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### Sustainability of Theatre in Colleges and Universities

“Theatre, as a term, bears almost a universal familiarity. It [the universal familiarity theatre brings] has several reasons; the best being the sense of closeness that it carries for the human life” (1). This excerpt from Debilal Mishra’s *Theatre and Communication: Exploring the Process of Life* gives readers one of infinite reasons as to why theatre is important in society. However, if there is such an importance in theatre, why do humans negatively stigmatize it? Furthermore, how does it relate to those who study theatre in colleges and universities? Blake Jorgenson’s article, “Behind That Heavily Criticized Theater Major: Experiences, Skills For Multiple Jobs” explains that “Some combination of fine arts, drama, theatre, and visual performing arts appears on almost every ‘worthless college major’ list on the Internet.” Why is it that theatre is placed so poorly compared to other college majors, such as business, communications, and so forth? Perhaps the poor placement and stigma stems from long-standing ignorance and prejudices towards theatre itself. Edwin Wilson’s *The Theatre Experience* provides historical insight as to why this stigmatization occurs. One of Wilson’s examples explains that Elizabethan Theatre also did not allow women to appear onstage, stating, ... in the English public theatres in the time of Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603), women were forbidden by law to appear on the stage. Although some actors rose to become celebrities, actresses were often associated with ‘public women’ or prostitutes—particularly by Puritans who viewed theatre as an immoral profession (49).

This suggests that theatre itself has long been stigmatized by religious and/or segregated by

gender. Stigmatization of theatre still occurs today, although it may not stem from gender or religious issues, but it still occurs due to commercialism and the focus of “quantity over quantity”. In his book *Theatre as the Essential Liberal Art in the American University*, Thomas H. Gressler discusses stigmatization of theatre, especially towards theatre students, and reminds readers that

Rather than cry unceasingly that theatre remains low man on the totem pole, educational theatre directors might rather look squarely at the last 2500 years, see clearly and accept the fact that nearly every society, nearly every culture has suspected theatre and has attacked it in various ways (194).

This serves as a reminder that theatre was heavily stigmatized throughout history, and today’s stigma should not surprise theatre students and directors. While this stigma continues, Gressler reminds the reader “...that even as most societies have maintained a suspicious distance from the theatre, they also have attended it, if only on the sly; some few have even adored it” (194-195). This also rings true in today’s society—while many college students tend to stray away from the theatre and theatre programs, but some do attend or participate, and some students even enjoy it. This may lead to some asking, “Why are some college students (and potential college students) deterred from taking part in college theatre activities?” Whatever is deterring these students from taking part in theatre may lead these programs to decline and eventually cease to exist. For theatre to be sustainable in colleges and universities, researchers must look at how theatre has been sustained throughout history, what marketable skills it provides to students, how these skills go beyond the walls of the theatre, and how theatre is reflected in everyday life. By looking at these aspects, researchers may also have a better understanding of why students may be uninterested in theatre.

While theatre clearly has benefits, those who criticized theatre from a historical (and even religious) standpoint did not always see theatre in a positive light, or as something for everyone

(including women) to enjoy. As mentioned earlier, Elizabethan theatre did not allow women onstage for social reasons (Wilson 49). However, this treatment of women was not just limited to Elizabethan society. Long before the Elizabethan Era, ancient Greece also took an anti-female standpoint in many aspects of their society, especially in theatre. Wilson explains this issue, stating that while women were “citizens” in ancient Greece, they did not participate in political matters (49). Therefore, according to Wilson, “They were thus also excluded from appearing onstage in the annual spring theatre festival called the City Dionysia. The plays were written and acted by men, even though many feature important female characters” (49). How does this issue relate to society today? Perhaps this unfair treatment of women of ancient Greece echoes in American society today, where women are still fighting for equal rights. Some of this unfair treatment has been (and is still being) echoed through Feminist Theatre (166).

