“We Do Storefront Theatre”:
Using Chicago’s Storefront Theatre Model
as the Foundation for a Theatre Curriculum

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As a result of the changing economic climate, theatre programs at colleges and universities face a range of budget cuts or even the possibility of being eliminated, and they are now looking for different solutions to offer a quality experience at a reasonable cost. At North Park University, a small liberal arts college in Chicago, we have met this challenge by developing an innovative theatre curriculum that is based on the Chicago Storefront Theatre model, where experiential learning is at the core of the program. With over 200 production companies making theatre in over 115 venues, most of the theatre in Chicago is being done in small spaces by groups with limited financial resources. The following describes the model and argues that the curriculum trains students to be creatively effective artists not only in the Chicago theatre scene, but also in other locations such as Boston, Minneapolis, and Seattle, where underfunded yet thriving theatre is happening.

North Park University understands the financial challenges of operating within a city setting and works hard at being a good steward of the few resources it has. The institution is relatively small, where most of the students are considered traditional aged and a majority of them graduate with a bachelor of arts or a bachelor of science. Originally, the school served students from the Evangelical Swedish Covenant Church, but as demographics changed and, given its location in Chicago, the school has altered its mission and vision to embrace its urban setting. While a majority of students choose to live on or near the thirty-acre campus, many students commute and work multiple jobs to afford the education. With only a $60 million endowment, North Park is a tuition-driven institution that is always balancing its budget dependent upon student enrollment and retention. In other words, North Park University is always looking for inspired and innovative ways to offer a quality experience at a reasonable cost. Therefore, given the institution’s financial picture, coupled with its mission of preparing students for lives of significance and service, the administration embraced my idea of basing the theatre curriculum on the Storefront Theatre model.

In order to describe the model to North Park’s administration, it was easier to demonstrate what it was not. A quick glance at the Theatre Communication Group’s American Theatre provides a visual and textual example for how different North Park is from other well-funded and robust academic institutions. Knowing North Park’s financial realities and organizational structure, there would be no possible way to develop a competitive theatre program with those schools advertising the complexity and depth of their programs. Furthermore, North Park does not have the kind of space necessary to develop a demanding design program. The closest model that we could envision exploring would be a community-theatre model, but Chicago is filled with theatre companies with outreach programs serving a vast number of communities. Once I eliminated the programs and ideas that would not work for North Park, I was left with one significant and renewable resource: North Park University is in the heart of one of the most productive theatre settings in the world. Thus the vibrant Chicago Storefront Theatre scene became the model, the laboratory, and the practical goal for us as we developed our curriculum.
Chicago Storefront Theatre

The special demands of the storefront site itself require a very specific curriculum. First, it is important to understand what is unique about the Chicago Storefront Theatre. When describing storefront theatre to colleagues outside of Chicago, I focus on four areas: the creative use of small spaces; the creative ability to problem-solve with limited resources; the intimate actor–audience dynamic; and the cross-trained artist. Each of these parts highlights a vital aspect necessary for making successful theatre in Chicago, yet these areas are not exclusive to Chicago and have been explored by others in different ways at different times.

In one example from theatre history, Bertolt Brecht envisioned a dynamic theatre as a boxing match where the rowdy audience surrounds the ring illuminated by glaring lights, with the actors slugging it out in that shared and intimate space (223). While Brecht worked in such diverse theatrical contexts as cabaret, state-supported institutions, and cinema, his writings suggest that he preferred an intimate space that connected directly to the people. Even if they are not boxing rings, the Storefront Theatre landscape in Chicago could be characterized in a similar way, as many of these theatres are housed in unrefined and intimate environments that have been converted into performance spaces, and the uniqueness of these spaces define the personality of the productions and production companies. Accordingly, the productions in these small, unique spaces often have the energy of a boxing match. The world-renowned Steppenwolf Theatre, for example, began as a group of friends in the intimate setting of a church basement before it moved to its first small storefront space on Halstead Street. These early productions were highly visceral and often played the conflict onstage as strongly as boxers in the ring. Even now, Steppenwolf acknowledges its past, as it has created a garage space to accommodate the deep talent found in the Chicago storefront movement.

