

Writing/Communication in the Theatre and Dance Studies Major

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The liberal arts education is dedicated to providing students with a foundation of knowledge that will serve them throughout their lives as well as their careers, and inspiring in students a passionate desire to learn and engage in their world. Liberal arts institutions strive to produce students who contribute positively to their social environments and a crucial component of this pursuit is the exchange of ideas and experiences between individuals and groups. Understanding and empathy unify communities and also celebrate their inherent diversity. Theatre provides the perfect forum for this exchange of ideas and infused understanding of human behavior, emotion, and psyche. Theatre encompasses text, movement, speech, sound and visual art, and can provide a full sensory experience of a story as it is told. Because theater and performance take place in real time, where the audience is in the room with the artists at the time of Art's occurrence, communication of ideas is often more immediate and direct than other solitary artistic endeavors. Rarely do other art forms allow the same intimacy found in the actor-audience relationship. The artist and the audience engage in a common experience and may each walk away with a deeper understanding of the human condition than they previously possessed. In the scope of "global citizenry," there is no better method for enlightening ourselves and others in a community.

"Theatre allows you to put yourself in someone else's shoes. That to me is the beginning of the end of racism, sexism, homophobia, whatever bad 'ism' you're looking at. Theatre is learning that another person has feelings."
–Steven Maler, Director Commonwealth Shakespeare Company

What better reason for representing theatre on a liberal arts campus? By its very nature, the discipline demands an expansive and tolerant worldview. We get nowhere in the profession with a biased perspective: our job is to understand. Theatre, when truly ambitious and firing on all cylinders, brings people -- all kinds of people-- together in a vision of common humanity. Quixotic? Yes. Idealistic? Yes. What better place to promote such a hopeful philosophy than academe?

Through writing students hone their analytical and language skills. In many of the department's classes, students are required to write self-reflection papers, which engender the ability to be self-critical. As young people can be increasingly inarticulate, writing and making presentations forces them to articulate their thoughts. Presentations make students accountable for the work and for their own opinions regarding the course work. Through writing and presentations students engage in dialogue and work collaboratively.

Dance Track

The role of writing or self-analysis in the dance technique classes at Wheaton is critical to the progress of the student. Through their self-exploration in their journals, they begin to assess what works physically for them in class and what is more problematic. They also begin to intellectually and physically assimilate the material as they write about it and this process produces progress in their dance vocabulary. The act of breaking down the movement in their journals gives clarity to the execution of the step in class. While they might not have sufficient strength to jump high or extend their line, they know what it should look like and they strive toward that goal. It also demonstrates where their weakness might be as they study dance technique. If turns are a problem for them the student often analyzes why they are and takes steps to correct their mistakes. It is the very act of putting the thought to paper that helps move them along in class. There is a mind body connection in dance technique and the critical analysis the students employ in their journals strengthens their ability to dance.

Students are asked to attend live dance performances and write a review on what they saw. The act of writing about dance educates the eye to determine what dance is and if it is successful in communicating its message to the audience. Students are able to tell you if they like something or not but writing about it asks the question, why? They become more discerning towards dance and this helps build audiences for the future. The intellectual component in dance is what makes it artistic and culturally relevant to society and is why people

dance. It also is a way for people to express themselves as a community that is richly rewarding to them personally yet significant to our cultural expression. Movement is basic to human beings and the desire to make dances is as old as our civilization and is a form of communication essential to mankind.

Dance Technique Classes:

All technique classes in dance (ballet and jazz) meet twice a week for one hour and twenty minutes. These are practicum classes that include learning and executing vocabulary for the specific genre as well as two written assignments. The first is a journal of self-discovery that consists of the student's motivation for taking the class and their assessments of their strengths and weaknesses. They are required to do one entry per week and their job is to respond to their performance in class that week. It is a fairly intimate process and it forces them to analyze their effort and evaluate their level of success in the class. Most students report of their difficulty in class executing the movement and are surprised at how challenged they are by it. Most report that their effort is there but it is a difficult process to master. However, all students improve during the semesters' worth of work and most accomplish some level of mastery within the aesthetic.

The second writing assignment is a review of an outside performance that they have attended during the semester. They must report their reaction to the performance and why. This allows them to assess why they may or may not like a performance and then they must substantiate their response. It develops an educated eye towards dance so they know how to look at movement through a lens of knowledge. It also encourages them to attend live performance and helps us build audience for the future. Since dance is very much part of popular culture, this is the next step toward educating future generations for proscenium dance.

Design/Tech Track

The particular genre of communication that we require of our students, presentational communication, is essential because not all communication happens over email. There are always going to be times in any professional field that a verbal discussion or presentation is going to be necessary. What is unique about the Theatre Department is that we teach how to support the verbal presentations in classes ranging from Public Speaking to Lighting Design.