Criticism of theatre also existed from a religious standpoint. An example of this criticism involves French playwright Moliere. While Moliere was generally accepted as a well-known actor and playwright, many French officials did not see him in that light. Wilson explains this problem, stating that “Though he was one of the most renowned actors and playwrights of his day, France at that time had laws preventing actors from receiving a Christian burial...” (98). While religion limited theatre in some societies, religion also provided inspiration to societies such as the Prehistoric era and ancient Greece, providing inspiration for today’s theatre.

Those who are so highly critical of theatre must understand that theatre was (and still is) not always about acting or pretending, it acts as a way of life, a way to “explain the unexplainable”, especially to Prehistoric people who had little to no knowledge of the natural world. Gilberto Martinez, Ed.D, and Glenda Holland, Ed.D. discuss how theatre evolved out of ritual in *Theater Program Development in Colleges and Universities*. Through their research, Martinez and Holland believe that theatre developed from rituals, explaining that in the category

of “Prehistoric Theater”, “Tribal Shamans developed rituals that sought to prevent undesirable circumstances such as death or a bad hunt... These rituals were adopted before every hunt or at certain times in order to appease the unexplainable forces around them (Brockett & Hildy, 2008)” (85). In this context, theatre was not just a form of entertainment, but as a means of bringing comfort and answers to the unknown world.

While theatre served as an ancient ritual and way of life of sorts, some cultures used theatre as a celebratory means, or a means of honoring others. One culture that used theatre in this way was the ancient Greek culture. As Martinez and Holland argue, “Greek theater’s main function was to honor the god Dionysus (86).” This demonstrates to those criticizing theatre that theatre of ancient times was not necessarily about acting, but honoring the gods. Greek theatre not only honored the gods, however; it was also used to facilitate a gathering of sorts, “...where playwrights often competed with one another (86).” This potentially allowed for playwrights to influence one another, perhaps even inspiring one another, all while participating in competition. This shows that theatre sustained throughout this period by means of celebration, worship, and a dose of healthy competition.

Notable people also emerged from the Greek theatre era, sustaining the inspiration for theatre and playwrights of future generations. Influential theatre critics, such as Plato and Aristotle emerged from this era (86). It is noted by Martinez and Holland that “In the end it was Plato and Aristotle who become the first educators of the theater (86).” These two philosophers ultimately emerged from the competition surrounding Greek playwrights, and their teachings have sustained well into the twenty-first century. While these two philosophers have made contributions to today’s theatre, it should be noted that they ultimately had completely different approaches to theatre. Martinez and Holland explain these differences, stating,

In his book *The Republic* [,] Plato stressed the idea that conceptual analysis

was more important than empirical discovery. Plato was concerned with beauty that was conceived, and how that beauty related to philosophy and theology. Aristotle took a different approach. He believed theater could be studied in a more empirical and objective setting (86).

This conflict of theories led to the development of “two different schools of thought, the Platician and Aristatalian” (Carlson, 1984) (86). Martinez and Holland note that Aristotle’s philosophy is more present today, and while his ideas are often confusing (87), “Scholars agree that the most significant contribution made by Aristotle was his way of analyzing theater through his elements of theater. These elements are still used to evaluate theater today (Carlson, 1984) (87).”

While those who criticize theatre say that theatre only one purpose—to entertain—this is not the case, especially when looking at Greek theatre. Martinez and Holland explain that “Greek theater also served as an avenue for instruction on morality and social issues (87).” While Greek theatre served as a means of celebration and honoring others, it also served as a means of teaching to audience members. These morals not only influenced the audience members, but also served as inspiration for works of pottery during the fourth century, which heavily portrayed Greek tragedies (87). This shows that theatre during this time not only sustained by its purpose, but also sustained through its teachings and works of art.