The second characteristic that most of the companies who are making theatre in the storefront spaces have in common is their ability to solve problems and to create compelling theatre with limited resources. This element of the storefront identity is related to budgets and creative financial problem-solving. In a 2009 *Time Out Chicago* article, theatre critic Christopher Piatt argues that Chicago theatre has never been about the money, stating that the very reason Chicago theatre might be able to make it through this economic crunch is the smaller size of theatre companies and the relative affordability of tickets. To support his argument, Piatt interviewed Peter Handler, program officer for the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, an organization that gives grants to Chicago’s smallest start-up theatres. Handler “notes that [of] Chicago’s 200-plus nonprofit theaters, 54 percent . . . have budgets of less than $100,000, and that organizations that small are accustomed to working on a shoestring, recession or no, and will continue to do so” (Piatt 87). As a result of the focused attention to monetary responsibility, successful companies become good stewards of the few resources available.

The third important area that typifies Chicago Storefront Theatre is the intimate actor–audience relationship. In *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Jerzy Grotowski discusses the power of producing theatre that focuses on the audience and actor communion and not necessarily the production values. He writes that

> [b]y gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor–spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live” communion. (19)

Storefront theatre echoes Grotowski’s “poor theatre” in its effort to develop the immediate actor–audience connection while directly engaging the concerns of a community in “live communion.” The entire actor–audience experience is changed when an audience member can walk off the street and right into the playable storefront space. As a result of this eliminated distance and reduced bar-
rrier, the intimate relationship expands and becomes far more intense. Surveying the landscape of the Chicago Storefront Theatre, the choice is clear: when there is no money for elaborate sets, the one thing that must be explored is that intimate connection.

Finally, my own experience with one of these theatres and my work as a theatre educator influence the last, and perhaps most crucial aspect of the Chicago Storefront Theatre profile: a cross-trained artist. Chicago artists producing theatre in storefront spaces, out of necessity need to think differently about how to make theatre. When I was, for example, hired to manage the day-to-day operations of Chicago’s highly respected Live Bait Theater and keep a close eye on spending, I saw my role expand to include that of grant-writer, play adaptor, director, contract negotiator, production manager, properties master, lighting designer, technical director, puppeteer, master carpenter, box office manager, and custodian. In short, I was being cross-trained, and as a result of this experience, I began to think it would help the Chicago theatre community if we could expand the skill sets of the professionals by cross-training them in several different areas of theatre-making. This ability to do multiple tasks appears to be a key characteristic of a successful and working Chicago theatre professional. Economically, this approach makes sense, because of the limited operating and personnel budgets with which small companies have to work. Furthermore, productions that have artists who are fully committed to doing multiple jobs create a fuller web of collaboration.

In sum, my own graduate-school experience did not directly prepare me for the realities of working professionally in Chicago. During my time as a student in the University of Illinois’s theatre department using the stages of Krannert Center for the Performing Arts (measuring up in size to the scale of Lincoln Center or the Kennedy Center), I directed several productions, with access to a design team, production staff, union shop, and material resources that were modeled to be on par with organizations the likes of Goodman Theatre and Steppenwolf Theatre. I enjoyed this opportunity to explore ideas with room to dream, and looked forward to expanding my abilities with access to similar resources.

However, when I made the transition from school to doing professional theatre in Chicago, my initial experience turned out to be quite different: my first job, in 2000, was directing in a storefront theatre of forty-nine seats with a $200 budget for building materials, costumes, props, sound, lights, and publicity. The actors and production staff were paid out of ticket sales. I designed and built the set. While the University of Illinois prepared me to think big and produce with vision, it did not prepare me to do theatre in the context of where most of the theatre is being done in Chicago, and indeed, where most theatre is done across the United States. In the storefront scene, I was often alone in solving my own artistic and production problems. To my mind, it makes sense to use this unique Chicago experience to prepare students to create art for small communities in smaller spaces, and, more broadly, it engages theatre students in an experiential learning process of the most immediate sort.

This type of experiential learning that grows out of working in a specific site is one kind of practice John Dewey laid out in his philosophy of education. In a reaction to a traditional top-down educational approach, he advocated for a student-oriented progressive education, outlining the difference clearly in *Experience and Education*:

If one attempts to formulate the philosophy of education implicit in the practices of the new education, we may, I think, discover certain common principles amid the variety of progressive schools now existing. To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from text and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world. (5–6)
In brief, each one of these objectives represent part of a practical framework for setting up effective curricula in theatre, where these components translate to theatrical training by placing students at the helm of their own education—a key strategy for “experiential learning on site.” Over the last ten years, universities nation-wide have taken a pragmatic and progressive approach in developing interdisciplinary, practice-based curriculums that include strong components of service-based learning. These approaches directly address the individual student experience by assisting them in finding their voice in a “changing world.”

