

Theater Program Development in Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to find answers to how best colleges and universities can adapt the teaching of theatre in its curriculum. It was then necessary to track the different ways drama has evolved throughout time and how its adoption in formal education has affected its students, both present and past. To this end the researcher examined theater from its earliest inception to its adoption by schools of higher education, more specifically, public colleges and universities.

Key Words: Theater Arts, Fine Arts, Theater Education

Historically, drama has existed to pass on information from one generation to another. It is unique as an art form as the mere function of drama is to move something forward. The word drama signifies a doing, or enactment (Brown, 1995). Modern playwrights, and writers in general, understand that drama's major function is to educate its audience to what is happening in the society they live in (Landy, 1982). This is sometimes done in subversive ways and at other times acted out quite simple and to the point. Drama has always had a quality that has set it apart from other art forms through its teaching characteristic. Consequently this art form has been adopted throughout the world and across cultures because of its ability to educate and inform (Landy, 1982).

This study sought to find answers to how best colleges and universities can adapt the teaching of theatre in its curriculum. It was then necessary to track the different ways drama has evolved throughout time and how its adoption in formal education has affected its students, both present and past. To this end the researcher examined theater from its earliest inception to its adoption by schools of higher education, more specifically, public colleges and universities.

Historical Overview of Theater

1. Prehistoric Theater

It is difficult to imagine what early theater consisted of, but scholars agree that it most probably began with ancient cave drawings (Markus & Sarver, 2005). These drawings originated by the hunters of the particular clans who would tell stories of their conquests. The better the stories the more reverence was given to the hunter (Markus & Sarver, 2005). It is believed that hunters would most probably embellish the story to produce a greater response from their particular clans. This embellishment would turn to performance and thus becoming theater in its purest form (Markus & Server, 2005). Brockett and Hildy (2008) also point that theater most probably emerged from ritualistic ceremonies that then became part of the mythology of the time (Brockett & Hildy, 2008). The researchers who pointed out that prehistoric societies revolved around the hunting and gathering of food. The ones who were charged with bringing food back to the tribe were revered by the tribal members and were then honored with rituals depicting their conquests. Tribal shamans developed rituals that sought to prevent undesirable circumstances such as death or a bad hunt. Tribes also performed these depictions, in order to prevent negative outcomes. These rituals were adopted before every hunt or at certain times in order to appease the unexplainable forces around them (Brockett & Hildy, 2008). Brockett & Hildy (2008)

pointed out that “performers [wore] costumes and masks to represent the mythical characters or supernatural forces in the rituals or in accompanying celebrations” (p. 1).

Besides explaining ritualistic events the other popular theory of the origins of prehistoric theater come from storytelling, as was aforementioned. These two theories and even the idea of having no particular starting point for theater, are the ones widely accepted by scholars today (Brockett & Hildy, 2008).

2. Theater in Africa

As with many of our origins theater also has its roots in Africa. While not as documented as in the European continent, there is evidence that shows a theatrical influence. As stated in Brown and Urice (2003) Leslie Read notes that Egyptian theater, practiced its art in a festival format. Read stated that these celebrations, “were occasions when the gods were carried in procession out of the temples, through the urban quarters, into the country, and back. Magic and dance were integral elements, as was the dramatic play” (p. 93). Read pointed out that it was important for all community members to witness and learn from the festival.

There is no recorded literature as compared to that of the European counterparts, but the Egyptians still used the performers as messengers. What has been collected has been recorded by researchers and been classified as a type of dramatic literature (p. 94). The Egyptians passed their stories down as an ideology. The action of these performed stories served as a learning ground for the Egyptians as to how they were to interact with each other.

3. Greek Theater

Theater, as we know it today, can be traced back to ancient Greece. In the beginning theater was nothing more than a way to celebrate different events (Grote, 1989). Key terms that are with us to this day are Greek origin (Brown, 1995). Words like, drama, tragedy, comedy, and even theater itself were first adopted in Greece (Landy, 1982; Taplin, 1995). Two thousand five hundred years ago Greece was at the center of the theater world. It was not only the beginning of theater as we know it, but democracy as well. Scholars believe that Greek theater functioned to express concerns about the philosophical dilemmas of the day (Markus & Sarver, 2005).

Greek theater’s main function was to honor the god Dionysus. It is here that the first actor, Thespis, stepped from the shadows and delivered the first theatrical lines. This is mere speculation, but a well-accepted story nonetheless (Grote, 1989). Actors performed in large theaters and wore large masks so that the audience members would be able to decipher between the antagonist and protagonist. The masks also aided in the amplification of the actor’s voices (Grote, 1989).

The performance of plays turned into formal gatherings where playwrights often competed with one another. The emergence of theater critics also became well established. The most famous of these critics were Plato and Aristotle. Plato was born to noble parents, and in his youth wrote plays. He wrote plays, but burned them after being influenced by his teacher, Socrates. Consequently, there is no record of what he wrote before then, and it can be assumed that it must have been different than what was taught by Socrates (Carlson, 1984).

After Socrates’ death Plato traveled and took on a new student. Aristotle became the first formal student of theater as it was performed in ancient Greece. Plato taught Aristotle through his first published works regarding the study and teaching of theater. Plato’s *Ion* and *The Republic* offered the first formal glimpse of theatrical education. These works served as the first curriculum Aristotle would follow in the philosophy of theater (Brockett & Hildy, 2008; Carlson, 1984).

