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## **Educating the Creative Theatre Artist**

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# Educating the Creative Theatre Artist

*Sonja Kuflinec*

A few months ago, I had a revelatory experience about theatre education. I invited Michael Rohd to conduct a late afternoon workshop employing Image Theatre techniques and storytelling to explore community and conflict. As always I was worried about attendance, given the setting of the University of Minnesota: a large state university with an overabundance of programming and a student population with many live-at-home commuters.

So, I resorted to bribery.

I offered extra credit points to my Introduction to Theatre students in exchange for their participation in the workshop, which focused on cultural assumptions of gender. I also assured these students they could leave the four-hour workshop at the dinner break to attend their evening classes and activities. Four of these Theatre 1101 students, all nonmajors, attended the workshop. To my astonishment, all four remained to its conclusion at eight-thirty.

“I was supposed to leave the workshop at 5:30,” explained one student, Debbi Hoehn, in written commentary following the workshop, “but when it got to that time, I realized that the last thing I wanted to do was leave. . . . I did not feel like anyone was watching me, but was watching out for me.” Another student, Erik Adolphson, expressed delight in how the workshop opened up his understanding of theatre as a tool to investigate cultural assumptions of gender: “For me, this workshop was less about theatre, and more about communication and awareness of how we judge and label. . . . What is considered masculine and feminine in society is something we don’t think about or normally address. . . . Before this, I had seen theatre as pure entertainment. Now I see it as a tool of expression to teach something.” A third student, Erik Herbst, seemed to summarize the experiences of the group: “I was planning to leave at 5:30, but I skipped the rest of my appointments because I became wrapped up in the amazing way theatre captivates the body and mind.”

I found the experience and the student responses exhilarating and frustrating. I was thrilled to be reminded that students actually yearn for the opportunity to be captivated in “body and mind,” to critically engage in issues, and to examine their own social and economic contexts through theatre. At the same time, I found myself depressed by how seldom this kind of attention, questioning, and examination occurs in the classroom. “After about twenty courses

here at the U,” wrote Herbst, “I finally found one that I enjoyed, that I took something away from.” What happened, I wonder, in the other nineteen? Why do students in general seem so disaffected by their education? And why does this disaffection extend to many of our theatre students?

Pedagogue and social theorist bell hooks suggests a possible answer. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks identifies the classroom as “the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (12). Yet she also draws a distinction between education as the practice of freedom and education that “merely strives to reinforce domination” (4). As an embodied tool of learning, theatre offers one of the most radical possibilities for the practice of freedom in education. As my students discovered in Rohd’s workshop, thinking with the body can make visible the stereotypes that inform our social interactions, while offering practical options for change. Yet, instead of employing the liberatory possibilities of embodied education, theatre teaching in higher education often conforms to what hooks terms “education as domination,” unquestioningly replicating systemic acting theory, literary canons, or a positivist application of theatre history. By beginning with an unquestioned system or knowledge paradigm, we may deny students the opportunity to “take something away” from the classroom. Instead of unreflexively propagating these systems, we should work together with students to practice critical thinking about these systems. We should educate creative thinkers rather than simply training actors, directors, or historians.

My purpose here is to advocate a variety of ways we can revision theatre studies and theatre pedagogy to engage students in such critical and creative thinking by offering specific ideas on both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

### **Student-Centered Learning**

It is important to note how theatre studies is ideally positioned as the kind of student-centered pedagogy implied by hooks and other advocates of progressive education. Such a student-centered approach, for example, is the cornerstone of the 1996 Boyer Commission report on undergraduate education. The report, which focuses mainly on research universities, calls for an emphasis on student inquiry and problem solving. The commission cites the performing arts as exemplary disciplines engaging students in these research skills. The report also emphasizes these disciplines’ power to develop skilled communication, something that “proves to be at least as important as specific knowledge content [in undergraduate education]” (24).

Effective communication includes expanding the vision of skill sets taught to students. Rethinking our field must occur at the level of not only *what* is taught but also *how* and *toward what ends*. In a way, this is nothing new: many theatre departments and educators have long promoted the importance of life skills learned through theatre, such as the ability to communicate orally and work well in groups. Taking its cue from this tradition and from the Boyer

report, the 1997 pamphlet *Theatre Studies in Higher Education: Learning for a Lifetime*, a product of ATHE's Rationales Task Force, promotes theatre based on these life skills. "[Students] can use [these crucial life skills] in a wide range of professions as well as in their day-to-day relationships with others . . . theatre in higher education answers today's market demand for skills in creative, critical, and collaborative thinking." The pamphlet, designed to advocate for theatre outside of the department and the university, cites cognitive, interdisciplinary, and perceptive capacities as values for managerial and leadership positions. The report also emphasizes the importance of creativity in bolstering individual, spiritual, and community health. "Through the imagination, we can make significant, constructive changes in our communities." While the pamphlet was valuable in underlining the values of a theatre education toward building leadership skills and contributing to individual and community growth, I want to argue that it be expanded upon to include an emphasis on alternative roles for theatre in education, particularly related to community development. Once again, student commentary is the inspiration for my reflections.