A cross-training storefront curricular model, for me, was the next pragmatic step. Considering that a community is inseparable from the art it produces, the action of placing our students in the Chicago Storefront Theatre experience gives them the opportunity of engaging “present life.” In so much as theatre naturally incorporates interdisciplinary practices, the cross-training aspect of the storefront model provides students the means of attaining ends which make “direct vital appeal.” Similarly, according to psychologist Carl Rogers in Freedom to Learn, learning is most effective when the students are in direct confrontation with practical, social, personal, or research problems. He argues that “[i]f self-initiated learning is to occur, it seems essential that the individual be in contact with, be faced by, a problem which he perceives as a real problem for him” (130). By creating a storefront experience at North Park, we are giving the students real problems to be solved that are reflected in the Chicago theatre scene.

Establishing a Storefront Theatre Curriculum

When I ask Chicago actors, directors, and designers specifically what should be included in a curriculum based on what they routinely experience, they give me a myriad of answers, but almost all fall under three of the four headings mentioned above: cross-training, stewardship, and intimacy with the audience. Their answers either begin with “they should be able to do” or “they have to be able to make the dollar stretch” or “in any given run, they’ll reach about 400 people. Know who you are reaching.” The core of our curriculum therefore cross-trains the artists, while teaching them how to make the most with limited resources. We also focus our attention on the creative use of intimate space, with a close examination of the actor–audience relationship. Being skilled at an effective relationship of this type requires up-to-date contact with the moods and interests of a theatre public—a smart “make-do” approach. Skills in connecting with one’s audience members and figuring out what will reach them can have a strong impact on the ways our students channel their overall preparation in theatre. Ultimately, our goal is to prepare students to be effective, efficient, and resourceful storefront theatre artists.

While we have woven these aspects into all of our courses, two courses demonstrate clearly how we are preparing students for Chicago’s Storefront Theatre scene. The first course, Introduction to Theatre, illustrates the focus on cross-training and stewardship; and the second, Acting I, examines the intimate actor–audience relationship that is present in storefront theatre. The Introduction to Theatre course lays the foundation for the storefront theatre curriculum, and Chicago itself is the star attraction. This course demonstrates how vital storefront theatre is in Chicago and also introduces our students to the fundamentals of the curriculum; additionally, it contextualizes theatre as an art and how important it is for the Chicago community.

As a result of teaching similar courses at four institutions, I discovered that students did not have an essential knowledge of what “art” is, nor how to think about and discuss it. They readily expressed their likes and dislikes, but lacked the context to articulate why. Theatre, as a collaborate art, employs elements from many mediums, and by engaging the greater concept of art at the beginning of the course, I am able to establish a common vocabulary by which we could discuss the stage. In order to facilitate this foundation building, the course is broken down into three parts: using Chicago art to engage aesthetics; introducing the parts of theatre; and capitalizing on Chicago’s Storefront Theatre experience.
I begin the class with an interactive project called “art encounters,” which simulates the theatre-making process while demonstrating how theatre pulls from various art forms. The project takes three weeks to complete (similar to a rehearsal process), with students producing pieces of art (the production and its values) that have to be presented on certain days (reflecting opening nights). To demonstrate how theatre is the great collaborative art, this project helps the student identify the parts of theatre as introduced through other art forms. In addition, the deadline helps students understand the pressure of time management in the theatre-making process. During the three weeks, each student encounters over fifteen types of art that can be found in Chicago, including large public sculptures, items in the Chicago Art Institute, live concerts, and poems, short stories, and novels written by local authors. There is a dual purpose in this assignment, as I want to show that Chicago has many low-cost, artistically significant opportunities to encounter and provide students with the opportunity to explore Chicago on their own terms. The presentation of the arts encounter is an illuminating day, as each student has an opportunity to voice his or her Chicago experience in the form of a created reaction—a piece of art fashioned in response to encounters with Chicago art; each reaction is different, yet each perspective is deeply connected because of the common Chicago experience.

The second section of the class looks at four key parts of producing theatre: playwriting; designing; acting; and directing. What is important to me is to connect each of these areas to the professionals who are working in Chicago as playwrights, designers, actors, and directors. These guest artists deepen the students’ knowledge of the field of theatre, while at the same time attaching a human face to that area of knowledge. A second part of this section is having my students attend at least four professional storefront productions. Understanding the financial constraints of many of my students, I forego the requirement of purchasing a textbook, which many would return to the bookstore, and replace it with a lab fee that pays for the students to see the four storefront performances throughout the semester. As a group, we usually receive significant discounts and have some sort of talkback afterward with the director and actors. Attending these productions provides a window for students to see how these storefront companies are groups of creative artists doing imaginative work on small budgets in intimate spaces for a specific community. Moreover, I have discovered through these classes that many students become returning audience members of some of the theatre companies.

