

“Let me play the lion too”: A Rare Vision for Training Collaborative Theatre Makers.

Introducing the Program, or “Bottom’s Dream.”

This panel, comprising professors of Mary Baldwin College’s Master of Letters/Master of Fine Arts Shakespeare and Performance Program, aims to explore an ensemble-based alternative to a Method-inflected theatre training that seems reluctant to respond to the demands of a fluid interdisciplinary marketplace. Despite claiming collaboration, the predominant approach to graduate study in theatre reinforces disciplinarity and individualism, what the French call the “arthritis of specialization.” Our innovative company model, alive to the ancient heritage of actors as storytellers, influenced by early modern English theatre practices, and anticipating the entrepreneurial expectations of the new theatrical economy, encourages students to complicate the core Stanislavskian question, “What do I want?” by also asking, “What do we need?”

In the following presentation, I, Dr. Matt Davies, Professor of Acting and Directing, will explain the philosophy behind our recently re-envisioned MFA and will identify some of the ethical and practical expectations and challenges of collaborative pedagogy. Doreen Bechtol, Company Manager and Director of Training, will then explain the over-arching structure of the company model, as well as detail the daily operations that integrate a multiplicity of training styles, artistic visions, entrepreneurial skills, and administrative operations that govern our year-long, student-led company. Finally, Dr. Janna Segal, Assistant Professor of Theatre at Mary Baldwin, will explain how the re-imagined company model compares to other graduate conservatory programs, and consider the interweaving role of dramaturgy within the curriculum.

Begun in 2001 in association with the opening of the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse -- the world's only recreation of Shakespeare's indoor theater, in which our students also train and perform -- Mary Baldwin's unique double graduate degree offers a Renaissance training in Renaissance drama in which the actor-scholar is encouraged to explore and apply the relationship between scholarship and the fine arts: the performance of research and researched performance. However, while the two-year Master of Letters -- which ushers students through a variety of approaches to understanding Shakespeare and Performance as actor, director, teacher, dramaturg, and scholar -- has proved strikingly successful in placing graduates in teaching positions or Ph.D programs, the ensuing one-year MFA felt somewhat tacked on: a fast track to a terminal degree rather than a methodologically-applied training. Free to pursue their own projects, often with minimal resources and limited faculty oversight, students collected into cliques or operated as semi-autonomous agents -- marcher barons riding the boundaries of our discipline. While some endeavors produced marvelous effects and startling discoveries articulated in theses destined for publication in peer-reviewed journals, the MFA risked becoming pedagogically diluted and professionally peripheral.

In 2010, our Director of Operations, Dr. Paul Menzer, initiated a programmatic overhaul, challenging faculty to conjure from disparate dreams a rare vision of an MFA that would embrace the eclectic expectations of a select cohort of some twelve students while shaping their fantasies into professional realities. By better integrating the two degrees and by putting into daily and rigorous practice the lessons learnt in the classroom, we aimed to formalize our core academic values and training methods -- our

school, if you will -- and thereby to shape players and pedagogues ready for all markets. As we like to say, with a certain knowingness, classically trained is practically ready.

Transfigured so together, our visions coalesced into what we term the company model - an immersive, holistic experience in which students work together for one year to develop, select, organize, schedule, plan, cost, market, perform at home and on tour, and write a book about their season of five early modern and early modern-inspired shows. Built on the core principles of interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and entrepreneurialism -- the what, the how, and the why -- the company model is as elegant in its design as it is devilishly complex in its operations and paradoxical in its ambitions. It is rooted in smart scholarship, yet demands good stagecraft; it is inspired by the past but alive to present practices in the search for future audiences. And like the Ballad of Bottom's Dream, which is as performative as it is transformative, the company model pursues an applied training as well as an inspirational education.

