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Some Dilemmas Confronting the Educational Theatre

By Jared A. Brown

"Educational theatre": the term itself implies a dichotomy, or perhaps an amalgam of two quite different phenomena. A tension between the demands of education and the demands of the theatre does indeed exist, and it is the job of the teacher-artist to maintain a harmonious balance between them. The teacher-artist needs to be concerned not only with the theatrical process, in which the student-artists are guided to an appreciation of dramatic art and in which they learn the skills necessary to communicate a unified interpretation of the play they are presenting to an audience, but also with the final product: a finished, polished performance. Neither the process nor the product can be slighted in favor of the other if the educational-theatrical experience is to have validity for all concerned. The student involved in the production is primarily interested in the process; his goal is to emerge from the production as a more skillful artist than before, capable of applying what he has learned to his future work in a systematic way. The audience, on the other hand, is oblivious to the learning the student has experienced, and rightly so. Only the product interests the audience; whether or not the actors in the production have benefitted by the learning process is immaterial and insignificant. Audiences want good entertainment, and if they cannot find it in the educational theatre, they will look for it elsewhere.

In a typical illustration of the process-product conflict, the teacher-director may be faced with the dilemma of whether to cast a comparatively superior actor in a demanding role, or to give the role to another, less gifted, performer, who has shown ability and sensitivity, but has not yet demonstrated the range and technique necessary to carry off an exacting role with élan. To choose the former actor is to attempt to assure a more successful production, and to lessen the risk taken by the director, but at the cost of providing a valuable learning experience for the latter actor, whose need for it may be greater. To choose the latter actor, however, may be unfair to the audience, whose concern is only with the quality of the performance. In such a case-and the case is by no means unusual-the director in the educational theatre must weigh his responsibility to his students against his responsibility to his audience and hope to arrive at the most judicious and reasonable decision.

Some teacher-artists have resolved the dilemma for themselves by ignoring it. That is, they have reached the conclusion that only the learning experience is significant in the educational theatre, or-more probably-that the final product is of such overriding importance that all other considerations pale beside it. But the result of such rigid thinking has often been either the loss of audience support or the loss of student interest. So the difficulty cannot be avoided in the long run. It is best, perhaps, to recognize the nature of the dilemma, to acknowledge the impossibility of ever resolving it to everyone's satisfaction, and to attempt to work constructively within its confines. The educational theatre should offer an environment in which theatrical artists are given every opportunity to learn, while simultaneously endeavoring to mount the finest possible productions.

In practice, it should generally be possible to combine the casting of proven performers with those who lack experience. Many plays require skilled actors in the leading roles if they are to be performed satisfactorily; but smaller roles can frequently be cast with beginners, who will benefit not only from the opportunity to perform in a production, but also from being given the

chance to work alongside actors who have achieved a greater degree of proficiency. Gradually, as the beginning actor gains experience, he should of course be given more difficult roles to play.

A strong argument for the casting of inexperienced as well as experienced performers can also be made thus: in most cases, directors in the educational theatre are not employed to direct only a single production; rather, they are likely to be asked to mount several productions over a period of years. And it is when the director's third or fourth play is in rehearsal that the effects of "safety-first" casting may well rebound to his disadvantage. By that time, the experienced actors with whom he cast his earlier productions are likely to have graduated, and he will be left with untrained performers who have had no opportunity to develop their skills by acting challenging roles. Here is a practical justification for emphasizing both the educational and the strictly theatrical functions of the teacher-director's job: to stress the latter at the expense of the former will ultimately result in poorer theatrical quality as well as an incomplete education for student performers.

