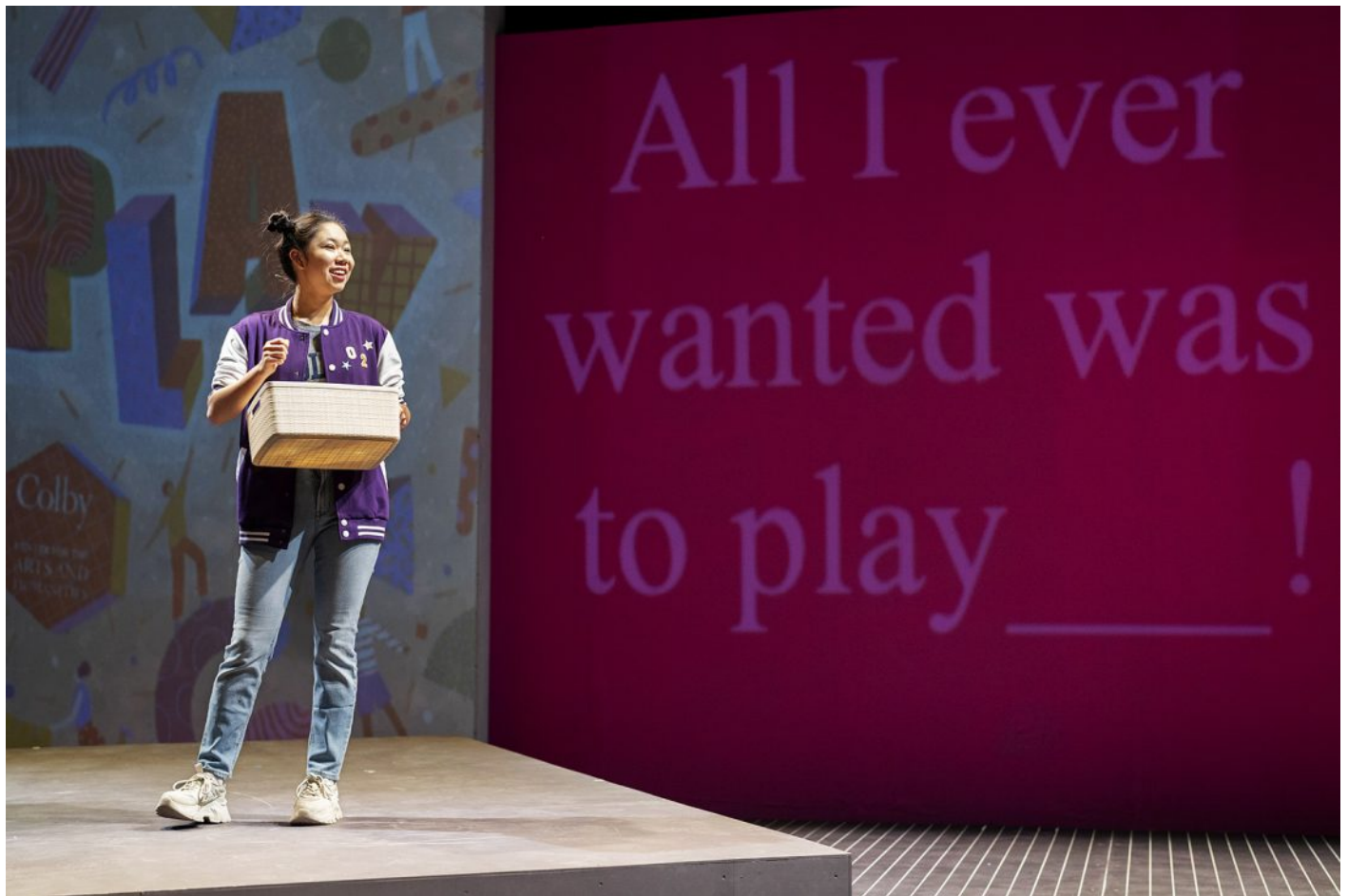


Getting Serious about Play

CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY | 7 MIN READ

The Colby community dives into the Center for the Arts and Humanities' new two-year theme



Yiyun Mao '26 asks the audience to finish the prompt "All I ever wanted was to play ___!" during a dress rehearsal for a collection of short plays inspired by the Colby Center for the Arts and Humanities' current theme, "Play."

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By Abigail Curtis | Photography by Ashley L. Conti

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The idea of “play” is being taken seriously across campus as the Colby community dives into the Center for the Arts and Humanities’ newest theme.

Through a seminar series, courses, cinema screenings, and more, students, faculty, and staff are invited to think deeply about play: what it means to play, its paradoxes, its history, its inequalities, its darker side, and its power.

Play can be simple, too—an invitation to shake off the staid and expected, to see the world from a new, playful perspective. That’s just what happened at the 206th Convocation in September when the assembled audience stood up and performed a quick rendition of the “Hokey Pokey” at the request of convocation speaker Annie Kloppenberg, associate professor of performance, theater, and dance and inaugural director of the Lyons Arts Lab.