To align a professional training program with Bottom and his comrades, consummate amateurs who consistently prove that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, might seem counterintuitive, hazardous even. Yet, lacking evidence of any formal theater training in Shakespeare's time, we might view the staging practices of the rude mechanicals, artisans with professional ambitions to be "made men," as a productive paradigm that is as enlightening as it is salutary. I shall therefore continue to mine this metaphor with Pyramus-like persistence in defining and contextualizing the core values that shape the company model. The conceit also, usefully, underscores some of the challenges of a heuristic system that we have yet to overcome.

Of our model's three foundational pillars, multidisciplinary, which defines the "what," or syllabus that we teach, is arguably the most contentious. While undergraduate programs have long appreciated the value of offering a broad training in every aspect of theater making, the jack-of-all-trades remains a largely unwelcome intruder into the refined atmosphere of graduate or conservatory programs, where specialization promises the mastery of *one* fine art, rather than many or, subsequently, none. Although we don't challenge the importance of specialization *per se*, we strongly believe that the pursuit of a career in classical theater, canonically constructed largely in a pre-industrial era, benefits from a more generalist education. As Scott Walters, proposing "A New Education for a New Theater" in an influential Clyde Fitch Report last year, reminds us, "It isn't until relatively recently that artists began to be encouraged to specialize. Education has carved that idea in marble." Moreover, the employment conditions that exploited this kind of training have fundamentally changed. "In our now-global economy," writes Robert Cohen in *Working Together in Theater: Collaboration and Leadership*, "permanent companies are giving way to independent theaters where relative strangers come together for short work periods to produce single projects." Warning of the growing isolation of the theater practitioner, Cohen continues: "Its constituents comprise a varied assortment of independent artists who have been trained in different schools, [focusing] on intensely specialized training in just a single theater discipline." With the channels to diminishing work opportunities hopelessly clogged, we believe we are better served teaching young artists not to conceive of themselves as "specialists for hire," to borrow Walter's phrase, but as multifaceted playmakers made more employable through their eclectic skill sets: individual agents in a market dominated by talent agencies.

Rather than promoting the all-dancing, all-singing allure of *Fame*, our notion of multidisciplinary is at once more didactic and more pragmatic. Much as the rude mechanicals apply their various trades to solving staging problems -- Quince the carpenter constructing a prologue; Snout tinkering with his wall of lime and hair; and the like -- so, too, our artisanal artists acquire skills that supplement their main focus. Armed with a foundational approach we currently term Embodied Rhetoric, which itself marries a classical rhetorical training with Stanislavskian textual analysis and the physical principles of Viewpoints, graduated MLitt students rotate through a series of Competencies, only one of which, once repeated, becomes a Concentration, either in acting, directing, or dramaturgy. Under these competencies, which develop critical skills in stage management and design, movement and music, marketing and publicity, archiving and editing, artists for hire evolve into members of the ensemble.

While the dangers of multidisciplinary are patent -- clearly, not everyone can, or should, play the lion -- in an inherently unstable marketplace the ambition to be a jack of *some* trades while remaining master of one seems not so much fanciful or egotistical as ineluctable and rational. And it is supported by precedence, both historical and immediate. From the great early modern player-playwrights Shakespeare and Moliere, through actor-managers like Garrick and Beerbohm Tree, or more immediately Kenneth Branagh and Kevin Spacey, to actor-theorists like Stanislavsky, multitalented individuals carving out their own eclectic careers shape the theatrical landscape and populate the syllabi taught by us: typically, hyphenated faculties of professors-practitioners. When we teach what we do and perform what we preach, we earn the critical credibility of our students and, at least in my experience, a better night's sleep.

Speaking of a good night's sleep, when Bottom wakes from his dream, his first thought is of the play and of his duty to his fellow performers. "When my cue comes, call me, and I will answer it," he says, coining a maxim for our program. Despite their struggles to stay on book and in character, the mechanicals manage to cast, block, rehearse, and stage a performance that includes multiple role-playing and cross-gender casting, mumming and miming, an impressively prolonged death scene and, *almost*, a bergomask. And they do so through collaboration - the sharing of labors. Collaboration is the *modus operandi* that engages the interdisciplinary dialogue and free exchange of ideas upon which our model depends. Yet, as Twyla Tharp once commented, "collaborators aren't born, they're made ... a day at a time; through practice, through attention, through discipline." From the moment the company meets to define its identity to the crossing of the last 't' of the company book by its editors, the MFA students participate in an endless discourse; identifying issues, offering solutions, and making decisions through debate and negotiation, assertion and compromise. They "take control of the means of production," to borrow Walters' terminology, and in so doing acquire the agency of independent artists.