While Greek theatre was certainly influential in providing additional uses of theatre, its influence sustained to the Roman era, which was heavily influenced by the Greeks. One aspect of Roman theatre that was influenced by the Greeks was their preference for comedies. Martinez and Holland explain the reason for this preference, stating that “Some scholars have suggested that Romans preferred the comedy due to the fact that the Greeks were more in tune with the social aspects of their civilization (87).” Romans were potentially inspired by the social aspects

of the Greeks, and decided to portray comedies in hopes of imitating them. While inspired by the Greeks, the Romans preferred a different style of comedy—the “New” Comedy of the Greeks rather than the “Old” Comedy. Larry Wild’s “Early Theatre: Greek, Roman and Medieval”, defines Old Comedy as “...[being] written before 400 B.C.E... [and] was mostly political satire.” Roman playwrights (such as Plautus) were heavily inspired by New Greek Comedy, a genre that “...was written after 400 B.C.E.... *New Comedy* dealt with domestic affairs: Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets (sic) girl back again. *New Greek Comedy* is the beginning of the “SitCom”. While the Greeks inspired the Romans, the Romans ultimately furthered comedy, allowing it to endure throughout history.

One of the most important eras in theatre history is Elizabethan theatre, mainly taking place during the middle ages. How did the Elizabethan era get its name? According to Martinez and Holland, “Elizabethan theater gets its name from Queen Elizabeth [,] who commissioned the building of playhouses and the hiring of playwrights” (Thompson, 1995) (88). The Elizabethan era of theatre also introduced major playwrights such as William Shakespeare, whose influence is heavily present in theatre today. According to Martinez and Holland,

In America today, many Shakespeare festivals take place in what scholars believe Elizabethan theaters must have looked like. No Elizabethan theater exists today, and what is known comes from stage directions that were left behind in the plays of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson...” (Markus and Server, 2004) (88).

Other than their impact on actual acting, what did these people contribute to theatre as playwrights? Martinez and Holland later explain that

[As] A formulaic writer, 38 plays of Shakespeare still exist and are produced today. Ben Jonson [,] best known for his play *The Alchemist* [,] introduced the concept of satire to English audiences. Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragic History*

*of Doctor Faustus*, among many others, added the element of blank verse, a technique that is still studied in classical theater today (Thompson, 1995) (88).

While the Elizabethan era of theatre ended in 1642, its works have endured the test of time, serving as an inspiration for today's theatre (88).

The next major era of theatre is American theatre, specifically the American theatre of the twentieth century. Theatre has long been regarded as an academic program in the United States, despite the criticism it has faced over the past century. In his article "Theatre in U.S. Higher Education: Emerging Patterns and Problems", Burnet M. Hobgood describes theatre's initial appearance in American colleges and universities. Hobgood explains the occurrence in increasing popularity of theatre in American colleges and universities, noting that "In the decades following World War I and World War II...extra-curricular dramatic activity and formal theatre instruction increased sharply in all parts of the country (143)." Theatre rose out of necessity, and not just a necessity for entertainment, but a need for more well-rounded students.

The arts, not just theatre itself, rose in necessity after World War II. According to Anne Berkeley's "From a Formalist to a Practical Aesthetic in Undergraduate Theatre Studies: Becoming Relevant in the Twenty-First Century", there was a great need for new methods of teaching in American colleges and universities. Berkeley explains this change, stating that

...the humanist axis in theatre curriculum was manifested in an *aesthetically-oriented* curriculum in teaching the values of 'art for art's sake.' The utilitarian axis produced after World War II, a *market-oriented* curriculum characterized by professionalism and vocationalism (4).

In this sense, theatre did not necessarily develop out of a need for entertainment, but as part of development of a new education system in American colleges and universities. This need

allowed for theatre (as well as the other arts) to be more sustainable, as they were now part of educational reforms.

Theatre in American colleges and universities continued to prosper well after World War II, especially with the passing of Acts that granted more funding towards these programs. The more funding that any program has (especially theatre), the more the program can provide for its students. Anne Berkeley affirms this statement in her article, “Changing Theories of Undergraduate Theatre Studies, 1945-1980”. Berkeley explains that

The National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963... injected vast financial resources into program development, and federal programs such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) were established (Berkeley, “Changing Theories of Collegiate Theatrical Curricula: 1900-1945) (58).

The passing of these acts, as well as the establishment of these programs, allowed theatre to flourish, as programs now had the funding and sense of importance needed to help their students succeed.