To some extent, the process-product dilemma has been magnified by instructors in the educational theatre who resent the fact that they have been hired to train artists in an educational environment. Rather than having their students spend a portion of their time on courses outside the theatrical discipline, such instructors would prefer that their students concentrate all their attention upon the theatre, and-better yet-learning only about a particular aspect of theatre. But undergraduate colleges and universities cannot be turned into acting academies or schools for scene design. Theatre departments in these circumstances exist within a liberal arts framework, and that situation is by no means inimical to an artist's development. Any artist needs to become knowledgeable in areas outside his particular discipline. Artists in theatre can be helped materially by exposure to courses in music, literature, pictorial art, history, and other courses that reveal man's achievements in humanistic areas. Only if artists are exposed to the widest range of experience can they meaningfully interpret reality to others. To suggest otherwise is to suggest that technique is artistry, that a mastery of craft equals the ability to create. In reality, the ability to create demands far more than craftsmanship; it requires sensitivity, intelligence, and a deep reservoir of knowledge. Theatre instructors, then, should actively encourage each student to pursue interests in areas outside theatre, for such pursuits may combine with the skills learned in theatre classes to produce an artist.

A second Issue confronting the educational theatre can be equally as troublesome. It differs from the first, however, in that it can be avoided altogether; although to avoid the issue is to destroy one of the potential strengths of educational theatre. I refer here to the desirability of using academic theatre as a testing ground for experimental plays, rather than using it exclusively to produce the proven works of the past. This is not to say that there is no obligation to produce the classics, ancient and modern; clearly, an obligation does exist, for the benefit of audiences as well as students. Some college theatre departments insure that this aspect of their function will be carried out by planning their programs on a four-year basis, and selecting plays for production that will reflect all the major dramatic periods and styles. Under this plan, all undergraduate students who attend a college for the normal four-year span will be able to see at least one play of each type during their undergraduate careers. * The plan is an eminently sensible one, and it ensures the possibility of acquainting all students with the classics, but it does tend to encourage conservatism in the selection of plays. The same playwrights-sometimes even the same plays-

tend to be repeated again and again, and the choices tend to be rather conventional and uncontroversial. For example, most theatre departments have produced one or more plays by Tennessee Williams during the past ten years. Surely there can be no quarrel with that choice; Williams has clearly demonstrated that he is one of America's finest playwrights. But the play selected for production is more likely than not going to be *The Glass Menagerie*-a fine play, to be sure, but one that has become over-familiar to most audiences during the last thirty years. How often do theatre departments produce Williams' *Camino Real*? The play is less well-known and was less successful in its initial commercial production than was *The Glass Menagerie*, but it possesses an originality and vitality that surely entitles it to an occasional revival.

When a theatre department chooses to produce a play by Ibsen, the chances are great that it will be *A Doll's House*, or perhaps *Hedda Gabler*. The effect of such a choice is to ensure at least some degree of success, for although the production may fail, the department will invariably receive credit for having revived a well-known classic. But how many departments have chosen to present *Little Eyolf* or *The Master Builder* or *The Lady from the Sea*? The answer is obvious: these plays are rarely performed because they are relatively experimental in form and therefore involve greater risk, and most theatre departments prefer the safety of conventionality.

This argument could of course be extended to Shakespeare, whose *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet* are produced far more often than, say, *Coriolanus* and *Love's Labors Lost*; to Eugene O'Neill, whose realistic works, *Desire Under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* are seen much more frequently than some of O'Neill's more experimental-and admittedly more flawed-dramas; or to any of the dozen or so playwrights who have written the two dozen or so plays that keep being produced by academic theatres year in and year out. How many exciting theatrical experiences do we in the academic theatre deny our audiences and our students when we refuse to produce a play because it has not received the overwhelming approval of previous audiences and/or dramatic critics? How often do we shy away from such works, calling them "unproduceable" or "inferior," only to react with stunned surprise when a more enterprising producer or director in the professional theatre presents such a play with astounding success? Indeed, Joseph Papp and Peter Brook-to cite only the first examples to come to mind-have repeatedly surprised and delighted audiences with unconventional: productions of previously little-known dramas, as well as fresh interpretations of plays that have frequently been produced.