The final section is where the class of twenty-five is divided into groups of four, each with the task of writing and producing its own five-page play. Some guidelines help structure the experience. First, the play has to fit into a commonly agreed-upon mission, and this mission is based on existing storefront theatre missions. They research current Chicago theatres of interest and modify those missions to fit their own. The second guideline is that the final performance needs to be fully realized in its production. They have by now seen several examples of Chicago Storefront Theatre and thus know how powerful the imagination is in theatre-making; also, they have seen firsthand how creative a theatre company can be on a minimal and limited budget. Here, I am teaching according to Grotowski, where students discover what is not needed to make a production work. By challenging us to expand our imagination, Grotowski encourages us to examine “what is indispensable to theatre” (32).

While props, costumes, sets, and lights help suggest the environment of a play, the students’ productions tend to focus more on how suggestion and imagination are powerful tools in telling stories dramatically. Their final performances are committed theatrical pieces that synthesize the parts of the class into a whole. As each student takes on a primary role—that of writer, director, actor, or designer—he or she is also responsible for a secondary role: for example, the writer needs to design and produce the program; the director gathers the props; and the actors build the necessary set pieces. While the designer is responsible for the look, lighting, and sound, he or she is also the group’s stage manager. Based on Paulo Freire’s writings on praxis, this experience combined an informed, committed action (88–89) with the importance of the storefront cross-training and a Grotowski aesthetic, motivating each group to produce an original production according to their chosen company’s mission.
As a result of this course, students have the skills to talk about art, they know how readily accessible it is in Chicago, and they understand how the parts of theatre work as specifically demonstrated through Chicago Storefront Theatre and its artists. The course has served as an excellent introduction to theatre, as well as a powerful recruiting tool for our major. Nonmajors take this course to fulfill the general-education requirement for the arts, yet many become involved in our program over their four years at North Park. Majors view this course as their entrée into the vital Chicago theatre scene.

While the Introduction to Theatre class sets the foundation for the production of storefront theatre, the Acting I class prepares students for the intense, intimate style usually associated with Chicago actors. What characterizes the “Chicago style”? David Mamet, in his book *True and False*, makes the powerful and provocative charge that if you want to learn acting, don’t go to school (1997, 19). His assessment can be supported when one surveys the development of several of the pillars of Chicago theatre: Mamet learned to write for theatre by trying to be an actor; some of the early Steppenwolf members dropped out of school; and the improvisational technique made famous by Viola Spolin and Second City was practice-based. In point of fact, many Chicago theatre professionals have university degrees in other areas, but learned their skill in theatre by doing it in the professional setting. Therefore a first characteristic of the Chicago style is a drive to succeed based on getting up in front of an audience and being willing to fail in order to improve.

More specifically, Mamet argues that an actor learns acting by doing, and that is one of the key principles of the learning process of a Chicago actor. In fact, Mamet’s thoughts on acting are clearly outlined in his introduction to *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, in which doing is the foundation of the actor’s technique: “[y]ou must understand that acting, like carpentry, is a craft with a definite set of skills and tools. By assiduously applying your will to the acquiring of those skills and tools, you will eventually make them habitual” (Mamet 1986, 6). One exercise in the Acting I class that helps illustrate this point of learning by doing is the assignment I give students to take Mamet’s short scene “Cold” to the elevated platform and wait for a train to arrive. The assignment is given in January and the Chicago weather cooperates with the premise of the scene. Their assignment is to stand among a group of waiting Chicagoans and act the scene, but without any stranger realizing that it is a scene. If the actors recognize that the other people waiting for the train perceive it as an acting exercise, the actors have failed the task; conversely, if the actors recognize that the waiting Chicagoans are eavesdropping because of the dynamic in the scene, then they have succeeded. This exercise illustrates for the student the practical and real dynamics that come into play in the everyday world, and how to reproduce these relationships successfully in a scene.