### **Rethinking Undergraduate Education**

In the summer of 1999, I met with Anne Gardner, a transfer theatre major, to discuss her possible life pathways now that she was on the cusp of graduation. While she had received a great deal of production-oriented training from the state school she had previously attended, she waxed enthusiastic about Minnesota's emphasis on rigorous critical thinking and opportunities for creative play. Much as in the model proposed by the Boyer report, Gardner had been able to synthesize inquiry and practice in a way that was stimulating and meaningful to her. In her final months at the university, she had collaborated with a group of women who were dissatisfied with the opportunities provided them by more conventional dramatic fare. Integrating feminist theory with movement work and Image Theatre, the women had created a compelling original production entitled *Womenatrix*, a performative collage that provocatively explored how women can be socialized to conform to a variety of normalizing behaviors. Admission cost an apple, and breast shots replaced traditional company head shots in the lobby.

The critical and creative opportunities exemplified by this production had widened Gardner's vision of where a theatre education could lead. Many of the participants continued to develop projects outside of the theatre department with the university's Women's Center, the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group, and a Latina women's group, among others. Yet, despite, or perhaps because of, their initiative, the students expressed frustration with the limited opportunities available in the traditional classroom to explore alternative applications and understandings of theatre. So, while Gardner still considered actor training programs in her future, she also spoke to me of applying for a Fulbright scholarship to Senegal, using the work of Augusto Boal to explore social power dynamics in her Kentucky hometown, and investigating graduate

programs in performance studies. These experiences suggest how, by expanding the focus of what we teach, we might prepare our students for a lifetime of learning in theatre.

A January 1999 ATHE retreat, which I attended as a representative of the Performance Studies Focus Group, clarified the dilemmas faced by our field in terms of what and how we teach, and toward what ends. Should we be training students more preprofessionally—undergraduates for performance jobs and graduates for teaching jobs? Or should we focus more on interdisciplinary collaborations across fields that would redefine students as inquirers and artistic entrepreneurs? Or should we try to combine training and inquiry, particularly in educating graduate students? Surveys of artists working in alternative theatrical projects suggest a focus on redefining undergraduates as artistic entrepreneurs, while experience with graduate students at the University of Minnesota suggests a model for more explicit “teacher training.”

Surveys compiled by Bob Leonard at Virginia Tech, and Jan Cohen-Cruz and Lucy Winner, former cochairs of ATHE’s Task Force on Expanding Roles of Theatre in Education, emphasize the need for interdisciplinary undergraduate coursework while offering general avenues for rethinking the skills and values we teach our undergraduates. Leonard’s 1995 questionnaire received responses from fifty-five working artists associated with Alternative ROOTS (Regional Organizations of Theatres South). The respondents’ replies, when asked what they would teach and what they wish they had been taught, reveal what might be lacking in some of our undergraduate training: collaboration, ensemble-building, idea development, interdisciplinary approaches to creating art, listening, conflict resolution, community engagement, and application of artistic skills in a wide range of settings.

The undergraduate production programs that I know of tend to emphasize individual actor training based in psychological realism often supplemented with movement and voice work. Elective classes in production include audition techniques and acting for the camera. There is little or no emphasis in the classroom placed on collaboration, ensemble-building, or alternative careers in the field of theatre. Conventional production training tends to recycle a system that emphasizes the passivity of the individual actor rather than graduating students who can think critically and creatively about the value of theatre in society and who act upon those thoughts.

Opportunities for alternative training do exist, and universities are expanding what they teach. The Task Force is compiling a growing list of educators who work with and teach about these additional opportunities. Such roles include business and managerial training, conflict resolution, theatre-in-education, and community-based work. These programs also tend to move beyond an assumption of the theatre student as stage actor to embrace the notion of the student as social agent.