There is, of course, a strong counter-argument to the one presented here. Many teachers would contend that it is necessary to produce the best-known plays in the educational theatre because few students have been exposed to the classics. Most college freshmen are as ignorant of *Hamlet* as they are of *Coriolanus*, and if they can only be exposed to one of the two plays, it is more desirable to expose them to the drama that has long been recognized as a milestone of theatrical history. This argument certainly has merit, but it focuses attention entirely upon the audience's need to be made aware of great dramatic literature. It does not take into account the desirability of challenging audiences to make their own decisions regarding the merits of a play; nor does it deal with the artist's need to explore unfamiliar territory on occasion. So it is quite possible to accept one point of view without feeling that the other has been invalidated. Surely the best answer is that a theatre department should present a balanced program of classics and unfamiliar material.

At Western Illinois University, the problem has been eased by the availability of two theatres. Although neither theatre fits neatly into a "classic" or "experimental" mold-productions of both kinds have been given in both theatres-a general pattern has emerged over a period of several years. The first theatre most frequently houses those plays best-known to the public, with lesser-known plays occasionally produced there, whereas the second is used primarily for the production of lesser-known plays, with occasional productions of familiar dramas. Among the presentations given in the first theatre are three popular musicals, produced during the summer months. Thus, at Western, the various tastes of different kinds of audiences are served by offering plays of all kinds-familiar, unfamiliar, conventional and unconventional-in two different locations, each theatre offering productions that appeal essentially to a particular taste.

Many schools do not have the luxury of two theatres, of course, but the solution to the problem can be approached similarly. If, for example, six plays are to be given during the course of the academic year, the plays can be selected in such a way so that audiences are offered opportunities to see performances of both traditional and rarely-seen dramas. The size of the audience for the lesser-known plays may be negligible at the outset, in comparison to the audience attracted by a well-known play or musical, but the hoped-for end results-that both audiences will eventually combine into one, and that the enlarged audience's appreciation for various forms of theatre will be increased and enhanced-are so desirable that I believe they outweigh all other considerations.

Those educational theatres that are too timid to produce unconventional dramas are even less likely to sponsor the productions of original plays. That, too, is left to the commercial theatre. But the rationale for doing so is absurd. The pressures to succeed are not nearly as great in the educational theatre as they are in the commercial theatre, where-by definition-the principal purpose of producing a play is to make a profit for the investors. The educational theatre should take advantage of its relative freedom from commercial pressures by producing new plays that are too adventurous in form or content to be likely candidates for professional production. Indeed, to do otherwise is to deliberately avoid doing that which must sustain the future of the theatre, and to do so for the least defensible of reasons: timidity.

An honest appraisal would have to conclude that the educational theatre, taken as a whole, has failed to provide leadership in seeking out and producing new plays; that it has, in general, been content merely to follow Broadway's lead, leaving the risks to the professional theatre while reaping many of the benefits. Such a policy must change if the academic theatre is to claim that it is making a contribution of genuine Significance to the American theatre.

The Theatre Department at Western Illinois University has for many years paid lip service to the notion that the academic theatre should produce original plays, but an embarrassingly small number of such dramas have been presented. From now on, however, that situation will be reversed. Original plays will be actively solicited, with the promise that as many as three full-length plays will be chosen each year for production in Western's "Showcase" series. Advanced graduate students will direct the productions, and a small cash prize will be awarded to each playwright whose play is selected. In addition, winning playwrights will be invited to work closely with the director during the production process. It is hoped that, in this way, the production of original plays will be greatly increased on Western's campus.