A second aspect of the Chicago style is represented by the immediacy that was made famous by Steppenwolf’s storefront years, Mamet’s work with actors, Plasticene’s work on physical listening, and Chicago’s tradition of improvisation. Each of these examples have developed a technique that works in close, intimate settings, essentially exploring the vital actor–audience dynamic, and this intimacy–immediacy is central to the acting technique taught in this class. My students need to witness this intimacy in action, and one theatre group I have routinely brought them to see is The House Theatre of Chicago, which is known for cultivating a strong actor–audience relationship in which the audience is expected to be vocal, as it helps intensify the dramatic action. The actors react to and build upon the expressions and words of the audience: for example, an audience member involuntarily whispers “I don’t believe it!” and the actor hearing this might run with the idea, “She doesn’t believe us! Did you hear that?! She doesn’t believe us!” This technique might initially pull the audience out of the action, but The House Theatre has found that the audience actually becomes more engaged and invested in the story. My students come away from the experience by often telling me that they did not know theatre could be like that.
Co-curricular Praxis

In addition to aligning our curriculum with Chicago, our co-curricular program is the intentional integration of Chicago into our praxis. This practical connection to Chicago theatre and its professionals can be seen in our two annual main-stage productions. In order to keep our program current, one play is directed by a Chicago theatre professional connected to the storefront movement. Building these relationships with prominent Chicago directors and writers has strengthened our program and provided our students with real experience with working professionals. In addition to these relationships we are building with directors and writers, the design team is comprised of leading professionals; consequently, when they need assistants on professional projects, they often look to our students as resources, because they have had a hand in preparing them to work in storefront theatre. Each of our majors needs to do an internship during his or her time in our program, and the relationships established with these directors and designers have resulted in many of our students gaining professional credits for their resumes before graduation. The assessment from these professional artists who work with our students has been overwhelmingly positive.

While one production is directed by a Chicago professional, the other either has Chicago professionals working on it or else is inspired directly by what is currently happening in the theatre scene. Four years ago, my students were particularly fascinated by The House Theatre’s \textit{The Valentine Trilogy}. For my students at the time, The House represented the best of Chicago Storefront Theatre, and indeed it served as an excellent example in a number of ways: it made theatre in small and quirky storefront spaces; it clearly understood and cultivated the actor–audience relationship; it cleverly used its imagination, given its financially limited resources; and it created timely and relevant new stories specifically for an invested and eager audience.

This kind of theatrical engagement is exactly what I try to cultivate in my students. The House Theatre demonstrated for them that Chicago is a great city for creating and/or engaging in new work. After two of my students had seen the final installment of the trilogy, they sat in my office praising its quality and magnitude and how they wished that someday they would have that kind of talent. In response, I told them that there was no reason why we couldn’t create a similarly inspired piece of theatre for our audience, but that they would have to work alongside me as a team in order to accomplish that goal. The result was \textit{Kung Fu Suburbia}, \textit{a Rock and Roll Graphic Novel for the Stage}.

\textit{Kung Fu Suburbia} accomplished many of my storefront goals by weaving in student experiential learning at every level. Thematically inspired by The House Theatre, the two students and I wrote an original musical that was inspired by the students’ upbringing in the Chicago suburbs. Chicago theatre is often very personal, and the musical’s storyline of four baristas aimlessly looking for purpose spoke directly to the students’ experiences. Included in the program were statements by the two student writers speaking to the immediacy of the topic. Remembering Grotowski’s idea of live communion, the production met a community exactly where it was and gave it a powerful voice in return. Looking at one of the student’s (Joe Giovannetti’s) statement in particular demonstrates how invested he was in the theatre-making process and, by extension, his experiential education. At the end of the statement, Giovannetti acknowledges his growth while at the same time making a significant nod to The House Theatre’s \textit{The Valentine Trilogy}. He wrote:

Our conceit was this: what is the organizing force behind the suburbs? Is it the PTA? The simple desire to be safe and out of the city? Or could it be that suburbs are really a haven for powerful secret ninja bent on saving the world? Or destroying it? I think, at their core, superhero stories are so beloved because they’re so much easier than real life. There are no shades of gray in Gotham or Metropolis: some things are good, some are bad, and good will always triumph. It’s a hard day for a kid when he or she first realizes that this pattern really has nothing to do with the way real life is lived. I know it’s something that I’m still processing. That’s where this
show came from. More than anything, Kung Fu Suburbia is a tribute to the notion that some things are still foregone conclusions. Heroes fight evil. They may take a few blows, but by the time two hours is up, you know who's going to step out of the wreckage. This is a homage to everyone from Indiana Jones to Frank Miller to the V. R. Troopers. It's a hard-rocking valentine from some kids who are dangerously close to becoming adults to you.