A theatre designer is primarily a visual artist. In this way, designers not only read texts by other writers, but also create their own visual texts with a vocabulary built on the elements of design. Because a theatre designer does not usually have the opportunity to communicate directly with an audience the way a playwright or actor does, "writing" for a visual artist involves storytelling that is unspoken and must be "read" by the audience without the guidance of the author. This requires the development of a visual text, a text utilizing a vocabulary built of design elements and principles, images within context, and the human body. This vocabulary can be less tangible than monologues or dialogue, but no less powerful and integral to a theatrical performance and its potential for communication than a playwright's words.

Writing assignments in design courses include text analysis for design, analysis of visual compositions, and assertive statements of the designers' creative intentions. These assignments foster the exchange of ideas between designers and playwrights, directors, actors and other designers. Writing assignments like script analysis and performance reviews demand that students engage with playwrights or visual artists and performers in ways that scrutinize and evaluate compositions. Later assignments like concept statements also ask students to communicate with themselves as artists. Students use these kinds of assignments to identify and organize their own ideas about playwrights' texts as well as scenic, costume, and lighting design, and then to communicate those ideas effectively to others.

Both of these pursuits challenge students to develop their individual voices by learning to articulate their thoughts about storytelling. This development results in creating a literal language, which is then translated into the less traditional vocabulary of imagery. In turn, student designers engage in the "writing" of visual texts as

both artists and audience members, becoming participating members of the artistic community and the human experience.

Both writing and communication are important to Lighting Design. In class the students go through a design process for two separate plays. For each play they have a series of written assignments, including a Design Concept, Character Analysis for each of the major characters, a breakdown of the mood of each scene of the play, and a breakdown of each lighting moment in the play. These written assignments differ in their formality. The Design Concept, intended to be read by the Director, is a way to express your creative ideas through words, and is written formally. There is also an oral presentation of the written concept.

The two primary functions of lighting, visibility and creation of mood are both types of communication. Through the first, visibility, the students learn how to tell the audience who they should be watching at any particular moment. Through the second, creation of mood, they learn to communicate mood through color, brightness, and focus. The students learn to analyze the mood that the actors are trying to communicate and how to enhance it for the audience, using light as the medium. Part of how they learn to do this is through a series of projects in which they try to communicate a feeling they have, the mood of a photograph they choose, and a song they choose, only through light. In class they have to verbally defend their choices after they have made their presentation, but the presentation itself is silent.

There is also another type of communication that is an essential part of both Stagecraft and Lighting Design. Both classes learn to draft in different scales, in order to communicate physical objects through a drawing. One of the goals of these drawings is to use as few words as possible, as a good drawing will use lines to express its ideas almost exclusively. Written communication is used to evaluate the progress of the students in the classes. Each class has a final and a midterm, and Stagecraft has several additional quizzes as well. The quizzes are in different formats, but there are always at least some short answer questions. In both classes we use verbal communication to understand plays and the technical needs of plays, through analyzing scripts as a group. In Lighting Design, we do this for at least four plays during the semester. Since the creation of a lighting design for a production is a highly abstract project there are several tools the students use to walk through the process. One of the most important tools is exploring different possibilities and concepts and talking about how to demonstrate those concepts in a visual format.

These non-verbal methods of communication, through drawings and light, are important to the Liberal Arts mission because they are not taught in the majority of classes offered at Wheaton. With the exception of a few related courses in departments such as the Art Department, students do not have the opportunity to learn about these alternate communication methods.

Acting/Directing Track

Theatre 101: Beginning Acting

The objectives in this class are to experiment with structured improvisation and theatre games, to develop observational skills, of self and others, to become an effective collaborator and team player, (essential roles for the actor) and to develop text analysis and research skills around monologue and scene work. Students keep weekly journals on development and rehearsal logs that help articulate goals and reflection.

Theatre 103: Introduction To Theatre

All writing required for this course -- a discussion questionnaire for each of the nine plays assigned, a review of a professional production, and a final production book -- seeks to instill in students an appreciation for the totality of theatre as an art form. How do playwrights, directors, actors, and designers collaborate in bringing a script to life on stage? How does each division of labor function in the creative process? How do we constructively distinguish between vital and mediocre offerings in our theatres? What do both tragic and comic visions celebrate in the theatre? How are the visions inextricably linked in most modern work? On paper and in classroom conversations, students must speak to the contemporary relevance of the plays they have read and

articulate reactions to both live and taped productions of those plays. They are also asked to assume a directorial role, casting the plays on the syllabus and another of their own choosing and sharing ideas on an overall concept for each and corresponding set, costume, lighting, prop, and sound/music designs.

