Inside classroom 200 in Hartke Hall, on a blustery autumn afternoon, sophomore Bob Pike, a drama and psychology major from Eustis, Fla., pores over a tiny square swatch of material. It is deep amethyst and matte finished on one side and bluish purple and incandescent on the other. He flips it over and over using thumb and forefinger.

“I do find it really fascinating how these two [sides] correspond, and I’m wondering how we use that to our advantage,” Pike muses aloud to two of his project teammates, sophomores Lauren Schene of Gambrills, Md., and Kim Giroux of Marlborough, Mass., while they examine a rainbow of other square-inch swatches of China silks and laces they’ve cut from bolts of material in the Hartke Theatre costume shop.

These bits of material are serious business for students in Catholic University’s Introduction to Design class. Choosing colors and textures for costumes and sets can spell the difference between a king and a fairy, the city and forest, or the moods of war and of peace in a play on stage. And having an eye for the little details of design can make the difference between a myopic dramatist and a versatile one who’s much in demand, says Gail Beach, chair and associate professor in Catholic University’s drama department and one of two instructors of the design class (pictured next page).

Every player in a dramatic production — whether actor, director, or playwright — should know how to design costumes and sets to be a well-rounded theater artist, says Beach. So in addition to acting, playwriting, literature, theory, and other subjects, CUA’s drama department offers the design class jointly taught by Beach, a professional costume designer, and Professor Thomas Donahue, a seasoned set designer.

Those who take the class as part of their Bachelor of Arts in drama end up earning rave reviews in the D.C. area drama world, Beach says. “Day in and day out, I have people come up to me around town and say, ‘I keep seeing your kids everywhere, and they are great! They are so full of knowledge,’” Beach recounts. “They can jump in and help with the set or bring really good comments to the various parts of the production,” she explains.

The November class begins with a trip behind the heavy black velvet curtains of Hartke’s stage to the costume shop tucked away upstairs. Against the backdrop of the room’s sun-filled windows and among half-clothed sewing forms, wardrobe racks of costume...
suits, and plastic milk crates filled with glittery, strappy sandals and sensible black pilgrim shoes, two small groups of Beach’s students pull down from shelves bolts and folded remnants of chiffons and golden-trimmed, sari-ready silks to snip off swatches. Their aim is to develop color schemes for characters and places in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, William Shakespeare’s 16th-century play that mixes aristocratic Athenians, unrequited love, and mischievous, forest-dwelling fairies.

One group in Beach’s class is setting their imaginary production in New Mexico of 1870. When the characters “go out into the forest, they’re actually going out into the desert,” sophomore Tara Costello of Mill Valley, Calif., explains against the hum of her classmates’ cheerful chatter and snipping scissors. “And fairies are more of a mirage than actual ...”, she adds, stopping herself. “I mean fairies are clearly not real. I hate to break it to anyone.”

Costello and her teammates select sturdy cotton prints, earthy browns, and muted yellows. “Laura Ingalls Wilder would wear that when she’s going to school on the banks of Plum Creek with Nellie,” Costello suggests, pointing to a little swatch. “I love Little House on the Prairie.”

Meanwhile, Bob Pike and his group envision the play in an abstract, dream-like world inspired by the colors and styles of their favorite artists Dale Chihuly, Mark Rothko, Salvador Dalí, and Georgia O’Keefe.

So the group picks out bits of icy-silver lace, forest-green sheer nylon, bright red raw silk, and that intriguing double-sided taffeta — the purple side of which inspires the group to color Athens and its residents in the regal monochrome. But that flat, stolid tone will morph into kaleidoscopic hues as the characters move from the city of “structured ideas” into the “forest” of imagination, says Pike.

For the set, they’re planning on a mosaic of plexiglass-covered pools lighted in changeable colors from below. As with costumes, those colored lights would shift with the plot to separate the worlds of Athens and the fairy forest. If actually installed, the pools would “cost a lot of money,” Pike notes. “But we don’t have a budget, so we don’t have to worry about that,” he says, smiling.

In lieu of finding producers and money for a full-scale production, students will sketch or build a diorama of their proposed set that must show the ground plan, including vertical space and color, Beach tells them back in the classroom. Using such mock-ups, along with the color swatches, designers can talk to directors about the “world” of the play long before it’s formed on stage, she adds.

Also, each group must produce an Act-Scene Chart — a complex grid on an X-Y axis listing all the characters, acts, and scenes of the play, and the colors each character will be dressed in whenever they appear. Like their professional counterparts, Beach explains, the student designers can compare at once characters within a scene, ensuring protagonists “pop” and sidekicks don’t steal the limelight.

And by the end of the semester, the students will render sketches of six characters from the play in their full costumes, from period hairstyles to shoe buckles, if applicable. They will attach swatches of the materials they propose to use for the costumes, from cotton eyelet for petticoats to velvet for waistcoats. These renderings become a “communication tool” costumes designers use with costume-makers, Beach tells her students.

But given this isn’t an art class, Beach will offer them pre-drawn outlines of the characters’ shapes: “I don’t want, I can’t draw a body, to be what stops them because sometimes the most creative people aren’t facile with that.”

Most of all, Beach wants her students to leave this course at ease in both the visible and unseen worlds in the production of a play, negotiating with actors, directors, lighting technicians, carpenters, tailors, and myriad others who inhabit them. “Part of what I’m doing is giving them permission to communicate,” she explains.

At the end of this day’s class, Beach affirms the collaborative efforts of these fledgling designers who’ve kept their eyes on the details. “Now they realize everything it takes behind the scenes to support the final production onstage and they more fully appreciate the collaborative process,” says Beach. “No matter what their individual paths in theater may be, they will never look at the process in the same way after their work in this class.”