

Teaching Stage Design and Collaboration in a Liberal Arts Environment

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Abstract:

This paper presents strategies for teaching stage design for theatre and dance to graduate and undergraduate students. Students who take this course approach their study from various vantage points and disciplines other than Theatre. Emphasis is placed on interactive learning and engaging the student as a collaborator and communicator. The objective is for students to understand design as *a process* and how it may be applied to other disciplines, as well.

Strategies and challenges to be addressed include:

- choosing appropriate texts
- student demographics
- structure of each class and the term
- inter-disciplinary research and design projects/assignments
- role playing and group projects to stimulate the creative experience
- personalizing assignments through simulated project work
- collaborative/team teaching that also mirror specific projects
- balancing various skill levels (how much technical skill to be taught and determining the degree of theory vs practical application)
- sequence of material to be presented

In discussing all of the above points I also introduce suggestions for writing a new text for an introductory design class, as well as provide examples of projects that worked particularly well and those that did not. The structure of this class serves as a model for the course revision of other courses such as History of Costume, Theatre Collaboration, and Script Analysis. I would like to point out that our department is in the process of curricular revision and, as Director for Undergraduate Studies, I am assisting in revising courses that seek to engage many of the above strategies.

The idea of understanding and utilizing design as the means to synthesize various interdisciplinary elements to create a world of performance and composition on the stage is the primary focus.

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“The opposite of play isn’t work. It’s depression. To play is to act out and be willful, exultant and committed as if one is assured of one’s prospects.”

Brian Sutton-Smith,
Professor of Education, Emeritus
University of Pennsylvania
(A WHOLE NEW MIND, Daniel H. Pink)

I appreciate this quote because it reflects my objective in teaching and my approach to my design work. I recently remarked to students in an Introduction to Theatre Design class to consider their entire life as a “composition” during a discussion of the elements and principles of design and composition. I was attempting to relate design to more than art—how might they incorporate the ideas of design to other courses seemingly not related to design and in what manner. Indeed, as a costume designer I always associated the word “design” with art and the final design product as the primary concern. During that same class I quoted Michael Gillette’s definition (THEATRICAL DESIGN AND PRODUCTION) of design as a *process*.

As I became more and more involved in teaching, I came to realize how crucial it is to teach the *process—and the process is treated as part of the final product*. That process includes collaboration, research, a degree of technical skill, and a dose of artistic sensibility, perhaps. The focus for the student should be to understand and use design to coordinate the various elements to create a world of the play—to create their composition. Most Introductory Design classes required of theatre majors do not teach design with that perspective. I use the idea of everyone thinking as a *director*.

Over the years, as I observed the process of student designers, performers, and directors, it was obvious that a lack of communication was the source of miss-guided theatrical endeavors. This was true for directors on the graduate level, even those who have had considerable experience. Although I taught a graduate class in Stage Design

over the years in various formats, I took the opportunity to revise the structure for undergraduate students when I last taught the course in the Fall of 2009. This course served as a model for revision that I used for a “Speaking Across the Disciplines” seminar in which I participated during the previous spring. As I planned the objectives and content for the course I gathered ideas from successful assignments given in the past, observations as mentioned, my professional design experiences, and the integration of oral communication in every project.

I conceived the class to function as an artist studio/seminar-workshop/advertising agency: there was to be a series of projects based on specific scenarios. Each project had specific deadlines that simulated an actual working experience. Probably the most significant question of approach as I began to plan further was whether to teach design to a group of general liberal arts students (which may include performance students) any differently than to a group of aspiring designers? This concept was also used as a reference point for another course that is in the process of total revision, Introduction to Theatre Arts. The revised course will have a new title, Theatre and Collaboration. This is significant because the course will not only be required for Theatre Arts majors but will be offered as a general education option for all disciplines within Arts and Sciences.

On a trip to the Utrecht School of the Arts in Utrecht, The Netherlands, the phrase “theatre makers” was used by the faculty as the focus of their MA in Scenography. That phrase stayed with me as I emphasize the principle of integration in the creation of theatre performance. The Utrecht School trained students to create and stage a performance. This served as my inspiration in planning a course that would engage students to cultivate an understanding, appreciation, and vocabulary in order to collaborate more successfully. The focus had to be on work in pairs and in groups and structured in such a way to increase the challenge. The main question for me, after I established a general outline, was how much emphasis should be placed on practical skills—I am not teaching designers, after all. I discovered that I did not emphasize and teach this enough which I will explain.

The first week was devoted to discussing general ideas of the process of styles as seen through various artists and movements in theatre and design. In discussing the principles of collaboration the idea of using case studies is applied. Using specific models of

theatre groups and productions where video documentation is available clearly helps define the various methods of application. As a first assignment, for example, students are asked to do individual presentations on a specific director or designer—a “Who’s Who?” Students were also asked to discuss a production design that was particularly memorable. Both of these assignments generated initial discussions that served as a foundation for the subsequent work to be done.

Each project that I created was treated as a simulated experience---I use the term “premise-based”. This promoted a clear objective and application. For example, the first assignment for the “Who’s Who?” presentation was set up as a voice-over for a TV biography spot. It made it more fun and it contributed to shaping vocal presentation techniques that we all have to do as we present our ideas. This is also part of the editing process as we clarify and finalize a design. One student, for example, created a video presentation that was clever in treating his delivery as a design in itself.

The Stage Design course centered around five projects: creating a concept, storyboarding, designing for dance, creating the complete package, and simulated collaboration with a guest director. So we have students playing roles as director or designer on the various projects. As the faculty instructor I served in the role of moderator/facilitator or producing director depending on the assignment.