The willingness to be daring must involve more than the selection of plays, however. It must also extend to methods of presentation and to rehearsal techniques. Many artist-teachers may disagree, but I maintain that the educational theatre should consistently attempt not only to stretch the abilities of its students, but attempt to enlarge the horizons of its audiences as well. This is accomplished by not always giving the audience what it thinks it wants to see, and by challenging it to accept forms and ideas to which it has not been exposed previously. There are risks inherent in such a course, to be sure; at the furthest extreme, they could involve alienating a portion of the audience. But no theatrical venture that is unwilling to take those risks can maintain vitality for long. Throughout history, the greatest theatres and the greatest theatrical artists have been those who have been unafraid of adverse audience reaction, and who have been willing to explore any avenues that promise to be theatrically valid. Fortunately, the result of such daring has often led to the creation of a larger, more supportive audience, rather than to diminished support. Can the educational theatre afford to take a conservative approach and deny the possibilities of innovation while the professional theatre and other entertainment media place no such limitation upon their own work? To do so would be artistically if not commercially suicidal.

One area in which educational theatres frequently adopt a conservative approach to production involves the performance of plays that require innovative staging methods. Many outstanding dramas go unproduced because they call for numerous sets, for example, when the school contemplating the production is operating under the limitations of a severely restricted budget. But most plays can be satisfactorily-often excitingly-performed on imaginatively arranged platforms, or on a bare stage in which the setting is created primarily by light. Any frequent theatregoer can recall occasions which he saw plays given extraordinary productions with minimal settings, or with only painted cubes to serve as furniture and set pieces, or performed spaces that seemed initially to be completely unsuited to the experience.

It is not only plays like *Our Town* that can be performed imaginatively and economically-and surely those attributes, which have been written into the play, have helped to make it one of the most frequently performed works in American schools and colleges. The same sort of inventiveness, supplied by the director and designer rather than the dramatist, can be applied to a myriad of plays. The size of the budget should not dictate the choice of the play or the style of production; the only limiting factor should be the degree of creative imagination the theatrical artists are able to provide.

There is yet another area in which the teacher-artist in the educational theatre is likely to find himself pulled in two directions, and that involves the teaching of courses that are intended to train student actors, directors, designers and technicians in their particular disciplines as opposed to those courses that emphasize theatrical history and dramatic theory. Unfortunately, many theatre students are unable to perceive the relationship between the two kinds of courses, and tend to prefer those courses that have a direct bearing upon their training. Educators who are responsible for teaching theatre history and dramatic theory can be hard-pressed even to hold the attention of students who see no relevance in "academic" courses that they are required to take in order to fulfill the requirements for a theatre degree. There is probably no simple solution to this problem, which occurs so frequently and in so many places that it may reasonably be called universal. Nonetheless, it is still essential that the "academic" courses be taught, and taught well.

If students can be persuaded that such courses are indeed useful, that they are significantly related to creativity, that they provide the scholarly foundations for creative growth, then the courses will be understood in the proper light. It is not possible to indicate in every case and to every student how a study of a particular aspect of theatre history will benefit that student in his particular area of interest, but surely any reasonably intelligent student should be able to understand how a knowledge of various acting traditions can be useful to an actor who may be cast in a period play, or how a prospective scene designer can be helped by a familiarity with the designs of Inigo Jones, the Bibienas, and Jo Mielziner, or how a costume designer can only function in the present if he understands the costume practices of the past. Furthermore, tangential relationships can be discussed: how, for example, an actor can use a knowledge of costume practices to help develop his physical characterization for a role in a period play. Not all students will respond to this approach; some will perhaps refuse to admit the relevance of "academic" courses to their areas of interest; but the majority of students is likely to accept the notion that theatre history, dramatic theory, and skills courses can, and should, supplement one another effectively.

To raise the issues discussed here is not to lament an unfortunate situation, rather to recognize that the teacher-artist in the educational theatre is continually confronted with dilemmas that cannot be easily resolved. If several of the dilemmas appear to lead to two desirable alternatives, or seem to be insoluble, let us grant their existence, wrestle with them, and attempt to surmount them. The problems cannot be eliminated, but the various objectives of educational theatre can be met, as thousands of college and university productions, teachers, and courses have successfully demonstrated.