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The Historical Account of Undergraduate Theatre Curricula's Rise in the Academy

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THE dearth of historical inquiry into post-secondary theatre education might lead one to think that the study of theatrical arts in American colleges and universities has been non-existent, or at best, superfluous. A search for unified historical accounts of post-secondary educational theatre uncovered only twenty-two published studies and eleven unpublished doctoral dissertations. Only one of the published studies, a biography, is book-length (Kinne, 1968). The rest include six articles in professional journals, three professional reports, one article in a professional report, and eleven chapters in books and anthologies that usually discuss aspects of fine arts in the university, non-profit theatre, and the history of speech education. Only a few sentences, at most a paragraph, are sprinkled here and there in historical treatments of higher education, individual colleges and universities, curricula, and general histories of American theatre.

Interested students will be surprised to discover from this record, then, that educational theatre underwent a swift and substantive rise in higher education, one that has been neither precedented nor duplicated internationally. Theatre was mostly absent in the classical colleges of the colonial period but was buoyantly popular in extra-curricular literary societies after the Civil War. Thereafter, according to historians, theatre curricula developed in four chronological periods that parallel major changes in the United States economy, public policy, and higher education.[1] According to this organizing scheme, the first generation began around the turn of the twentieth century when newly formed departments of speech and English introduced courses in playwriting and play-production. The second generation began in 1925 when the famous Radcliffe professor of playwriting, George Pierce Baker, opened the Department of Drama at Yale University, the event usually credited with legitimizing theatre as an autonomous field of study in higher education. The third generation occurred during the so-called boom time for higher education, from the end of World War II through the 1960s, when state and federal legislatures appropriated a large share of mounting national prosperity to the expansion of colleges and universities. During this phase, curricular theatre soared. Drastic changes in educational funding and student populations in the 1970s initiated the fourth generation that continues today.

The sheer volume and speed of growth of theatre curricula in undergraduate education contradicts the marginal attention it has received by historians of education and theatre: the record shows that although it took 200 years to secure the right to perform plays at American colleges, it took only 80 years for the curriculum to grow from a few isolated courses at the turn of the century to well over 14,000 in the 1970s. Perhaps desiring to affix legitimacy, status, and worth to the theatre curriculum in higher education, the majority of historians who chronicled its ascent seem to have aspired to promote theatre in America. By positioning themselves as advocates of theatre education, theatre historians assumed a vantage point that illuminated certain questions about the curriculum while obscuring others. Examining these questions may provide us with a better understanding of today's problems.

That both educators and historians have been preoccupied with a struggle to attain legitimacy is unsurprising. Theatre has suffered historically from political suspicion and low cultural esteem. The Puritans who planted the seeds of American culture fled England to escape the corruption of moral life by, among other things, theatre. But they were only the most recent incarnation of a Western tradition begun at least when Plato rejected theatrical activity as an emotional distraction from lofty ideas and continued later by medieval theologists who rejected its association with pagan gods. The anti-theatrical penchant prevailed during the first two centuries of American collegiate education. Classical colleges which aimed above all to transform boys into gentlemen and ministers, greeted dramatic activity both on and off campus with skepticism and often hostility. From Harvard's founding in 1636 until the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, colleges regulated against any theatrical expression on college campuses (Beckerman, 1971, p. 339; Ney, 1989, p. 42). Such antagonistic beginnings contributed, perhaps, to historians' persistent focus on a relatively narrow set of questions that conditioned the following perspective on the development of the collegiate theatre curriculum.

The first phase of collegiate theatre instruction, between 1900 and 1925, grew out of universities' official sanction of extracurricular clubs and productions after the Civil War (Beckerman, 1971, p. 345; Clark, 1954, p. 544). As historians of higher education explain it, higher education in the latter half of the nineteenth century initiated a process of democratization and professionalization that provoked radical change and dislocation in the academy.[2] Rapid expansion and diversification of knowledge led to a dissolution of traditional subjects, the creation of many others, and the departmentalization of the entire curriculum. Out of these transformations, the prototypical modern university emerged. Reconstruction of the curriculum included the replacement of rhetorical study by departments of speech and literature in which dramatic curricula developed (Beckerman, 1971; Coulton, 1951; Damon, 1951; Geltner, 1980; Hamar, 1954; Hobgood, 1960). Departments of speech and English introduced drama to their courses as a method of cultivating skill in public speech and of interpreting literature respectively. Within a period of upheaval and debate in higher education, then, curricular theatre formally entered the academy.