The first group project centered on visual research in order to develop a preliminary concept statement for Christopher Hampton’s *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. The premise here was to consider this as an in-progress discussion to initiate questions and revisions. There were three groups of students and within each group students would take on a specific role: director, set designer, or costume designer. I became the flea on the wall and when appropriate initiate a comment or guide the direction of the conversation to facilitate optimal collaboration. Ideally, two moderators in the room would have been more beneficial to be able to follow more of each group’s conversations. The follow-up to this project was never realized. It was to be a full-scale design installation as a promotion/advertisement for the production. Students would have had access to the prop and costume shop inventories, select a space and incorporate lighting.

The next project took the students to the next level of completing a visual presentation package that I called, “Selling the Package to Producers.” The design reference was

drawing inspiration from a particular artist. In a group of three students, one served as the director who created a storyboard, the scenic designer who created a model, and the costume designer. Various presentation techniques were discussed and presented. The faculty scenic designer came in to present ideas for the storyboard (she designed for TV and film) and models. Although each student had a different design objective all had to communicate to accomplish the individual projects. It was fine to use stick figures for each storyboard composition—the focus was on visual space.

Designing for dance shaped my much of my training in theatre. Discussion preceded a scripted scenario. Dialogue and, hence, collaboration was essential. There was less time spent working alone. Hence, I chose a dance project to introduce the group to another aspect of costume design that did not always rely on a scenic environment—understanding visual space is still important, of course. Here music/sound and lighting becomes more pronounced as contributors to the visual presentation. Since dance is an area students may be most unfamiliar with, I hoped it would be an encouragement to think more abstractly and understand movement. In addition, this was one project where every student would take on the role of director/choreographer and production designer. I decided to make this an individual project rather than my original intent to have students work in pairs. I coordinated with one of the dance faculty (in the physical education department) to take my class to watch a dance rehearsal in her dance class that met at the same time. In preparation for watching the rehearsal I showed clips from dance sequences to explain the process and criteria to consider. This was the most difficult for the students. Attending a dance rehearsal for the first time seemed daunting for most, I quickly realized, as I observed. And comments from students later substantiated this.

For the class project, however, I gave them a short scenario (a chapter from Italo Calvino's *INVISIBLE CITIES*). They had to choose the music. The music from the actual dance rehearsal would have been appropriate, as well. The projects were good overall; it was easy enough to concentrate on this purely a paper project: scenario in hand, music and concept analysis. Research was done for lighting, mood, as well as for costumes.

The final project I called "Collaboration in Depth: Real-World Models." I divided the students into pairs—costume designer and set designer. I invited two faculty directors to

come in for design conference meetings with the students for two different scripts: A Midsummer Night's Dream and Scapin. The Shakespeare piece was something the director would like to stage and Scapin was an actual production currently being developed as part of the main stage theatre season. Each director worked with two different pairs of students to allow for two concept styles for each production. This project put all of the students in the role of designers so that each could then experience the process of collaborating with the entity of "the director" but a faculty director--- somewhat intimidating and intentionally so. This was the ultimate test to practice the fine art of communication. Each director worked very differently. Consider, too, that one had the opportunity to experiment with proposals for a dream project and the other was in the throes of an actual production that had for the most part been designed. I have often told students in design classes to think like a director. A sequence of deadlines were established leading to the final presentation. During this process, each deadline was treated like a production meeting. During one session the Technical Director and the Costume Director came in to confer with the students, asking similar questions regarding various practical issues with the designs as they would under actual production constraints.

In considering teaching design and collaboration to students in theatre arts and the liberal arts it is important to recognize there will never be the definitive method. Earlier in 2009, prior to my teaching the Stage Design class, Rob Roznowski and Kirk Domer from Michigan State University published *Collaboration in Theatre: A Practical Guide for Designers and Directors*. I used the book as recommended reading since I was still reviewing it. I did refer to portions of the text from time to time. It is a very clear guide in the art of communication with excellent examples given throughout. Very little research is available in this area. Richard M. Isackes in his article, *On the Pedagogy of Theatre Stage Design: A Critique of Practice* (Theatre Topics, March 2008), makes a point of inviting his colleagues to share their thoughts on teaching. There should always be continued change, new interesting twists to an approach, experimentation. The most surprising finding that I am discovering is that students want to learn technical skills yet they will not readily express that desire. In the introduction class, for example, I would allow students to trace a figure template for a costume design plate but almost all—even

those without any drawing skills—chose to do their own drawing. I realized, as well, to maintain a standard of presentation it is essential to teach the skills. It is well worth the time to integrate this as part of the director's training.

Francis Reid in his wonderful handbook (which is currently out of print), *DESIGNING FOR THE THEATRE*, Chapter 9, "Learning to Design", suggests certain qualities that would be desirable in a theatre designer:

- strong visual imagination.
- ability to express and communicate this through various media, especially drawing.
- wide interest in people, their relationships with each other and with their environment, both in reality and as reflected in all the arts, today and throughout history.
- commitment to theatre.
- personal ability to relate to, and work with, the other members of the creative and interpretative team that constitutes a theatre.

So, if removed the word "drawing" and "theatre" from the above, does this not reflect the optimum qualities of any student in the liberal arts?

Most important, in defense of teaching students technical skills, is that it develops the ability to focus and creates an acute awareness and sensitivity of the energy involved in producing the various design elements for production. The objective, then, is that students should think like a director and the director may also think like a designer with effective communication as a key factor.

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