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Recreating New Departments, From Name Change To . . .

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INTRODUCTION

IN the fall of 1991, I had the pleasure of becoming the Chair of a Speech Communications and Theater Department in a small liberal arts, religious affiliated college. I was optimistic, excited, and idealistic. Since that time, I have discovered a few more gray hairs, a few more wrinkles, and my stress level has risen. However, I am happy to report that I am still optimistic and excited about the potential of the program, and I am convinced more than ever, that an idealistic approach to theater education is essential if a department is to prepare its students for the challenges of the "real world."

I contend that we must continue to be idealistic because the challenges theater educators face concerning so many issues can be astronomical depending on the individual or departmental situation. If we lose sight of our ideals I believe mediocrity will prevail, and as long as we choose education as an occupation we must remember that we serve as examples for our students and we are equally accountable for their future as the students are themselves.

I am fortunate to work for an administration that supports the arts and allows a chair to make difficult and often unpopular decisions. Such decisions are not always understood by the administration, the students, or the community. However, in my estimation, (and I am ultimately responsible), all of the changes implemented during the past three years have been for the benefit of the student, the program, and the college. Since 1991, the department has faced many challenges and has undergone many changes including philosophy, objectives, title, curriculum, and faculty. I would like to take a few moments to discuss the justification for such changes.

CHANGE IN PHILOSOPHY

The major factor contributing to the changes the department would undertake in the upcoming months was philosophical. Students come to us with a dream. A dream of working

within the profession they love—the theater. It is the goal of the faculty and, I hope, of faculty everywhere, to help such dreams become a reality. Theater is a business, and it is the goal of the department to challenge, to push, and to prepare students with such dreams in the classroom and in production. And the educational process must be implemented in a manner that will best prepare the student for the harsh realities of the business.

As a small liberal arts college that currently employs three full-time faculty (two directors and one designer), two adjunct faculty members (one dance instructor and one speech instructor), and one staff member (costume designer), within the department, it is important for the department to realize that we cannot claim to be something other than what we are. We cannot be all things to all people. It was my belief at the time and is presently, that it is better to concentrate departmental efforts and resources on aspects of theatrical training that takes advantage of the expertise of the faculty and best prepares our students to meet the challenges they will face upon graduation.

The department has historically operated within a liberal arts environment offering a Bachelor of Arts Degree within the academic discipline. Stephen Langley (1974), author of *Theatre Management in America: Principle and Practice*, states: “. . . the liberal arts college that offers a theatre major is likely to discourage careers in professional theatre and, rather, prepare students for careers in educational theatre” (p.146). If Mr. Langley is correct in his assumption, then the department is unique in that it does exactly the opposite. The department does not offer secondary certification for potential drama teachers. However, the department does not discourage careers in educational theater. The department does, however, encourage students who have professional aspirations to begin planning for such a career from the first day of their college career. Realizing the challenges of the professional world of theater, the department does educate the student on other career opportunities within the theater and the entertainment industry and encourages the student to explore other career options as they mature, and career and personal goals evolve.

Obviously, such an approach to theater implies that the emphasis of the program is on the practical and not the theoretical or historical. Such a philosophy has been implemented because the faculty believes we are meeting the needs of the student and the demands of the 90's. In addition, the faculty believes that if the student is trained properly in acting, directing, and design, and a varied season of theatrical genres is presented, the student who is curious, passionate, and dedicated to the art form, will examine closely each period represented throughout their undergraduate career and learn much of the historical and theoretical, while exploring the practical demands of the production.

CHANGES IN DEPARTMENTAL OBJECTIVES

Departmental goals and objectives traditionally reflect the philosophy of a department. Prospective students who compare past and present catalogs describing the program will notice a dramatic change in the stated objectives of the department. A 1991-92 catalog reveals objectives that are consistent with traditional liberal arts programs:

“Students completing a major in Speech Communications and Theater will have an understanding of the theoretical concepts behind each of the three major divisions within the discipline: oral communications/performance, design/production, and theater literature/history.