The direct connection to the audience was not limited to the performance of the musical. Understanding the importance of post-performance development, as articulated by Susan Bennett, we expanded to include a pre-performance connection (163). Given that the musical was based on the graphic novel genre, we had a student storyboard a prequel comic book to the musical, and then disseminated it to generate audience enthusiasm before the opening of the show (Fig. 1). The House Theatre works this relationship dynamic quite well and has built a solid audience following as a result. Inspired by their approach to audience development, we took a page from their playbook.

Reflecting on the four aspects that make The House Theatre a successful Chicago Storefront Theatre, our production of KUNG FU SUBURBIA modeled each step. First, we claimed the unique space at North Park and made it our own. The 400-seat lecture-hall auditorium where the theatre program produces shows at North Park is less than ideal, with no backstage, no fly space, no wing space, and a shallow though wide stage. While it is easy to see the limitations in a space like this, we chose to re-imagine the space for this production. In short, we created a theatre within an auditorium to frame the actor–audience experiences.

Second, we successfully engaged the actor–audience dynamic by publishing the graphic-novel prequel to the staged production. This brought the audience more deeply into the world of the play and created palpable audience anticipation. We also made available MP3 files of the songs so that audience members, if they wanted to, could be familiar with the songs before they arrived. An unexpected yet powerful result of our making the songs available was the spontaneous audience participation as the actors rocked out on their songs.

Third, we created a graphic-novel world on a minimal budget. Producing a musical is an expensive enterprise, yet this does not stop Chicago artists from developing new musical work with small budgets. With the help of a very efficient and professional production manager, we were able to keep the cost of the production under $5,000, which included production costs as well as designer and choreographer fees. The student who wrote the music assembled a rock band for the final performances, all of them willing to donate their time to perform.

Finally, we created a timely and relevant story for a young, eager audience. As Giovannetti's program note suggests, the story was directed toward a college-age group who might not otherwise attended theatre. Making the mode of telling stories through theatre relevant is one of The House Theatre's greatest strengths—a strength I observe in most of the effective storefront theatres in Chicago, and it is what we are trying to do in our program at North Park University. This production has been the most successful at our institution to date, doubling our average audience of 500 per run to over a thousand. A coda to this experience is that this musical inspired the two students to pursue professional careers in Chicago theatre.

As a final point, I am very excited about the next step, because it places our students directly into making storefront theatre in Chicago. Our institution's provost has given me permission to establish The Storefront Experience (a new segment of our co-curricular praxis) beginning in the spring of 2010. In view of the fact that one of the cornerstones of our school is to intentionally engage the urban arena, I proposed a culminating storefront production in which students are given firsthand experience in producing theatre in a professional storefront space. This real-world experience also fits into the educational philosophy of experiential learning: the vision is to collaborate fully with a professional company so that students have the opportunity to put into action what they have been
taught in our curriculum. My goal is to mount one production every two years so that each graduate will have worked in this unique phenomenon known as Chicago Storefront Theatre.

Like many small colleges today, we are contending with institutional budget cuts and also occasionally those who are lacking in imagination, but we cannot let discouragement get the best of us. We need to think creatively, so I continue to imagine worlds in small or unique spaces and to prepare my students to problem-solve in creative ways. When I arrived at North Park University, I was confronted by two seemingly incompatible charges: on the one hand, the administration expected me to build a competitive theatre program in Chicago while creating magical worlds onstage; and on the other, I was to do this magic without spending any money. Consequently, I needed to find a different approach and ended up framing the experience as a concept and giving it a name so that my administration would understand what I was doing. Happily, the Chicago Storefront Theatre brand is now recognized throughout the institution. “We do storefront theatre at North Park” is now what student tour guides tell prospective students and parents. For us, referencing Chicago
Storefront Theatre helps articulate the details of the curriculum, given the fact that North Park is in the middle of Chicago. This model, however, could easily be used by other small colleges located near successful, small, storefront-type theatre companies that are trying to cope with the financial realities of today’s market.

Chad Eric Bergman actively collaborates in the Chicago Storefront Theatre scene, having worked with Stage Left, Live Bait, Chicago Dramatists, MPAACT, parker, and Plasticene. He earned his Ph.D. in theatre history and criticism from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and spent a year in Finland on a Fulbright scholarship researching bilingual theatre. In addition to his work with North Park University, he has been an artist in residence at the Ragdale Foundation and the University of Chicago’s Summer Inc., and has received a grant from the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond to translate and produce Nordic plays in Chicago.

Works Cited