Ironically, however, while collaboration and its transferable skills have become widely appreciated in the marketplace, from the boardroom to the science lab, the greatest challenge to teaching the values of ensemble, as Monica Stufft observed at the 2011 ATHE Conference, comes from academia itself. Shaped by the dominant cultural discourse of neoliberal individualism, which Stufft defines as "what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours," students (not to mention their teachers) earn awards and advancement through individual assessments of personal achievements assigned discrete

grades. This “competition for approval affects, or perhaps, even, infects,” notes Cohen, “most beginning students of the theater,” while the growing demands for accountability by college deans and accrediting agencies pressurizes the validity of less conventional teaching practices and forums. Our challenge -- and it is a work in progress -- is to nurture an environment that appraises teamwork as well as individual growth, values process and product equally, and favors quality of contribution over quantity; all within an artistic atmosphere that encourages the Bottoms to listen, the Snugs to speak, and the Flutes to dare. For, however great the challenges of collaborative pedagogy, our first two MFA seasons have graphically demonstrated that, when collaboration fails, a company is only as strong as its weakest link; yet when it succeeds, it is always greater than the sum of its parts.

Making graduates employable is, finally, the *raison d’etre*, the why, of the company model and of the entrepreneurial spirit it fosters. Rather than preparing students to relinquish control of their careers to the cattle call, the casting director, and the agent, we aim to empower them to make their own opportunities - to contribute their unique skill sets to existing troupes or to launch their own companies. While many performers play instruments, how many also make costumes? While most directors block actors, how many have choreographed dances? While all dramaturgs write program notes, how many can claim to have edited a book? These additional experiences build confidence and marketability exponentially. Above all, we offer our graduates the financial and administrative wherewithal to survive, and hopefully thrive, in the current marketplace. Rather than offering students an “apprenticeship in begging,” as Walters rather brutally

puts it, we endow them with the grant-writing skills and promotional savvy to fund a showcase or launch a start-up.

Of course, administering an ensemble of entrepreneurs -- predictably, self-reliant individuals with alpha personalities -- poses its own challenges. Just as the audience witnesses the early modern conflict for managerial status between Quince the playwright and Bottom the lead actor, so, too, our students continually re-negotiate lines of authority and the obligations of ensemble and hierarchy that Cohen recognizes are “two sides of the same animal.” Our current concern, however, is more clearly defining the jurisdiction of the faculty within a model that promotes self-determination. Although Walters advises faculty to “hover and respond: [...] serving as consultants for the students as they experiment, and giving advice *as [they request]*,” experience tells us that, while graduates appreciate being given their head, they’d prefer it not to be hoisted with their own petards. In our dual roles as professors and producing artistic directors, we must strike a balance between pedagogy and professionalization, instruction and consultation, advice and authorization, license and sanction. Rather than seeking an either/or solution to these competing forces, we present them as complementary. When students ask us if the MFA is a class or a training program, our answer, always, is “yes.”

We believe that Bottom’s Dream of playing all the parts, rather than being merely the expression of an egotistical fantasy, also embraces the entrepreneurial spirit of the Renaissance theater maker. Our vision is to transform student mechanicals into multi-disciplined practitioners of early modern texts and in constructing our collaborative MFA we appear to have caught the wave of a *zeitgeist* within academia. In the spirit of collaboration, we now solicit an exchange of ideas within our discipline -- between



schools of thought and styles of drama -- as we attempt to solidify our approach, solve some of its problems, and sell some of our solutions to the broader theatrical community.