

FACULTY IN FOCUS

Bridging Culture and Language

To help students in his “Baghdad” class understand the city and its place in the American consciousness, comparative literature professor Armando Vargas insists on starting at the beginning. Not the origins of civilization, as one might expect, but the origins of students’ conceptions of Arab cultures. For this generation, that means a screening of the 1992 Disney feature *Aladdin*.

Like many popular Western tales set in the Middle East, the animated love story includes genies, magic lamps, flying carpets and other distortions of the region’s rich and complex history.

For his students, who were children when *Aladdin* came out, the movie was “a direct influence on how they think of a subject like Baghdad,” Vargas says. “I thought it would be a good point of departure. It’s their first time thinking of *Aladdin* in a very different way than they first experienced the movie. That’s a symbol of what I would like the class as a whole to accomplish—retranslate something you’re already familiar with and engage it in new ways.”

Vargas came to Williams in 2004 as a Bolin Fellow at the urging of his friend Celia Quezada ’95, who like Vargas is a Mexican-American from Central

California. Vargas is the College’s first full-time Arabic instructor and this spring will introduce a new class, “Migration and National Identity in Literature and Film: Europe and the Americas,” exploring how the immigrant experience fits into a country’s mass narrative.

“My big goal in life is to have people become more critical thinkers,” Vargas says. “Going the comparative literature route certainly allows for that type of thinking.”

Vargas took a circuitous route from the Salinas Valley to the Purple Valley. He holds degrees from Georgetown, Harvard and UC Berkeley, attended language institutes in Tunisia and Morocco and studied for extended periods in Brazil, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. In addition to his native English and Spanish, the 35-year-old is proficient in Portuguese, French, Turkish and multiple dialects of Arabic.

Vargas says he interviewed with several institutions looking to shore up their Arabic or Middle Eastern studies departments, but Williams offered the freedom to explore his transnational interests.



Armando Vargas

“I definitely want to be one of these people that bridges fields and cultures and languages,” Vargas says. “It’s very exciting that there’s a lot of support here for interdisciplinary work and

international studies. The course I taught last year was ‘Latin American and Middle Eastern Literature and Film,’ a comparative perspective from these two world regions. We talked about popular culture and modern society and issues of gender and identity. That course is quite new in the field of comparative literature.”

Utilizing everything from early works by al-Ma’arri and Abu Nuwas to popular modern fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri to foreign films, Vargas trains students to approach portrayals of other cultures judiciously.

“It’s my job to complicate these ideas that people have about Latinos and Middle Easterners,” he says. “If people still hold on to their original views, I would hope that they base them on knowledge and experience—something concrete rather than the six o’clock news or the latest politician trying to gain votes.”

—Jim Mulvihill

Spreading Sustainability Across Campus

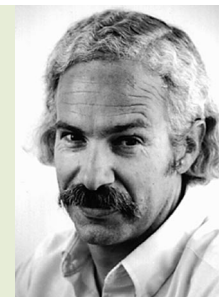
Williams and its environs will become a laboratory of sustainability thanks to a \$420,000 grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

The study of renewable energy—wind, solar, geothermal, biomass and hydropower—traditionally has been the purview of science classes. But the five-year Luce grant also will enable faculty to infuse elements of

environmental sciences and policy across the curricula.

David Dethier, geology department chair and the project’s director, will work with a team spanning biology, economics, studio art, physics, architecture and facilities planning. The team will create new modules for existing courses as well as an upper-level environmental course

to foster collaboration between science majors and students and faculty in other fields who share an interest in the environment, energy policy and the economic viability of renewable resources. Projects could include analyzing the feasibility of retrofitting



David Dethier

dams for hydropower along the Hoosic River and measuring the output and efficiency of photovoltaic panels installed throughout the region. “The photovoltaic panels on Morley [Science Center] sit flat, so in the winter we get snow on top of them—which we thought

Left: Félix Nadar, *Sarah Bernhardt*, c. 1860 albumen print. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Estampes, Paris

Right: Melandri, *Sarah Bernhardt Posing in Her Coffin*, c. 1880 albumen print cabinet card. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Estampes, Paris



The Art of High Drama

She was one of the most photographed women of her time—a performer as comfortable on stage and screen as she was hawking face cream or Bronx real estate. Her long list of lovers, her fascination for the macabre (she is rumored to have slept in a coffin) and her taste for the exotic (furniture inscribed with her motto) only heightened the public’s fascination with her. Now Sarah Bernhardt is the subject of a major exhibition at The Jewish Museum, organized by Williams art history professor Carol Ockman and NYU chair of fine arts Kenneth E. Silver.

The Bernhardt Brand

In the 60 years after her debut with the Comédie Française in 1862, Bernhardt succumbed to an estimated 40,000 stage deaths in venues ranging from the Odeon to San Quentin Prison to the front lines of Verdun during World War I. She owned theaters, supervised productions and established the template for modern-day celebrity by cultivating her professional and public image like no one before her, Ockman says. She embraced early photography and recording as well as new forms of entertainment such as vaudeville and film, which had little artistic cachet but brought her international acclaim.



Carol Ockman

Exhibit of an Exhibitionist

To produce “Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama,” Ockman and Silver spent more than four years gathering 250 objects from around the world. Among them are Bernhardt’s own sculpture, costumes, stage designs, a human skull given to her by Victor Hugo, her nine-foot dressing mirror and a linen handkerchief embroidered with “Sarah.” The square of fabric has been passed down through a “luminous

was going to blow away,” Dethier says. “But now we’re not so sure. So what would have been the economic tradeoff if they were put up on an angle, as with the Williamstown Elementary School panels?”

Dethier, who is the Edward Brust Professor of Mineralogy and Geology, also would like to see greater emphasis on communicating

environmental research to a broader audience. So the grant will support a faculty research seminar as well as a public lecture series that brings together scientists, architects and building planners from the area.

Dethier also envisions a greater Web presence to enhance the visibility of the College’s renewable energy programs and initiatives. A portion

of the grant will go toward hiring someone skilled in technology, dataset ability, graphics and information visualization for analyzing and displaying data. This will enable the creation of a Web portal for data streams such as weather information from Hopkins Forest as well as wind and solar information from surrounding areas.

“We should be talking about what we do much more loudly,” says Dethier, adding that the Internet is an effective way to do so. “The Web would be both a value to the outside and to the inside. . . . Communicating about what we do will be very different in the next few years.”

—Kipp Lynch

“sorority of actresses,” Ockman says, including Helen Hayes, Julie Harris, Susan Strasberg and Cherry Jones, who won a 2005 Tony Award. In the eyes of an art historian, Ockman says, “this transmission story is amazing. It takes place in private. It takes place among women. I wanted to be able to save it, to tell it.”

Who Do You Think You Are ...

With a Winter Study course at the Williams Club planned around the exhibition this month, Ockman hopes to remind Williams students that, before Britney, before Madonna, even before Marilyn, there was Sarah. Moreover, she says, her students will have “the unprecedented opportunity to learn about an exhibition from soup to nuts” and then compare and contrast “The Art of High Drama” with other shows and collections around New York City. Ockman says being able to walk her students through the show, from its “very inception to its actualization to its critical review,” makes it “all the more meaningful.”

—Amy Lovett

“Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama” runs through April 2 at The Jewish Museum in New York City. For information, visit www.thejewishmuseum.org.