- 1) The student will be able to demonstrate a practical knowledge of the theater through participation in department productions.
- 2) The student will know the basic structure and the fundamental philosophical thrust of each of the major dramatic literary movements, from fifth century Greece to contemporary theater.

- 3) The student will demonstrate an awareness of the historical evolution of the theater and be able to identify the significant trends in theater architecture, and scenic and costume design.
- 4) The student will demonstrate an understanding of the communication process through a variety of oral presentations.
- 5) The student will demonstrate a mastery of the theoretical aspects of the discipline through the completion of a practical project prior to graduation."

A review of the 1992-93 catalog reveals a substantial change in the objectives of the department consistent with the new philosophy yet recognizing the strengths of the past:

"The following objectives are established as a basis for the training program in Theater Arts. Upon application for graduation, the Theater Arts major will be expected to:

- 1) have an understanding of the basic theoretical and evolutionary concepts behind each of the three major divisions with the discipline: performance, design/ production, and literature.
- 2) have an artistic vocabulary especially in their specific area of concentration.
- 3) have the technical knowledge pertaining to the student's chosen area of concentration, but not limited to it.
- 4) demonstrate an understanding of auditioning (actors) and or portfolio presentation (designers/technicians) through a juried presentation.
- 5) be knowledgeable of various unions within the entertainment industry, including but not limited to, Actors Equity Association (AEA), United Scenic Artists (USA), and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG).
- 6) be knowledgeable of viable avenues of employment and sources noting such information.
- 7) have an understanding of graduate study and opportunities in theater and the performing arts."

CHANGE IN DEPARTMENTAL TITLE

Changes in the departmental philosophy and objectives required an examination of the departmental title. Upon my arrival in 1991, it was my observation that the Department title of "Speech Communications, and Theater" implied that the department offered and was qualified to teach "Speech" courses. Although advanced "Speech" courses were listed in the college bulletin, such courses were not offered on a regular basis. More importantly, none of the faculty possessed an advanced degree in "Speech Communication." In addition, a further examination of the major degree requirement revealed that only "theater" courses were required for graduation.

Examining the history of the department, the study of "theater" had always been the focus of the program. To clarify the true nature of the program, and more importantly, avoid claims of misrepresentation by perspective students, the President of the College approved a name change to "Theater Arts" beginning in the fall of 1992.

CHANGES IN THE CURRICULUM

Changes within the curriculum reflect the new philosophy and objectives of the department. Beginning in the fall of 1992, all "Speech" courses (with the exception of "Fundamentals of Speech," a general education requirement), were deleted from the

curriculum. Students with performance ambitions who could previously graduate with only one required acting course but were required to take three design/production courses, suddenly had the opportunity to take a sequence of performance courses. Students also had the option of declaring an emphasis (performance or design). The addition of such courses as Period Styles of Acting, Auditioning, Musical Theater I & II, and Stage Combat were added to the curriculum to enhance the education of our performance students.

Other factors contributing to this emphasis on the practical and to our developing a "training program" were: (1) the facility in which the students are trained; (2) the departmental budget; and (3) the administrations commitment to employ passionate, energetic educators with professional affiliations and experience.

The administration provides a generous departmental operating budget and equipment budget. Although I cannot provide financial details of the budget, I can attest that the dollar per student ratio the department is allotted annually, is significant for a small theater program.

Students are currently trained in an eighteen year old theater that houses a two-hundred and eighty seat auditorium, thirty-six fly lines, eight electricians, a hydraulic orchestra pit, fully equipped scene and costume shop, dance studio, classroom, box office, concession stand, spacious lobby and separate storage areas for scenery, props, and costumes. Stage lighting is controlled by an Omega Computer Lighting System (dimmer per circuit system consisting of 120 dimmers which are electronically patched to 72 channels). Sound effects are cued on a Tascam DAT (Digital Audio Tape) machine and played back or mixed through a 16 channel mixer. Although many theater training programs have similar or more extensive facilities I believe such a facility may be unique for a small liberal arts college with under twenty students majoring in Theater Arts.