Theatrical instruction developed rapidly during its second phase, between 1925 and 1945.[3] During the 1920s, courses in dramatic art became increasingly popular. Curricular programs in theatre arts increased by 28% as departments of public speaking and literary studies offered courses in theatrical arts. By the late twenties, 76% of American colleges and universities offered theatrical courses. Educators initiated a curriculum emphasizing theatrical training and production skill that replaced the former uses of drama in speech and English courses. Pedagogy still favored experimental approaches in course work. Play production, to which curricula quickly became inextricably linked, embraced an aesthetic of amateurism (Isaacs, 1933).[4] Theatre's continuing popularity among undergraduates, coupled, assuredly, with effective advocacy, culminated in the 1930s with the first instances of departmental autonomy from English and speech.[5] Finally, these achievements spurred sev-

eral national coalitions that formed six theatre associations and instigated professional efforts to define a universal, formal curriculum (Halstead & Behringer, 1954).

Historians have identified four distinct achievements of the first two generations of theatre education in American colleges and universities, given here in their rough chronological appearance. First, theatre was legitimized as an academic field of study. Second, a discreet curriculum rose from haphazard extracurricular theatrical activity. Third, the leadership of Baker, Frederick Koch, Edward Mabie, Alexander Drummond, and others who introduced playwriting and "production labs," initiated curricula that led to increasing specialization in the crafts of production: Acting, Directing, and Play-Production became the core of the theatrical curriculum (Beckerman, 1971; Butler, 1971; Hamar, 1954; Macgowan, 1929). Fourth, by guiding students to write, produce, and tour plays locally, teachers paved the road for the university to play an important role in the development of regional theatre (Butler, 1971; Macgowan 1929).

Historians defined the third phase of the enterprise by its sustained and prolific growth from 1945 through the mid-seventies. After the second world war, the advance of mass media ravaged commercial theatre.[6] The noncommercial theatre subsequently surged and the university theatre rose with it. Chronicles of the period referred to evidence in the Directory of American College Theatre (DACT), 1960, of sprawling curricular expansion.[7] From 1945 through the 1950s, the number of programs, teachers, students, and productions doubled. By the end of the 1950s, most colleges and universities provided instruction, with one quarter of them offering a B.A. in dramatic arts.

Constituting one of the largest single events in post-war American theatre, the third phase is recognized by historians for the professionalization of educational theatre on two fronts. First, the period saw the legitimization of theatre as an accredited, degree-granting field of study in higher education. Second, educational theatre moved away from humanistic education and toward training for the professional theatre, with which the greatly expanded educational theatre clearly aspired to ally itself.[8]

The continuing growth of university-sponsored programs and curricula in the arts led the critic W. McNeil Lowry in 1962 to assert in an influential article that in an irreversible shift, the enlarged university had assumed responsibility for training the nation's future artists and for developing a healthy regional, professional theatre.[9] Believing this situation to be incongruous with then-current objectives of liberal education, he urged the formation of new strategies to avoid a loss of quality in both education and professional theatre. Lowry had identified an unexamined conflict that developed in educational theatre—the conflict between a liberal education and professional preparation for theatre.

But the conflict has been lost on most historians who have limited their attention to the impressive numerical growth of the field. First, the record explains, by 1967, the number of teachers and majors tripled just since 1960, while the number of courses grew by 71% in a curriculum increasingly geared to professional training. Second, with the establishment of conservatories in universities, the number of students seeking the M.A. and the Ph.D. doubled (Hobgood, 1964).[10]

Following the attainment of a hard-won place in the academy, educational theatre's momentum showed signs of slowing toward the end of the third phase. As early as 1970, studies indicated that the boom in higher education was over. Although sustained growth of theatre programs was reported through the seventies, by 1980 it became clear that educational theatre's expansion had ended (Hobgood, 1990) and that a new, fourth phase, characterized by unanticipated and entirely different challenges, had begun.

