word “Hashem” or the German “Gott” into “God.” But these publications use “Allah” in a Muslim context—giving the appearance, Rouhi says, of discomfort about Islam, as if the Muslim God were different from that of other religions.

In the classroom, Rouhi teaches courses ranging from “Elementary Spanish” to “The Cultures of Poetry.” Spanning diverse periods, her classes invite students to think critically about the importance of fiction in every culture's life and about useful applications of literary analysis to seemingly unrelated areas of study and life, such as understanding politics, current events or pop culture.

Rouhi studied Romance languages at Oxford University, where she received a bachelor's degree, and Harvard, where she completed a master's and doctorate. In 1993 she joined the faculty at Williams. She teaches classes in English and Spanish and conducts research in Arabic, Farsi, French and Latin.

Books by Leyla Rouhi:

Under the Influence: Re-thinking the Comparative in Medieval Castile, co-editor (forthcoming)

Mediation and Love: A Study of the Medieval Go-Between in Key Romance and Near-Eastern Texts (1999)

Behind the Seams

Since 1985, Deborah Brothers, the theater department's costume designer, has worked on dozens of productions, from *Medea* to *Angels in America*. She also teaches a class of roughly a dozen students per semester on what it takes—from script to stage, from underwear to overcoat—to outfit a cast for a performance and bring characters to life.

“Book” Review: At the start of a project, Brothers reviews the script with the production team, including the director, producer, set designer and lighting technician. She researches the time period in which the production is set, seeking out books, music and images, and creates collages that represent the characters and “show a general sense of what the piece means,” she says.



Deborah Brothers

Casting Call: Detailed, colorful sketches follow, using each actor as a model. Brothers attaches swatches of potential fabrics to each design. The goal of her work is to represent each character through his or her costume—using material, shape, style and texture—while evoking time, place, mood and even socioeconomic status. A single production can involve creating as few as four to more than 60 costumes. The eight actors in *Angels in America*, for example, played 29 roles, each requiring an original costume.

Fabric of Life: Brothers travels from North Adams to New York City in search of fabric, as well as to find clothing and shoes that she can use or alter. She and her staff of eight to nine students—some who are on work study and some who are volunteers interested in sewing,

design or theater—are responsible for everything from making patterns to dyeing or painting fabrics to assembling the pieces and adapting them to each actor's body size, shape and on-stage physical demands.

Dress Rehearsal: Brothers attends rehearsals to learn the actors' crucial entrances and exits. If there are blocking changes in a scene, she might return to the drawing board to adapt the costumes. If a quick change is required of an actor, for example, Brothers will add Velcro fasteners to the



Mining Your Business

Ever wonder how an online bookstore is able to “suggest” titles to you without knowing your taste? Or how you got on the mailing list of an obscure nonprofit halfway across the globe that is seeking donations? Or what supermarkets do with all the data they collect at the checkout stand?

The answer, says statistics professor Dick De Veaux, lies in data mining, a growing field that involves analyzing data in search of patterns and relationships that, in some cases, can help predict people’s behavior and boost a business’s bottom line.

In the past decade, companies have spent millions of dollars collecting and storing enormous amounts of customer data. (The tracking database of the United Parcel Service, for example, is on the order of 16 terabytes, about the digital size of all the books in the Library of Congress.) Now companies are mining this data, looking for patterns that might increase their profitability by 50 percent or more, De Veaux says.

An online bookstore might collect data on customer purchases. Using a data-mining algorithm, the store can determine what shoppers with similar buying behaviors have bought and then make recommendations to customers for future purchases, De Veaux says.

A fellow of the American Statistical Association, De Veaux has spent two decades helping to build statistical models predicting everything from what



Dick De Veaux

variables are most likely to cause giant pieces of metal to crack during manufacturing to what types of insurance policies are more likely to result in losses for the insurance industry. He’s consulted for companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Pillsbury and Chemical Bank, and because he helped Mickey Hart with research on his book *Planet Drum*, he’s the “official statistician” for the Grateful Dead.

Though his fieldwork has won him international acclaim, it also has enriched his courses and scholarly work. His experiences in science and business provide useful, real-life examples for classes such as “Introductory Statistics,” “Statistical Design and Experiments” and “Regression and Forecasting,” as well as for his latest book, *Intro Stats*, published in May.

Before arriving at Williams in 1994, De Veaux taught at the Wharton School and Princeton University School of Engineering, where he received six Excellence in Teaching Awards and a lifetime achievement award. He’s won several prizes for his work on data-mining techniques. He has bachelor’s degrees in civil engineering and mathematics from Princeton as well as a master’s in dance education and a doctorate in statistics from Stanford. De Veaux sings bass with the Williams doo-wop quartet Diminished Faculty, which he founded.

For more information on data mining, visit www.kdnuggets.com and www.twocrows.com.



costume. She also makes sure the actor is wearing appropriate underwear for a given time period and is able to perform stunts, such as wearing a harness to fly, without constraint. In the construction of one costume, an actor may go through as many as three fittings.

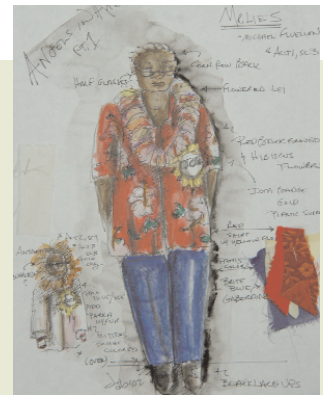


The Show Must Go On: After opening night, Brothers is on hand to do costume repairs, ironing and other maintenance so that each piece is ready for the next show. After the run is over, each costume must be cleaned and prepared for storage. The theater department has a stock of clothing, shoes and other accessories—including body padding, wigs and hats—accumulated from performances dating back to the beginning of the College’s theater program.

Fine Art: Brothers came to costume design not unlike a Williams student might. In college she pursued acting, and she took a work-study job in the costume shop at University of New Orleans, where she received her undergraduate degree. The

job allowed her to combine her talents, including painting, drawing and sewing, and she discovered how much she enjoys research.

She received an MFA in theater design and costume from California Institute of Arts and spent six years working free-lance on productions around the country before she came to Williams.



In addition to *Angels in America* and *Medea*, depicted here in sketches, Brothers has worked on Williams productions including: *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Seagull*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Hamlet*, and *Death and the Maiden*