

If only these walls could talk.... Who hasn't heard the whispers of the lives of our forebearers rustling, all but forgotten, among Las Vegas' historic buildings? Traveling merchants from far and wide, covered in the dust of the Santa Fe Trail which nurtured them, lurk in the stones of the buildings on Bridge Street. Pioneering settlers, home from the fields their work made green, murmur like unanswered prayers in the quiet strength of our adobes. Transplanted ladies from the east in bustles and hoop skirts flit among the cornices of Victorian homes. Soldiers, Bandits and women of ill repute flirt and flounce in the old saloons on Railroad Avenue.

If we could give voice to our history, what would we say and how would we say it? If our architecture could speak, what tales would it tell? NMHU Visiting Professor Robert Drummond brings his enthusiasm, his intelligence, his newcomer's joy in Las Vegas and his 10 years of international experience as a site-specific video artist to the task.

When Robert named his media arts class "Design Projects for the Community", he wasn't kidding. Happenings at Highlands can tend to stay within the university, however Robert and the seven students in his class have managed to reach deeply into our community for participation and support. And running for more than a month, with a kick-off event on Saturday, December 13 at 6:30 p.m. in the Old Town Plaza, they are going to show all comers what they have been up to.

If you take a stroll through the Plaza in the evenings this December or January, you are going to have the opportunity to meet some new people. Or rather, some very old people. Ida Ilfeld, Teddy Rosevelt, Eugenio Romero, Archbishop Lamy, Doc Holliday, Las Gorras Blancas, Stephen W. Kearney, Fabiola C de Baca, Billy the Kid, Giovanni Maria D'Agostino, The Harvey Girls, Felix Martinez, to name a few.

The walls, or at least the turn-of-the-century windows, of one of our historic buildings, the Plaza Hotel's Charles Ilfeld expansion, will tell their tales. "The original ideas were to use different windows throughout the Plaza, but we are going to consolidate in the Hotel's new addition," says

Robert.

Projected into alternating windows from inside the building, given voice by speakers located in trees in the Plaza, this multi-video art installation is a first for Las Vegas. Each character will take the 'stage' for approximately seven minutes, before falling silent, only to be replaced by another character in another window.

"I don't know what it will look like," says student Veronica Black of their show, 'Almas de la Plaza'. "I can only imagine it from when we did our first presentation. I'm expecting to be surprised. I have a vision of the dark, and the windows, and



Veronica Black helps direct/Sean Weaver, NMHU watching the characters morph into their space. I think it will be fun."

"I think it's going to be really great for the community," says another student, Amalinda Arguello. "I think they're really going to enjoy it, I've never seen anything like that put up around here. I think it will attract people from here and tourists, people coming through for the holidays."

"A lot of local history lies just under the surface of dust at the CCHP or at Donnelly or the City Museum. It's not always readily accessible to people here. The history's going to jump out at them," says Robert. "We're meeting the characters, at least our version of them, behind our history. I think another thing that dawned on me is the kind of social responsibility that this brings on. We really need to strive to represent characters across different sectors of society."

Here in Las Vegas, and throughout Northeastern New Mexico, we are grand masters of an unsung kind of public art: the art of living together, for generations, in the same small community. The materials of this art are everyday ones, found objects - the smiles we give each other, the doors we hold open for one another, the schools, events, shops, churches we attend together. Over time we become more familiar with each other, come to know more pieces of one another's stories and one another's lives. We develop and nurture the strong mutual compassion that keeps us here, that has kept some of our families here for the better part of 200 years.

Robert describes the experience which he envisions our community having with his class's installation in the same light. "You come and you go and you watch part of it one night and then you come back the next night and see something else. That's what makes it enjoyable. You continuously reencounter it and have a new experience. Come one night and watch for 20 minutes and then come the next. You can develop an intimate relationship with it over time. Public art is a whole different entity where you develop a kinship with a piece, instead of having it be a quick media experience, and then it's over."

"It's a great assignment for students," says Robert, "because it's not episodic. It's a life lesson as opposed to homework. It is very intense. The students have been doing a wonderful job researching and shooting the characters and directing some of the actors. I'm proud of them. I think they're really immersed in it. It's a sort of a Heart of Darkness experience. I always feel like a crazy person leading them up the river."

When I visited his class, the students completed each other's sentences, supported each other's ideas, exhibited the unity which can be found in any group of people - be it soldiers, families, or Robert's media arts students - who have been through intense experiences together. A student, Charles Ulibarri, describes it this way, "It's something that we've individually done together. We've all had to do research on our own characters, but we've worked together to make sure that things got shot and things got done."