I want to advocate for students as such social agents—for those who will leave the university exploring the possibility of work in West Africa, with nearby continuation high schools, or as IBM management training consultants, as well as wondering how they can land a role with an equity waiver production. I want to offer our undergraduate students a bigger toolbox: one that includes collaboration, generative skills, listening, and facilitation as well as Method acting, voice, and audition technique. I want to see students fulfill the potentials suggested in the quote attributed to Brecht: “Art is not a mirror held up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it.”

### **Rethinking Graduate Education**

At the same time, I want to imagine the possibilities for mentoring graduate students in ways that go beyond assisting in the mastery of a disciplinary area. The Boyer report, while focusing on undergraduate education, is frank in its assessments of the university’s failure to prepare graduate students for teaching:

There is a striking discrepancy now between the nature of graduate work and the nature of the professional careers for which graduate students are being prepared. In particular, people educated to the doctoral level are expected by their employers and by society to be highly proficient in their fields, to be able to evaluate the work of others, to be producers of knowledge that will enrich or improve life, and to be effective communicators to whatever audiences are appropriate. . . . Yet graduate education too often ignores all those expectations. Graduate students are given intensive work in narrowly defined subjects and meticulous training in the technical skills required for research projects; it is the unstated assumption that the other expectations will be met without organized effort—met, presumably, by the general education that preceded graduate training. For too many people, that assumption is unwarranted. (24)

A report prepared by ATHE’s Graduate Student Task Force, headed by Sharon Green and Leah Lowe, reinforces Boyer, citing the particular need for student mentorship and preparation in teaching, conference presentation, and publication. A recently reorganized Introduction to Theatre course at the University of Minnesota attempts to move this process of mentorship into the realm of pedagogy.

Prior to its restructuring, the course had been organized as a twice-a-week lecture series for five hundred students. Five graduate students assisted in setting up audiovisual equipment and leading extracredit discussion sections. Undergraduate student learning was assessed through two fifty-question multiple choice tests. While multiple-choice tests can function as excellent evaluators of a student’s ability to discriminate among concepts, they are not generally cited as the most effective method to engage students’ critical and comparative thinking skills. The graduate student assistants also felt that holding optional discussion sections, in which students were issued credit merely for attending, gave

undergraduates little incentive to arrive prepared or participate actively. Thus, the reorganization of the class focused on creating a writing-intensive, active learning environment that would provide graduate assistants with more autonomous teaching opportunities while enriching the quality of undergraduate education.

With encouragement from our department chair and university support for smaller classes with a writing component, coinstructor Tamara Underiner and I first cut the class size to three hundred students and beefed up the teaching assistant pool to ten. This reorganization allowed us to create individual sections that would accompany our weekly lectures. Graduate students became section leaders, with responsibilities for initiating discussion, developing writing and project assignments, evaluating student responses, and issuing grades. As Writing Consultants in our department, Underiner and I also followed through on a university mandate for more writing intensive classes—a mandate that financially supported additional teaching assistants. Following the directive that these classes require at least one draft revision and ten to fifteen pages of formal writing, we developed a text analysis assignment that allowed for revision in several steps, a production analysis assignment requiring both informal and formal responses, and a group scene presentation with a written component detailing student research, analysis, and self-evaluation.

Graduate students in our department had at the time no directed course in pedagogy. We therefore designed a series of spring and fall workshops that focused on general educational philosophies, as well as more specific strategies and tactics. The spring workshop series addressed syllabus development, active learning, and discussion leading. The workshops modeled the student-centered tactics we promoted. We began the first, for example, by asking participants to individually brainstorm their best and worst teaching experiences, as either classroom leaders or students. We then shared this information as a large group, creating a foundation of knowledge derived from the participants themselves. We also used the workshop to gather invaluable feedback on the draft syllabus we had developed for the introductory course. Our second workshop focused on active learning. We modeled this approach through a combination of lecture and activity formats, communicating through lecture the latest research on active learning and student retention, and using an on-your-feet exercise to demonstrate Boal's reflective theatre techniques. The third workshop centered on leading discussions. We employed Glen Altschuler's article "Let Me Edutain You" to model practical tactics as well as to engage discussion on an issue immediately pertinent to participants—the role of the teacher as performer.