Theatre continues to succeed in twenty-first century America, but not without its challenges. As mentioned earlier, theatre has endured despite criticism throughout history. One main challenge faced by theatre programs is the notion that there is an alarming decrease in theatre program enrollments, most likely due to the stigma that has been presented throughout this research. What can colleges and universities do to be able to sustain their theatre programs? To promote theatre to potential college and/or university students (as well as current students), researchers (as well as theatre faculty members) must consider some of the benefits that theatre provides to students. One major benefit is an improvement of overall communication

skills. Communication is an important everyday necessity that everyday people must have, but unfortunately, most college students lack in communication. Ellie Friedland addresses this problem in “Oral Communication Across the Curriculum: What’s a Small College to Do? Report of a Collaborative Pilot by Theatre and Education Faculty”. Friedland explains that communication is an essential skill for college students as they go through college and enter employment (288). However, some college students lack communication skills, and this creates a problem, as Friedland explains that “...many college students are insecure in their communications in classes...Some cannot make themselves heard or cannot communicate their ideas with the expression necessary to communicate them effectively” (288). What can be done to alleviate this problem? Throughout her study, Friedland addresses this problem by stating she will integrate the theatre and education department into creating a communication program (289). This integration could help better students’ communication skills, but some are left to wonder, “How does theatre essentially improve communication skills?”

When considering the use of theatre to improve communication skills, Mishra’s article explains that “Theatre is essentially an art of communicating life and creating an impact. The better the communication, the clearer the impact” (1). Theatre itself focuses on communication, (2) and Mishra suggests that “Without communication existence is impossible. Communication is the essence of all life and civilization and as a never ending phenomenon it is always instrumental behind the constant sustenance, survival and growth of the established order of the universe” (1). Without theatre, there would be less development of communication in societies, and the less communication that a society has, the less likely they will further their development. Mishra later explains that

The theatre communicates the human condition in the best way and arouses the deeper feelings. Moreover, it deals with the different aspects of human life, such as tragedy, comedy, laughter, heroism, humor etc. All these aspects are inherent

in human nature and the theatre helps them out for a subtler experience (2).

Theatre does not communicate words from a script, it communicates feeling, emotions, and problems that the characters face, problems that the audience can relate to in real life. Without theatre, human beings and theatre students alike would not be able to fully understand communication and the depth of emotion from performances.

Another skill theatre provides is the essential principle of teamwork. Just as those in emerging societies relied heavily on each other in to thrive, theatre requires those involved to work together to accomplish tasks and goals. Theatre is more than doing certain tasks to put on a production, it is about every theatre company member (cast, crew, even the directors) helping one another, working towards a finished product—the performance itself. Without effective teamwork in any work force (not just theatre), projects are left unfinished, deadlines will not be met, and employees are left feeling overwhelmed. In the article “What Stays”, Russell Vandembroucke provides an example of the meaning of what teamwork looks like in theatre, more specifically college theatre. Vandembroucke explains that

*What Stays* is our link to medieval apprenticeships: those with more ‘know how’ share it generously with those with less. All disciplines have classrooms where this occurs, but we also have rehearsal rooms, scene and costume shops, the hands-on tools of table saws and sewing machines (358).

While theatre students learn some concepts in classrooms, more learning is provided outside of the classrooms. According to Vandembroucke, theatre students learn not just from their professors, they also learn from other students (358). This allows for theatre students to build relationships with one another, something they would not have the opportunity to do if they were only learning about theatre in classrooms.

Tangibly speaking, how can colleges and universities take this information and apply it to the sustainability of their theatre programs? Colleges must first consider is how theatre is taught at the high school level. For some students, their introduction to the realm of theatre does not begin until high school. Martinez and Holland discuss this problem in their research, stating that “In other words, the United States relies on secondary education for most of its exposure to theatre productions” (90). Why is this such a problem? Most high schools are negatively biased towards theatre, treating it unfairly (91). Martinez and Holland state that “Wright (2000) also argued [argues] that theater as an ‘occasional activity’ and not part of a daily routine (p. 12)” (91). High schools (and even some high school drama programs) are unaware of the truth—the truth of hard work and long hours that go into college theatre productions. In addition to this unfair treatment, there are issues surrounding the quality of instruction of high school theatre and high school arts in general. According to Martinez and Holland, “Some instruction may be offered at the elementary level, but not enough to hold a solid theater curriculum... [The] Theater instruction does not have a sequence and is not delivered in a comprehensive form. This itself becomes problematic for the student of theater” (91). By treating theatre in this manner, high schools are setting up unrealistically low expectations of their theatre students, leaving them unprepared for and overwhelmed with the higher expectations of college theatre.