“There’s lots of different ways to approach this in ways that are playful and whimsical, but also in ways that are serious,” said Dean Allbritton, associate professor of Spanish and director of the center. “I think it’s really a nuanced and complex theme.”



Members of the class of 2027 smile as they dance the “Hokey Pokey” during the College’s 206th Convocation in September.

Emphasizing the humanities

The Center for the Arts and Humanities was founded just over a decade ago as a way to return the humanities to the heart of a liberal arts education, even as colleges and universities around the country were seeing dwindling interest in core humanistic subjects such as English, foreign languages, philosophy, and history.

As the center has grown in size and scope, it has become a vital part of Colby’s identity. One way it does that is through annual themes as a way to unite the campus around a central idea that has to do with humanistic inquiry. Previous themes have included Food for Thought, Freedom and Captivity, Boundaries and Margins, and Energy/Exhaustion. Play marks the first two-year theme and it will remain a part of campus life through spring semester 2025.

There are course unit development grants available to help professors fold the theme into their classes, and Allbritton and co-organizer Jun “Philip” Fang, assistant professor of sociology, promise a thought-provoking series of events and speakers.

“In the best form, the theme lets students in Spanish and philosophy and dance and religious studies all talk about the same thing, just through their respective disciplines,” Allbritton said. “And that is ideally what we are doing in the liberal arts.”



Isadora Wells '26 and Erica Loomis '25 perform during a dress rehearsal for *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* at the Gordon Center for Creative and Performing Arts.



Isabelle Harrison Bregman '24 laughs with Steph Kwon '27 as they prepare for *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*.

The change from one to two years happened because professors were approaching Allbritton last spring to tell him they still had ideas for ways to work last year's theme into their courses.

"I thought, what if we extend this a little bit and allow a theme to really take root," he said, adding that some entities, such as the Colby Museum of Art, naturally require more lead time in order to plan events. "I want there to be the time for them to fully invest in something and say, 'We've got a great idea, and we're going to make it happen.'"



Steph Kwon '27 holds a pose.

The possibilities are vast.

“We can’t even imagine what can happen in spring of 2025,” Allbritton said. “There could be something huge that starts cooking now and just explodes in a positive way.”

Manifesting the theme

According to Fang, it has been satisfying to see how the community, especially students, have shown up to learn and participate in the various events and activities. The seminar series takes place on Monday evenings, and he was initially worried that people would be too busy to come. The opposite has happened, and Fang has enjoyed experiencing how the events help bridge disciplinary gaps and create campus-wide interactions involving students and faculty.

“It has been amazing,” he said. “To see how successful these events have been and how they have engaged a kind of campus-wide conversation—not only from students but also from faculty members—has given me a sense of accomplishment.”



Actors explored themes of girlhood and play in *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*.



The bow after the final dress rehearsal.

Nate Dunn '27, an economics major who is on the student advisory board for the Center for the Arts and Humanities, said it's interesting how the theme has manifested in so many different ways around campus. It's also been important to recognize the myriad ways that people play and how those experiences intersect, he said.

"Everyone has a different way to play—some on the field, others on instruments or through a screen," he said. "To recognize all of these as meaningful play, that's something special."

Rory Hallowell '24, chair of the student advisory board and a religious studies and American studies double major, said the theme is a way to acknowledge the part of a person that keeps them youthful, creative, and hopeful.

"Our theme of play emphasizes the freedom of the personal spirit ... to defy and transgress the constraints and boundaries of reality," he said. "So that we might

explore and live in, at least for a time, the depths of our imagination.”

Exploring through courses and events

Faculty members and others have found many different approaches to explore the theme. So far, 16 courses affiliated with play are taking place during this academic year.

They include Philosophy of Humor, taught by Lydia Moland, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Professor of Philosophy; Race, Rights, and Land in the Americas, taught by Assistant Professor of Spanish Hector Ramos Flores; Queer Youth Cultures, taught by Andrea Breau, visiting assistant professor of women’s, gender, and sexuality Studies; African American Girlhood, taught by Assistant Professor of African-American Studies Sonya Donaldson; and The World at Play, taught by M. Suzanne Menair, lecturer of anthropology.



Isadora Wells '26 and Erica Loomis '25 have fun rehearsing for *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*.

Among the play-connected events this fall: a well-attended talk on the Indigenous roots of lacrosse co-hosted by the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and the Colby Athletics Department; screenings of films such as *Jumanji* and *Edge of Tomorrow* at the Maine Film Center in Waterville; and, with the Davis Institute for Artificial Intelligence, a presentation by nationally known video game designer and University of Miami School of Communication Professor Lindsay Grace, who spoke about the intersection of games, human computation, and artificial intelligence.

This week, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, assistant professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, presented a seminar titled “Playing ‘The Game’ of Migration.”

“I love how a theme can just energize the campus around a thought in different ways,” Allbritton said. “It’s been incredible to see how the theme has sparked new ways of playing across our different institutes and centers and into our local communities.”

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