A summary of the literature reveals that theatre historians have thus far stressed the quantitative scope of theatre education's growth and professionalization in the academy. Most historians have interpreted educational theatre's development as parallel movements

toward professional autonomy within the university and growing allegiance with theatre outside it. Historians' major indices of change have been marked by quantitative milestones: the number of autonomous programs and departments established nationwide, the number of courses offered in the curriculum, of students majoring in theatre, of teachers who hold advanced degrees or who are professionally trained, and of professional associations and publications established. Progress and success have been consistently associated with increasing size—of programs, productions, audiences, and so on. Qualitative indices mark the shifts in a curricular trajectory progressing from the creative use of drama to enrich instruction in speech and literature to an emphasis upon mastery of production crafts. Curricular standards have been measured by the degree to which the quality of training and play production conform to standards set by non-university theatre.

But most historians, while nodding at the steady effort to attain legitimacy outside the university, have not ascertained the accompanying pedagogical inconsistencies. That persuasive reasons exist, for instance, to produce theatre for the community outside the university (the lives of local audiences may be enriched, the university lessens its "ivory-tower" insularity, and so forth) does not justify a presumption that softening the boundaries between the university and the community is always a good thing. On the contrary, the outcomes of such initiatives will vary according to the particular goals and functions of academic disciplines. Contradictions result, for example, when pedagogical authority shifts from the interactions of varied student groups and teachers to the norms and tastes of audiences that may be unconcerned with the aesthetic and intellectual education of student performers. Thus, the apparent advantages of producing plays for audiences outside the university may be deceptive. Most historians of collegiate theatre instruction paid little or no attention to thorny problems like this, preferring, instead, to look on the bright side: the curriculum was expanding; students were choosing the theatre major in droves; audiences were growing; expensive facilities were being built.

Most of them were also disinterested in major institutional influences that bear directly upon the content of undergraduate education: the changing definition of the American university, the changing undergraduate student population, and changing educational theory.

First, theatre historians have rarely interpreted the development of educational theatre in relation to the multifaceted circumstances and problems of the American university. General histories of higher education seem, for the most part, to have eluded theatre historians. Consequently, practical and philosophical questions that pertain to the shifting ideologies of undergraduate education have been ignored: What is and has been the university's purpose? What has been, and should be, the university's function in American society? Whom has it served? Where might it go, and how might theatre programs contribute to its destiny? The omission of these questions bespeaks a lack of commitment to educational challenges and conflicts beyond the immediate concerns of the theatre department. It also implies a lack of understanding of the ideological foundations of higher education, and their role in decisions made about curriculum.

Second, theatre historians have overlooked generational variations in the student population, omitting, without exception, questions about students' cultural identity. Yet it is well known that student constituencies have changed extensively, forcing the university to adjust to the varied demands and expectations of each new cultural membership. Most radically, perhaps, since the Morrill Act of 1962, the university has continued to democratize and diversify relative to its parochial and aristocratic origins. Successive generations of students have prevailed upon the university to confront controversial questions about accessibility and equity in admissions and curricula. Betraying ignorance of the influence of such political factors on curricular decisions, however, theatre historians have elicited a picture of a student body that has remained faceless and static for several centuries.

Third, the studies have, for the most part, not yet considered the impact of changing epistemologies from which pedagogical and aesthetic theory are derived. Throughout American educational history, the question of what should count as knowledge has been widely debated, influencing curricular development in many disciplines during the four designated periods of theatre education. Is reality transcendent, and knowable as such, or determined contextually? Is knowledge transmitted, or communicated interactively? Should curricula be content or process-based? What is the value of literacy—To advance public discourse about ideas and politics? To enrich personal life? To equip individuals for economic well-being? Such questions and their surrounding controversies have conditioned the shape of American education in which aesthetic educators have assiduously sought to contribute. Yet explanations of pedagogical content, method, and aim given by most theatre historians suggest a lack of knowledge about epistemological theory and its importance to the history of undergraduate education.

The neglect of ideological, political, and epistemological influences in higher education from which decisions about curricula have been made is paradoxical and troubling. For educational theatre is nothing if not an extension and tool of the institutions that subsidize it and with whose purpose it is, by definition, interdependent. These oversights indicate a tendency within the profession to abstract theatre practice from its encompassing domain. It is hard to imagine such a divorce serving to sustain or strengthen the field's value to institutions of higher learning.