## Almas De La Plaza

by Elizabeth deMare

"What was interesting for all of us as a class, and the community," says Seth Romero, another student, "was to find out who people were, how they came here, what significant values they brought to Las Vegas. Having to research, finding out the fact from the fiction, and trying to give these characters that lived way back an identity, trying to depict their life, trying to give the certain character a soul, essentially bringing them back from the dead. I think it's going to be fabulous."

"I think probably the research part of it was the most challenging," said student Kenneth Chombah. "Most of the characters that we had to re-

search, we had an idea of who the characters are. Finding out the truth, especially when the online research contradicted what we found in books in the library, trying to put together the contradictory parts of the characters was a challenge."

"I enjoyed everything, especially researching the history of Las Vegas itself," says student Virginia Marrujo. "I was born here but raised in Colorado, so this class was like that stepping stone to start looking into my own history. Finding the actors for our characters was the most challenging."

"My favorite part about doing this," says student Rachel Montoya, "was seeing how excited people in the community get to reenact what went on here years and years ago. They would come in and look at the characters and say 'I want to be that person, I remember seeing or hearing about them.' The people in this community have never seen anything like this, so I think that it will be a good show."

"We try to have our actors ad lib based on a character sketch which we give them," Robert explains. "Students did their own research as well as did I, and we generated character sketches, with a picture, so that we could work on physical resemblances. We give the actors little quotes, but for the most part we have them improvising their character lines based on the character sketch. So this pushed the actors."

Jose Marquez was cast as Juan Eugenio Romero. "I'm retired military and work in movies now. I've worked on somewhere near 20 films and 6 television shows. Jose Eugenio Romero was the second born son of the pioneering family that came to Las Vegas, the dad was Jose Miguel Romero. They were one of the pioneering families in the government here. It was very interesting. I had to research it all and write it. I usually just say two or three lines. This wasn't that easy - it was fun though. I love that all these kids are getting all this stuff together and I'm interested to see how it will turn out. I've lived here my whole life. I might even be related to the Romeros. One of my



Charles Ulibarri on the camera/Sean Weaver, NMHU

grandmothers was Romero."

"The idea was to get a range of characters," says Robert. "Everyone knows Billy the Kid and the whole bit. But we really wanted to push the students into finding characters from across the board - important females and merchants and families."

In addition to challenging the students, the project has been a challenge for their teacher as well. "It's been a real trip for me," says Robert. "I've been a site specific installation artist for the last 10 years, and I'm so used to living in project oriented only mode. I'm now straddling both worlds - the academic scheduling and the project oriented mode."

"I've spent the past 10 years mostly being an artist and I was teaching courses at a community college in LA and then I made a transition into full time visiting professor here. I love Las Vegas. From the first minute I came up here in 2002 I was like 'what is this place about?' I started just randomly dragging friends up here from Santa Fe and I would say 'Look at the magic don't you see it?' Sometimes the answer was no. I moved the summer of 2007 to just north of Villanueva, and I didn't have internet or really good coffee, so I started coming up to the SuperChief every day and that's when I started really getting engaged." Robert has been teaching at NMHU since January, 2008. "I can't believe I moved out of my loft of 10 years above an old Pabst brewery in LA and moved here in January. I hardly miss it at all."

With a broad base of sponsorship, the project has been funded by the N.M. Humanities council, the Plaza Hotel, the Las Vegas/San Miguel Chamber of Commerce, NMHU, the City of Las Vegas Rough Rider Museum. MainStreet Las Vegas is the designated 501-C3.

"The state designated Las Vegas as an arts and culture community, and now it's up to us to do something about it," said Wid Slick, an owner of the Plaza Hotel and Chamber board member. "Because our historic Las Vegas Plaza is public and highly visible, it seems like the perfect place for this video art installation that focuses on our local history."

New Mexico celebrates its Statehood Centennial beginning January 6, 2012. When the Governor created the NM Centennial of Statehood Task Force in April of this year, he gave them the mission to: "Encourage community celebrations, commemorations, educational projects and long lasting legacy projects that will serve to educate and remind citizens of New Mexico about the diversity, creativity, commitment, perseverance, enthusiasm and enchantment that together form the unique character of this state." Robert Drummond and his class are doing their part to make this grand statement a reality.

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*Almas de la Plaza - Spirits of the Plaza*  
New Mexico From Territory to Statehood - An Artistic Video Exploration

**Public Opening ♦ December 13 ♦ 6:30 p.m. ♦ Plaza Park, Las Vegas, NM**

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