What can high school theatre programs do to address this problem? Colleges and high schools must work together to create a stable learning environment of theatre students, and especially must work together towards creating sustainability of college theatre programs. Why do most colleges and high school theatre programs choose not to work together, then? There are many reasons why they do not work together to create one standard theatre curriculum, one of those reasons being lack of funds. As Martinez and Holland explain, “Unlike high school athletic programs that are usually better funded, theater programs may not be seen as serious training

schools. This leads to a sort of fresh start approach by college and university programs” (90).

The lack of seriousness again appears in this instance, but is also combined with a case of unorganized priorities. To solve this problem, schools must develop stronger, more stable theatre curriculums and fight for better funding. Only then will these circumstances improve, and more students will be able to continue their theatre studies at the college level, improving the overall sustainability of these programs.

The main problem that college theatre students face is that they often feel unprepared or overwhelmed once they begin their theatre work, which may cause some students to either find another theatre program or study in an entirely different field. This ultimately leads to decreasing enrollments and the overall decreasing sustainability of college and university theatre programs. This in part is due to lack of a proper transition between high school and college theatre programs. As Martinez and Holland suggest, “It becomes clear that there exists no smooth transition from high school programs to that of higher education programs in theater arts. This can lead to higher education programs developing programs that seem to discount any previous training” (90). This lack of transition causes theatre students to question what they have learned during their time in high school theatre, and wondering whether it was worthwhile.

This questioning of meaning only deepens once students are introduced to college theatre. Martinez and Holland suggest that “With limited recruitment and a need for trained theater instructors at the secondary level, theater programs develop a strategy that seeks to build its (sic) program beginning not at the secondary level, but instead from that of the inception of a student’s higher education” (90). How, then, are students to be properly introduced to theatre before college? Community theatres could potentially take part in this introduction, but in places without community theatres, this may not be an option. Therefore, it is essential that high schools properly introduce the theatre curriculum to students, working with colleges to create one solid,

steady curriculum. This curriculum is essential to recruiting more theatre students and increasing the sustainability of college and university theatre programs.

While high schools are partially at fault for the decreasing sustainability of these programs, colleges and universities are partially to blame as well. While some performing arts schools, such as Julliard, are known for training famous actors, narrowly focusing on fame and fortune is unrealistic. However, as Gressler explains, some college theatre programs only focus on fame, fortune and glory; focusing only on the one or two “success stories” out of their entire programs. Gressler points out that “Acting is theatre’s most public component and, when a student “makes it,” the entire community celebrates. Suddenly the college and its theatre program seem a notch above. Teachers of such graduates swell with pride too, whether or not they actually had anything to do with the student’s development” (117). While this initially works as a recruiting tool for potential students, this is unrealistic and unreasonable. This narrow-minded focus on fame is deterring other students away from theatre, thinking that theatre is reserved only for those seeking the “fame and glory” of Hollywood. Gressler later explains that for college theatre programs to direct students on a path that only few have taken is unfair (119). To make theatre programs more sustainable in colleges and universities, college theatre faculty must be reasonable in recruiting potential students, as well as encouraging current students to pursue a wide variety of careers with their theatre degree.

What will happen if colleges do not begin implementing these solutions? Some programs may be forced to temporarily or permanently shut their doors. Vanessa Miller provides a real-life example of this in the article “Mount Mercy University Cancels Performances, Suspends Drama Program”, in which Mount Mercy University was forced to suspend their drama program due to lack of interest. According to the article, “Administrators made the decision after Mount Mercy’s production of ‘The Toxic Avenger’ last spring attracted too few students and forced the drama

coordinator to recruit more community members than planned.” To prevent similar losses from occurring, colleges and universities (as well as their theatre faculty) must implement these solutions (as earlier mentioned) if they wish to see long-term sustainability. Once this occurs, theatre in colleges and universities will truly become something for everyone to enjoy.