Theatre 202: Beginning Directing

This class explores an approach to directing plays for the stage. The purpose of the course is to develop an understanding of the basic principles influencing the stage director's primary responsibilities and decision-making. Students study and apply text analysis, observe and experiment with staging, and practice communication with actors inside and outside of class. Students have directed scenes from and written about Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Loraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, August Strinberg's *Miss Julie*, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*.

Theatre 211: Intermediate Acting

This course will help the student develop the skills and techniques for text analysis and performance in realistic plays. It will help the actor examine a technique, which will allow for a genuine existence on stage in any role. Students establish a working vocabulary for play analysis, develop the skills necessary to score a script for character development, develop research skills and integrate them into the rehearsal process and explore acting in contemporary, modern and realistic plays.

Theatre 351: Advanced Acting

The sole writing requirement for this course is a weekly journal, which chronicles the journey students are taking as they wrestle as actors with some of the most challenging material dramatic literature has to offer. We begin the semester with a thorough examination of that maligned and misinterpreted word "style" in the theatre and then plunge into a series of three performance showcases: the first devoted to material drawn from Greek Tragedy, a second to the plays of William Shakespeare, and a third to the Absurdist creations of Samuel Beckett. All three divisions share one commonality: actor-driven theatre presented on pretty much a bare stage. In preparing for the showcases, students read extensively about each genre of theatre and participate in a series of games, improvisations, and exercises that assist in understanding the worlds they are inhabiting. The showcases themselves last approximately one hour, are open to the public, and feature fully staged and memorized scenes and monologues from the aforementioned categories. Students participate in formal critiques of the showcases immediately following the presentations.

Theatre 020: Rehearsal and Production

This course is essentially a theatre laboratory, a semi-annual opportunity for students and faculty alike to put classroom theories to the test and collaborate on the mounting of a fully staged production in Weber Theatre. While no formal writing assignments are usually involved, the class is arguably about as rigorous and labor-intensive as any in our curriculum. Aspiring actors, dancers, designers, stage managers, stitchers, technicians, publicists, arts administrators, and box office coordinators work in an industrious beehive over approximately twelve weeks to create the best "mainstage" presentation possible. Exposed as everyone is to the collective effort, we learn a lot from each other. At the moment, we are giving close attention to William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which is scheduled to open on April 9 in an outdoor/indoor staging that will incorporate Visiting Artist Patrick Dougherty's recently completed Twisted Sisters sculpture next to Peacock Pond. A sampling of other productions done in recent years reveals the department's commitment to showcasing as many different types of theatre as possible: *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestly, the musical *A Chorus Line*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, *Angels In America: Millennium Approaches* by Tony Kushner, *Antigone* by Sophocles, *Waiting For Godot* by Samuel Beckett, and *Tartuffe* by Moliere.

Theatre 311: Intermediate Directing

Young directors in this course are asked to engage themselves in two major projects: directing an original play or plays for our annual New Plays Festival at midterm and interpreting an established script from two varied perspectives at semester's end. For the midterm project, students are required to submit a response essay summarizing their reactions to the new script(s) they have encountered and to the rehearsal process generally.

Invariably, commentary on playwright/director negotiation proves most instructive. For the final project, students must prepare production books that explain and hopefully justify interpretive slants on the plays they have chosen from all creative angles. Fully memorized realizations of these interpretations are presented before a live audience late in the school year. Communication in the classroom is constant, as students discuss and critique the decisions that have been made. A host of assigned interviews with professional directors feeds this discussion.

Theatre 371: Ensemble Experiments

This course is the department's senior seminar, the "capstone experience" for Theatre and Dance Studies majors. The class, organized as it is around a central theme(s) and/or author(s), re-invents itself every time out. Right now, for example, seven graduating majors are steeped in research and related performance projects on J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and the rich and influential tradition of Italy's Commedia Dell'Arte. After midterm, the students will wed these two fields of interest in a final production of their own making. Writers will write, actors will act, directors will direct, and designers will design as Pan/Commedia somehow comes into being and is given stage time before a public audience. As to the creation of the script: it's all about collective imagination, give and take, trial and error, brilliant ideas and tough edits. In the end, the seniors own it all as they appear one last time on a Wheaton stage. Recent themes/authors have included Federico Garcia Lorca, Dante, fairy tales, the 9/11 attacks, religion, and the theatre of Julie Taymor.

Types of Writing in Major:

Text and Character Analysis Papers

Concept and Design Statements

Essay/Discussion Questionnaires

Original Monologues and Scripts

Personal Reflection Papers

Production Books

Research Papers

Performance Reviews

Scored Scripts

Weekly Journals