Three historians diverged from their colleagues, however, by associating the development of theatre curricula with the changing institutional and pedagogical functions of the university. In *The Uses of Drama: A Historical Survey of Drama and Education from Ancient Greece to the Present Day*, the first of them, Phillip Coggins (1956) cites educational uses of theatre from antiquity to modern times. To this end, he reviews the history of epistemological systems from which educational theatre developed. He begins a chapter on American collegiate theatre education by identifying two instructional approaches: formal and creative. According to Coggins, formal drama ("the performance of plays written by established authors and in conditions approximating the professional theatre") (p. 189) derives from Kant's and Croce's separation of artistic expression from utility and its elevation to a realm of pure, aesthetic imagination. Creative drama (which took the form of playwriting in the American university) (p. 222), he explains, developed from Rousseau's claim that experience and emotion are dominant factors in human life. The author postulates that American collegiate theatre education rose in opposition to the growing utilitarian functions of education in an industrial society (p. 224). In spite of the depth of this study, however, Coggins does not mention any problems in the curriculum, or note the events and trends against whose consequences Lowry warned.

In "Theatre Education and Hirsch's Contextualism," the second of the three historians, Patti P. Gillespie (1991), extends Coggins's discussion by arguing that we rethink the past in relation to its educational outcomes. Like Coggins, she contextualizes theatrical pedagogy within philosophical traditions that began during the Enlightenment. She then examines recent curricular practices against which E. D. Hirsch has based his critique of cultural illiteracy. Finally, she suggests possible directions for theatre education at all levels of instruction based on Hirsch's proposals. Distinguishing herself from her colleagues, Gillespie moves beyond the enclosed world of the collegiate theatre department to analyze its role in the bigger struggle to define the American curriculum. But in an otherwise incisive analysis, Gillespie reduces incongruities in theatre curricula to an assumption of coherence between their content and the type of institutional degree offered:

"Some colleges consider the [theatre] major a pathway to a liberal education; others view it either as preparation for the professional theatre and so offer a B.F.A. degree or as preparation for graduate school in theatre" (p. 26).

Like Coggins and Gillespie, Oscar G. Brockett links the agenda of educational theatre to that of the university. In "The Historical Viewpoint," Brockett (1973) begins by tracing modern and educational theatre to their mutual roots in the humanist reforms of the Renaissance that spread through study of classical plays. He then challenges theatre educators to think about their endeavor in relation to the educational mission of American higher education: "What place, if any, should theatre have in a university?" "For what are students being educated?" and "For what purpose are plays produced" (p. 11)? Finally, he asks whether or not there are significant differences when theatre operates within the university as opposed to some other setting, arguing that if not, then theatre in universities offers only a poor substitute for professional theatre (p. 12). Regrettably, Brockett retreats from the complexity of his own questions with a simplistic answer: "In closing, I would like to declare my belief that any acceptable solution to our problems must insure that the depth of understanding implied by 'liberal education' is meshed with theatrical skills of the highest order, for in the theatre each is crippled without the other" (p. 12).

In sum, these historians, on the one hand, have exceeded the attempts of their colleagues. By correlating the aims of theatre curricula with those of the university, and by conceptualizing the uses of theatre in higher education within historical movements in epistemology and pedagogy, they have interpreted the progress of undergraduate theatre curricula in terms of its substantive educational content.

But on the other hand, they have left unexplained and unexposed the intricate and difficult problem, first introduced by Lowry, of the discrepancy between the needs and purposes of theatre and those of education. By failing to question the supposition of their compatibility, theatre historians have tacitly—and perniciously, perhaps—supported the division of educators' attention between the goals and demands of each.

One must conclude that, for two reasons, historians have inadequately recorded and interpreted the development of collegiate educational theatre. First, they have failed to fully examine the ideological, political, and epistemological tensions of the changing university that embrace the discipline of theatre study; second, they have failed to reveal and confront the paradox of the theatre curriculum.