How does theatre relate to aspects of everyday life? One aspect that involves theatrical elements takes the form of role playing. As Edwin Wilson explains, “Role playing by individuals involves both professional and private roles: a woman, for example, may be both a physician and a mother” (8). How does this relate on the college level? Most students are taking part in theatre every day. For instance, one student may have multiple roles. Example “A” be a full-time college student, but she is also a student athlete, and works a part-time job at a local restaurant. Example “B” may only be a part-time college student, but he works full-time employee at an office job and is a father of four children. Roles vary based on the person, but an individual person usually has multiple roles to fulfill. Roles are just one of many theatrical aspects of everyday life.

In addition to roles, theatrical elements can be found in everyday events. Wilson explains that “Theatrical events in everyday life—weddings, funerals, graduations, inaugurations—are considered *performative activities*” (8). For example, imagine a wedding. What makes it theatrical? There is music, lights, and an audience—but there are even more theatrical elements. The wedding party is formally dressed for the event, just as actors wear costumes for their performance. What about the bride and the groom? Their union consists of the standard ritual for most weddings—the father walking the bride down the aisle to be married by a religious official. This wedding consists of an audience, music, lights, sound, and costumes—all the makings of a theatrical event.

Theatrical events are also found in other rituals all over the globe. When looking at the context of these rituals, Wilson explains that

Throughout history, formal rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, and religious services have emerged all over the globe: among Native Americans, in many parts of Africa, in Australia, and elsewhere. These are formal occasions, repeated over and over again through generations, often at a given time Each year or every few years (8).

Through roles, events, and rituals the sustainability of theatre has already been occurring for generations. Theatre is not just in classroom settings, it is everywhere—even in the media. Wilson explains that “Most of us are likely to have our first theatrical experiences with some form other than actually attending theatre: movies, television, and our computers” (8). Just as theatre gives the audience a wide range of emotions, the media also provides this spectrum of emotion to its viewers. Wilson later adds that “In seeing these electronic presentations we may experience a wide range of emotions—suspense, conflicts horror, humor, joy, sometimes even ecstasy—the same emotions that theatre can evoke in us” (8). With this information, those who criticize theatre at the college and university level have no right to do so. These “critics” who think that college and university theatre programs are not sustainable are completely ignorant as to what theatre is truly about, and how its historical context has influenced how humans behave today. From the daily rituals of brushing teeth to a trip to the movie theater, these things owe their thanks to the sustainability of theatre.

Today’s college and university theatre programs have mostly been sustainable because of the history of theatre and how it has endured for so long. Unfortunately, as previously discussed, this has not been enough to keep some college and university theatre programs from shutting their doors. However, theatre faculty of remaining programs must reevaluate their priorities and must determine what is best to maintain sustainability. In doing so, they must consider what has made theatre sustain throughout history, what marketable skills it provides to students, and how these skills stay with students long after graduation, even if they do not have theatre-related

careers after graduation. Once this has been considered, theatre faculty can then educate potential students on the true benefits of theatre and its importance in higher education.

Theatre is more than just “acting on a stage” or “memorizing this-and-that for the next play”, it is a way of life, especially for students and audiences alike. Theatre faculty are dependent upon the success and participation of students and audiences, for if there are no students or audiences, there is no theatre program. The sustainability of theatre in colleges and universities is ultimately dependent upon education, patience, and understanding, as changing the minds of skeptics does not take place overnight. College theatre programs must be reasonable in their recruiting and teaching efforts. They must acknowledge the fact that not every theatre student is not destined to be the next Hollywood star or starlet—they may be destined to be the next accountant, schoolteacher, or anything they desire to be. Regardless of their choices, theatre still prevails today—through rituals, celebrations, advertisements—all taking place outside of the walls of the theatre. Whether taking place on a college theatre stage, a cramped community theatre, or even on a front porch, theatre will still carry the same emotional impact on its audiences.

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