CHANGE IN FACULTY

The final step in restructuring the department was the most difficult. The administration thought it best to begin anew and to search for faculty that: (1) agreed with the mission and policies of the college and (2) best fit the new philosophy of the department. Replacing faculty that were personable and dedicated was very stressful. However, I believe this decision, although painful, was to the benefit of all parties. The decision allowed the department to employ three full-time professors rather than two full-time and two part-time professors which had been the arrangement in previous years. More importantly, it allowed the department to search for professors who not only possessed the required academic credentials but the professional affiliations the department desired as well.

The professors employed in the fall of 1992 included a scenic designer with a Master of Fine Arts from the North Carolina School of the Arts and a member of the United Scenic Artists Union, and an acting professor/director with a Ph.D. from Texas Tech University but also a member of Actors Equity Association and the Screen Actors Guild. One final requirement the department was searching for were educators who were interested in pursuing personal and professional goals outside of the college and educators who were willing to risk, and to show, by example, what is taught in the classroom. The results of this philosophy have afforded one faculty member to act in a nine week run of the Horizon Theatre's production of *Six Degree's of Separation* in Atlanta and another faculty member to act in the S.A.M.E./Outproud Theater production of *The Sum of Us* also in Atlanta.

Arranging schedules and the added personal responsibility one undertakes is a challenge in itself when such opportunities arise. However, I believe a newfound respect is discovered by students who realize that their professor's have gone through the audition process and who have the opportunity to see the professor's work first-hand as an actor. It is not so important that the professor auditions and is cast. What is important is that those who teach are willing to risk, willing to practice the craft that they teach, and willing to experience theater other than

in the educational institution in which they teach. Aside from the personal benefits, one may discover that credibility for the program increases, in addition to positive exposure for the program and college or university.

CONCLUSION

As I reflect upon the changes made within the department, I realize other changes have taken place: (1) reducing the Mainstage Season from four productions to three, (2) breaking twenty-seven years of tradition and moving the summer theater program from an off-campus location to the campus; and (3) most importantly, and most controversial (when considering public relations and job security), is putting the students education first. I entered the world of education because I enjoy the process of teaching. I enjoy watching those students who struggle and although frustrated, refuse to give up and work harder to understand the process of creating art. I enjoy watching the student succeed? But what of those who do not succeed? What of those who do not realize their dream? For those who have tried.

For those who gave it all they had. For their professors who gave the student their heart and soul, I am confident that the student will succeed in life and in an area of the art form they love. I am confident because I know if the student is the first priority, that the time, the energy, and the effort by the professor and by the student will be there. I know that if the student ever fails to come first then it will be time for one final change to take place in the department that I chair. It will be time to search for a chair with more patience and less expectations. It will be time to search for a chair who cares more for career longevity than the quality education of a student. It will be time for me to evaluate my goals and my future.

Change is never easy. Department Chairs who have entered a challenging situation and have been forced to implement change for the betterment of a program have most likely faced resistance and perhaps from time to time, self-doubt. However, I have found comfort in a few simple words that hang on my office door. The poet is unknown to me, however, the poem was given to me by Mr. Sygmunt Nagorski, the President of The Center for International Leadership, based in Washington, D.C.. I base my life, my career, and every change the department has made from philosophy, to title, to curriculum, to faculty, on:

THE MAN IN THE GLASS

When you get what you want in your struggle for self, and the world makes you king for a day, JUST go to a mirror and look at yourself, and see what THAT MAN has to say.

For it isn't your father or mother or wife whose judgment upon you must pass. The fellow whose verdict counts most in your life is the one staring back from the glass.

Some people may think you a straight-shooting chum, and call you a wonderful guy, but the man in the glass says you're only a bum, if you can't look him straight in the eye.

He's the fellow to please, never mind all the rest, for he's with you clear to the end. And you have passed your most difficult, dangerous test, if the man in the glass is your friend.

You can fool the whole world down the pathway of life, and get pats on your back as you pass, but your final reward will be the heartaches and tears, if you cheat the MAN IN THE GLASS.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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Langley, S. (1974). *Theatre Management in America: Principle and Practice*. New York: Drama Book Specialists.