The situation about which Lowry warned—that the curricular paradox would eventually diminish the accomplishments of both theatre and educational theatre—now appears to have become a reality, at least in education. Although the current, fourth phase of collegiate curricular theatre has not yet been systematically researched, it is commonly believed that recent economic cutbacks have stalled, or in many cases reversed, the progress of previous generations. Programs have been terminated, enrollments have dropped, inter-departmental competition for money has shriveled or dissolved budgets, numerous performing arts facilities, constructed during the boom years and badly in need of modernization and maintenance, have been abandoned; power struggles with administrations and within departments abound. Finally, it has been argued, public image of theatre programs has deteriorated (Hobgood, 1990). Collegiate educational theatre's viability, then, seems increasingly precarious. Indeed, many contemporary observers allege that academic theatre today is in crisis on all fronts.

The inadequacy of the historical record, coupled with the prominent neglect of educational theatre as a subject of study by most theatre historians, insinuates a poverty of ideas rather than of finances in the decline of academic theatre. There is no evidence, for instance, to support the widespread assumption that advanced technology and acquisition are necessary to promote effective pedagogy, or to insure educational theatre's survival in the academy. On the contrary, the historical correlation of aesthetic and pedagogical power with lucrative budgets is neither universal nor probable. In fact, many of academic theatre's seminal accomplishments occurred in informal theatres where creative experimentation by motivated amateurs superseded expertise in the crafts of production.

An interesting development in the fourth phase of academic theatre is a reduction of self-oriented historical investigation. Not surprisingly, twenty-eight of the thirty-two historical treatments found in the present study were conducted after 1945 when federal and academic support of the arts burgeoned and campus theatrical activity flourished. But only eight studies have been conducted between 1974 and 1995. The cause of the relative decline of historical interest in collegiate educational theatre, especially in light of its current travails, remains to be determined: Is it the result of economic factors that have reduced scholarly output? Or is it theoretical developments that have diminished scholars interest in theatre as a discreet area of knowledge and pedagogy? Perhaps it is the ubiquitous bias against curriculum and pedagogy as worthy subjects of scholarly study? In any case, it seems likely that the need for historical analysis of collegiate educational theatre would be more profitable now than ever.

If it is true that the enterprise suffers from a poverty of ideas, then in order to meet pressing challenges, educators would surely benefit from further study of the past.

Contextualizing academic theatre's role history within changing definitions of the university, changing epistemological and pedagogical theory, and changing student constituencies might help generate solutions for academic theatre's present afflictions. In sum, theatre historians can deepen the productive analysis of entrenched problems for those who are persuaded by the powerful aesthetic and educational opportunities availed by theatre pedagogy and insist that it be kept alive.

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[1] Several commentators have referred to this framework. See Mahoney, 1970; Brockett, 1971; Neely, 1993; and J. Davis (Ed.), 1985, *Theatre education: Mandate for tomorrow,* Lawrence KS: Anchorage Press.

[2] For a discussion of historical changes in higher education, see John S. Brubacher, (1966). *A history of the problems of education,* New York: McGraw-Hill and Laurence R. Veysey, (1965). *The emergence of the American university,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[3] Statistics on the growth of theatre instruction between 1925 and 1945 may be found in Butler, 1971; Coulton, 1951; Damon, 1951; Geltner, 1980; Isaacs, 1933; Hobgood, 1960, and Ney, 1989.

[4] The term "amateur," meaning one who loves the arts, did not then carry the connotation of poor quality and low status that it does today.

[5] For a discussion of theatre's continuing popularity among undergraduates, see Isaacs.

[6] Throughout the 1920s, for example, audiences enjoyed 5,000 touring companies and 400 stock companies; 80 Broadway theatres opened 200 new plays. By 1957, 50 touring companies and no stock companies remained; 30 remaining Broadway theatres opened only 45 new plays. See Kenneth Macgowan, (1956) "The educational theatre for tomorrow," *Educational Theatre Journal, 8,* 87.

[7] For a summary of the growth of this period see, Hobgood, 1990.

[8] A discussion of the two developments can be found in Gard, Balch, & Temkin, 1968.

[9] W. McNeil Lowry, (1962). The university and the creative arts," *Educational Theatre Journal, 14,* 99-112.

[10]10 Theoretical articles published during his period, on the other hand, show that a vehement debate ensued over the aims and content of the curriculum.

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