At the end of the spring series, we garnered feedback from participants to develop our fall workshop, which became a three-day orientation session focusing on the relationship between the lecture and section; the practical skills of lesson planning, assignment development, draft commentary, and paper grading; and the more elusive skills of creating a supportive and productive classroom learning environment. We began our fifteen-hour workshop by discussing what researchers have determined to be students' most important concerns about a new class:

“Will I be able to handle the material?” and “Will I like my classmates?” (Johnson). We had prepared a workbook that detailed the responsibilities of a teaching assistant and provided support in the form of innumerable handouts on teaching tactics. We also elicited comments on participants’ fears and expectations and worked to build an ensemble feeling among this group of section instructors, modeling icebreaking games that they themselves could potentially use on their first day of teaching. After sharing more information about the philosophy of syllabus development, we assigned graduate instructors the task of creating individual syllabi for their sections that would supplement our overall course guide.

We began the second day of the workshop by illustrating peer review techniques, pairing up students to share drafts of their syllabi and first-day lesson plans. A guest from the Writing Center, Hildy Miller, introduced approaches to developing and breaking down assignments. We spent the remainder of the day dividing the graduate students into small groups to develop consistent but individualized course assignments. After large group feedback, the graduate instructors spent the evening formalizing their assignments, commenting on a sample rough draft of a text analysis paper, and grading a sample production analysis. On the final day, we used the instructors’ homework to discuss grade norming and draft commentary.

At the end of the workshop, we asked for commentary and evaluation. Graduate participants cited as invaluable the workbook, modeling tactics, the time to develop assignments, and the space to share their anxieties. The more practically focused work, based on the immediate challenges of teaching this particular course—rather than more abstract pedagogical issues—proved most useful to the students. These comments underscore what research on learning has shown: students respond most productively to assignments and discussions that seem most relevant to them (Weinstein et al.). In order to maintain the graduate student input and mentoring fostered by these workshops, we now meet weekly to discuss successes and challenges and share ideas for the next week’s section. We have also implemented a year-round schedule of workshops for new section instructors. Over the course of two years, I have noticed the graduate student section instructors in the course have increased their cooperative behavior, solving problems as a group rather than as individuals, and also becoming, in the words of the Boyer report, “more effective communicators.” This strategy of providing experiential learning along with active reflection proves a useful model not only in pedagogical training but also, as I will show, in community-based learning.

### **Community-Based Learning**

My final concern centers on the interaction between the university and its surrounding communities. Programs referred to as service learning, outreach, or community-based learning encourage students to work actively with local

organizations and secondary schools outside of the college setting. In this model students learn through experience, interaction with different cultures, and mentoring younger students. As Boal proposes, “One learns by teaching others. Pedagogy is transitive, or it isn’t pedagogy” (261). This pedagogical model as a whole also enacts one of ATHE’s main advocacy goals: “To establish, publish and promote education methods for theatre practice beyond the academy in community-based venues.”<sup>1</sup>

While numerous universities have centers devoted to service learning, I select for my examples two programs focusing on undergraduate and graduate education in theatre. The many programs and classes developed by Cohen-Cruz for New York University students serve mainly undergraduates in the arts, while Sharon Grady teaches outreach methods at the University of Texas, Austin, in a program designed for Masters students.

Cohen-Cruz maintains a national reputation as a scholar and practitioner of community-based theatre and the activist work of Boal. In the spirit of the Boyer report, Cohen-Cruz communicates her theoretical and practical knowledge to students through a school wide project, several independently developed classes, and an applied theatre degree. The two courses Cohen-Cruz teaches combine practical internships with in-class reflections. The Urban Ensemble course serves any student who works in artistic disciplines at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. Adhering to Boal’s reminder about transitive pedagogy, students learn how to teach in community-based arts projects. Students cofacilitate weekly sessions, then meet to discuss teaching methods and case studies featuring collaborative and community projects. The project-centered community-based theatre class has students engaging in internships and class sessions focusing on issues such as the relationship of community-based theatre to professional theatre and the idea of “applied theatre,” along with reflection and problem-solving provoked by the practical internships. [See Cohen-Cruz’s article in this issue.]

Cohen-Cruz also runs the Community Connections Office and oversees an applied theatre minor, both of which encourage and support students who wish to pursue alternative careers in theatre. The Connections Office operates as a clearinghouse for students who wish to work in community arts projects for educational, therapeutic, activist, or policy-oriented purposes. Students either apprentice with established organizations or develop their own projects. The minor offers interested students the opportunity to learn how performance has been and can be a vital part of professions and cultural practices outside the professional theatre.

Like Cohen-Cruz, Grady engages an activist reflective pedagogy. Grady teaches Outreach Methods, Creative Drama, and Theatre-In-Education in the Creative Drama and Children’s Theatre program, which grants a theatre MFA as well as an MA for secondary school teachers. Students learn to research, devise practical workshops, and reflect on their experience through the classes. Grady focuses on teaching reflective skills and developing critically aware practitioners

in the realm of youth theatre and education. Her classes demand critical engagement with the process of collaboration, encouraging students to define questions before beginning a community-based learning project.

