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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Jill Dolan, former President of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), and author of the foundational *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* once wrote, “We should teach our students to enter participatory democracy as artist/scholars with the skills to be competent, engaged, thoughtful citizens.”¹ When I first encountered this quotation it immediately struck me as incredibly relevant to my own teaching philosophy. Shortly after reading this statement for the first time I posted it on the bulletin board above my desk. Every time I look up from my desk I see Dolan’s words and am reminded of their import. With each of my courses I return to ideas of competency, engagement, thoughtfulness, and participatory democracy.

In preparing my students for professional success I try to focus on the most effective methods of educating them to the totality of their chosen fields—in my case primarily Theatre & Dance majors and minors. I deliberately use the word “educate” here in lieu of “train,” primarily in response to another quotation that I see above my desk daily. In a 1972 essay, theatre historian Hubert C. Hefner wrote,

The development of the ability to reason logically and to evaluate, the acquirement of the skills to communicate the results of reasoning, and a grasp of the facts and ideas essential to logical reasoning are, as I see it, the criteria which differentiate education from mere training. If these are missing from the instruction in theatre and drama, the result may still be quite good “trade training” but hardly worthy to be called academic education.²

In my classes I strive to go beyond training and reach education. To me, the difference lies in the connective tissue between topics and the students’ use of independent critical analysis. For example, in my Theatre History courses I have a responsibility to introduce students to the classics of Ancient Greek tragedy. Asking students to read, discuss, and analyze these plays would be sufficient training. To transcend training and move to education, however, I also challenge my students to question how (or if) the writing and performance of these classic texts proved central to the formation and institutionalization of misogyny in Western theatre. I present them with both the play and with contemporary critical analysis of the play, encouraging them to examine their own preconceptions. Finally, our conversations turn to how do we *as theatre artists utilize* this scholarly critique to inform the art that we create. It is my goal that upon completion of my courses students have acquired the knowledge they require to be professionally competent, but also to be thoughtful in their application of this competence.

Yet as much as I value this combination of competence and thoughtfulness, I perhaps prize engagement and participatory democracy more than any other educational values. Engagement with the world at large touches every single one of my classes. Engagement, in the words of Garland Wright, the former Artistic Director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, defines “the difference between ‘putting on plays’ and participating in the world through theatre.”³ Courses in theatre history and dramatic literature draw ties between theatrical material and the cultural contexts in which they were created. Courses in directing and playwriting encourage students to connect their artistic activity to the world in which they exist. In all of my courses I guide students to engagement and participatory democracy.

¹ Jill Dolan, “Rehearsing Democracy: Advocacy, Public Intellectuals, and Civic Engagement in Theatre and Performance Studies,” *Theatre Topics* 11.1 (March, 2001), 1-17, 3.

² Hubert C. Hefner, “Theatre and Drama in Liberal Education,” *Studies in Theatre and Drama: Essays in Honor of Hubert C. Hefner*, Oscar G. Brockett, Ed., (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 9-20, 16.

³ Michael Bloom, *Thinking Like a Director*, (New York: Faber & Faber, 2001), 12.

At the top of my Directing syllabus I include a quotation from the stage director Peter Brook, the source of which is long lost to me. This quotation reads, “Everything is possible, but you must find your own way. So, if you look at my work and think, ‘Ah, there is an example, I will start by what he’s done,’ you are bound to go wrong. Because the work that I do today is the result of all the work I’ve done through trial and error, in changing times.” This is an example of my learner-centered approach to education. In short, what it means is that there is no one single way of directing—nor is there one single way of playwriting, or working as a historian. There exist multiple methods, and it is the responsibility of the learner to find the method that works for them. As an educator I strive to help my students find their own approach—one based in my guidance, but never one that merely reproduces my own techniques