

BRIGHTLIGHTS

[Kendra Johnson ('91)]

A fervor for theater

By Sara Riddle ('10)

Even at a young age Kendra Johnson ('91) knew that no matter what she pursued in the future it would be something in a creative field. This past fall, that creativity, time, energy and passion paid off when Clemson University announced her promotion to associate professor of theater in its performing arts department.

"I always loved to read, draw and sew," says Johnson. "I thought costume design was a great fit for a career."

A member of the Clemson faculty since 2003, Johnson is no stranger to college theater and costume design. She designed many shows during her four years studying theater at JMU. "Theater took up most of my time, but it paid off," says Johnson. "My design experiences at Madison helped me get accepted to several graduate school costume design programs."

While accepted by numerous graduate schools, Johnson decided on the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, where she won several design awards as a Master of Fine Arts candidate. After earning her degree in 1994, she taught general theater courses in public schools in Charlotte, N.C., and later became an assistant professor in the theater department at the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

As a tenured professor, Johnson teaches courses in theater appreciation, stage makeup, costume design, costume technology and African-American theater history. She also designs costumes

for many Clemson productions and manages the costume shop. She has served as the costume designer for nearly 50 shows, 20 of which were university productions.

Marat/Sade, Johnson's first production at Clemson, is her most memorable to date: "I loved my first production. I think all the production elements really came together."

In addition to specializing in costume design, costume technology and stage makeup, Johnson presents and exhibits research on 19th-century slave dress in South Carolina and is currently studying indigo dyeing. "As a costume designer, you have to know a lot of history as well as art history," Johnson says. "As both an undergrad and grad student, I noticed the lack of information on how African-Americans styled their clothing during the antebellum period. I wanted to research the link between Africa and their new 'home' in America."

Johnson's research focuses on the depictions of slave clothing on stage and screen as well as at historical sites. Her dolls, which illustrate slave clothing, have been displayed at the Blackbridge Hall Gallery at Georgia College and State University, and the Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio.

Beyond her faculty responsibilities, Johnson designs professionally for various Greenville theaters. Between doing her own research, teaching theater classes and designing costumes, she enjoys the creative aspect of working with other theater artists. "Theater is collaborative," she explains. "I like getting ideas from my colleagues and incorporating them into my designs." ❧

Clemson theater professor Kendra Johnson ('91) researches African-American slave clothing on stage and screen and at historical sites.