Of particular interest to Grady is the negotiation of power relations between the community and student facilitator, and she teaches to raise awareness and suggest ways of engaging a dialogic relationship between the two. Ideally, students relate *with* the community rather than *to* the community. A workshop on facilitating community-based theatre at the 1999 ATHE conference in Toronto illustrated Grady's methodology. At the session we divided ourselves into small groups and imagined a community with whom we might work. Grady then asked us to brainstorm responses to three questions: 1) What do you want the group to achieve? 2) What do you think this group needs? and 3) What do you think are the group's interests and concerns? The movement of the questions, from the "I" of the facilitator to the perceived "you" of the community, clarified this negotiation; in the process of asking the workshop to address the questions, Grady helped to move the community group from object to subject. This dialogic process inherent in critically aware community-based theatre work can help to clarify the pedagogical goals of a re-visioned theatre education.

## Openings

ATHE's 1997 keynote speaker, Tony Kushner, addressed a new paradigm for theatre in the academy. Kushner's "Modest Proposal" advocated for the abolishment of all undergraduate arts majors—that is, as he took care to explicate, the abolishment of the ontological category of "arts majors" rather than the "wholesale slaughter of young people interested in the arts" (77). Like hooks, Kushner underlined the need for education as opposed to training, education that synthesizes thought and action—or, as my Introduction to Theatre student put it, that "captivates body and mind."

While not advocating the extreme measures proposed by Kushner, I do want to suggest that we need to address the sense of crisis and disaffection that prompted his comments and is felt by many of our students. As educators, we must continue to recognize how re-visioning the field embraces our pedagogical practice—to rethink both how and what we teach undergraduates and graduate students. We need to orient ourselves toward a student-centered pedagogy, challenging the subject/object dichotomy implied by what Paolo Freire refers to as a "transmission model" of teaching. We must also be able to concretize the theoretical. As the Boyer report reminds us, our discipline is perfectly positioned to embrace such a pedagogy, and yet too often it fails to live up to its promise.

I want to conclude with an examination of students' dialogue about their own education—a dialogue that spontaneously developed over several weeks in March 2000 on our departmental listserv about the place of musical theatre in our curriculum. The listserv discussion moved from the practical to the

philosophical, beginning with queries about the purpose and function of musical theatre in the department, and morphing into queries about the purpose and function of the department and of liberal education as a whole. The lively dialogue underlined the divergent ideological underpinnings of most students' understandings of what a theatre arts degree should provide. Many comments assumed a training function in arguing either for more or less musical theatre: "The best kind of actor is the kind that can do anything and everything and has experience with every imaginable sort of show and job," and "College is the opportunity for us to push ourselves to do things we won't get to do as often when we are working professional actors." Some expressed dismay over the sexist politics of many musicals. Others expressed dismay over this dismay: "I was horrified to read the many posts by people who don't feel that musicals are a necessary part of a college education for actor hopefuls."<sup>2</sup>

Eventually the discourse began to reflect on education as opposed to training. One student who had left the university to study at a more professionally oriented program explained, "I chose to come back to the U because of its liberal arts base. I found that I disliked being merely taught how to be an actor. Everything was very career-oriented and lacked in the chances to become intellectually challenged." In response to this posting, students began to add meditations on academics in general: "The public education system sells us information. They tell us how to do things. Rarely, if ever, do they ask us to question the reality we are given and the things that we accept as true. Rarely do they ask us to be discerning and ask provocative questions."

We are the "they" in question. These students turn the debate back to us, urging us to provoke them and ask ourselves hard questions in the process. Do our theatre programs educate students to work in a particular system or to become creative, critical thinkers—artistic entrepreneurs? Do our classes promote individual achievement at the expense of ensemble learning and collaboration? Are student concerns addressed in the classroom without a loss of critical rigor? Do reflections in the classroom translate to practical work outside the institution? Are we doing our best to stimulate students like Erik Herbst, who yearn to be captivated in both mind and body?

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#### Notes

1. This is Strategic Plan Goal I.03. The complete text of the Strategic Plan can be found at ATHE's website, <[www.hawaii.edu/athe](http://www.hawaii.edu/athe)>.

2. The discussion occurred 2-20 March 2000 at <[Theatre-L@tc.umn.edu](mailto:Theatre-L@tc.umn.edu)>.

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