Theater scholars agree that while Aristotle was a student of Plato, their views on drama were actually quite different (Carlson, 1984). 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. These two differences in thinking were so influential that even in our present day there are two different schools of thought, the Platonic and the Aristotelian (Carlson, 1984). In the end it is Plato and Aristotle who become the first educators of the theater. Plato’s foundation dealt with

inspiration. If theater was not inspirational then it was meaningless. Aristotle, conversely, believed dramatists could be trained and that good theater had technique (Carlson, 1984).

It is the Aristotelian philosophy that we see more in today's theater schools. As a scholar, Aristotle was acknowledged as intellectual master of knowledge (Carlson, 1984). Still, scholars agree that interpreting Aristotle's ideas is both confusing and cumbersome. Unlike Plato, Aristotle's ideas, published in his book, *The Poetics*, is severely misinterpreted. 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). Critics were not the only theater patrons of the time. Greek audience members frequented the shows to watch competing plays and their fellow playwrights (Taplin, 1995). Athens, Greece became the primary source for these contests and it is here that both tragedy and comedy found their permanent fixture (Brockett & Hildy, 2008; Landy, 1982).

Greek theater also served as an avenue for instruction on morality and social issues. DeMetz (2004) wrote:

“Twenty-five hundred years ago, citizens of ancient Greece were instructed on how to conduct their lives through watching dramas at community religious festivals. Greek Tragedies demonstrated the approved way to live in order to avoid societal chaos and punishment by the gods. Sophocles' well-known tragedy *Antigone* underscores this point. When King Kreon would not respect the sacred time-honored tradition of burying the dead, Antigone challenged him, bringing on terrible consequences for the King and those around him. Order was restored only after Kreon had a change of heart when he saw the error of his ways. (p. 153)”

Indeed much was learned from the presentation of tragedies. Taplin (1995) notes that place such as these became a prominent force in the development of visual artistry. He points to the fourth century art that is found on pottery as evidence. Most of this art shows the depiction of Greek tragedies of the time. While no specific play is illustrated, it serves as the cultural transmitter of its entertainment value. Much like the merchandising of today's world the art of the fourth century shows actors and performances in the form of pottery, paintings, and sculptures, each depicting the popular tragedies of the time. A sign that these plays served as not only entertainment, but a strong cultural influence (Taplin, 1995).

4. Roman Theater

The next strong civilization to move theater forward was the Roman civilization (Brockett & Hildy, 2008). The Romans were so enamored with theater that they built theaters in every place they conquered. Today, ruins exist in places such as Turkey, North Africa, and Spain (Markus & Server, 2005).

Adronicus was said to have been the first Roman playwright, and he borrowed much of what he wrote from Greek culture (Wiles, 1995). The Greeks had no structure in their political world. The only true contribution they possessed was that their culture was spread across the western Mediterranean land (Wiles, 1995).

The most significant aspect of Roman theater is the preference for comedy (Brockett & Hildy, 2008). 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. Greek plays were founded in both their religion as well as their political views. The Greeks were more in tune with this thus Roman theater preferred the comedy (Brockett & Hildy, 2008). Romans also prevented controversial plays, mainly those criticizing the government's political views. Plays began to be viewed as immoral and offensive thus giving way to other forms of entertainment (Grote, 1989). This world view gave way to the collapse of the Roman theatrical structure. Markus and Server, (2005) pointed out that “when the Roman Empire collapsed, Western European civilization lost its centralized government and unifying culture along with its respect for intellectual activities like reading, writing, and theatergoing” (p. 257). Theorists believe that the rise in the middle ages and the new Christian religion were the cause of this Roman theater decline (Markus & Server, 2005). The Roman Empire was still not without its influence. As Brockett and Hildy (2008) observed, “by the time Rome ceased to be a republic in 27 B.C.E., regular drama had already declined markedly and the minor forms had become dominant” (p. 46). Dramas were now only performed for special occasions and private gathering. Writers such as Ovid and Horace did manage to

produce great works whose main function became to “both teach and please, while dictating the proper way to write a serious drama, including the use of a five-act structure” (Brockett & Hildy, p. 46).

The Roman worldview began to change in 14th century Italy. Trade with other countries jumpstarted a renewed interest in theater as an art form. The cultures of both Greece and Rome resurfaced through its theater and culture (Brockett & Hildy, 2008). The advances in media and the ability to record the plays on paper became an easier way for Rome to transfer its ideas to other civilizations that push theater to the next level (Grote, 1989). One important distinction is that the audience was now thought to be thinking at a higher level. Brown and Urice (2003) points out that the audience would be sophisticated enough to understand the actors and the performance they were witnessing. This was due to the fact that the playwrights would bring this assumption with them when writing their plays. It also helped to create the same type of play. A formula with the protagonist acting as an agent of the audience became the best way to educate and inform the audiences of the differences between right and wrong, good and evil (Brown and Urice, 2003).

5. Middle Ages Theater

The education of society continued to emerge through religious drama in the early middle ages (Brockett & Hildy, 2008). It is during this time period that saw theater take shape in the form of religious services. Brockett and Hildy (2008) observe that the church strongly prohibited drama in its traditional form. However, it was the church’s service of the “Hours” that allowed theater to exist in these times. The author’s note “The services of the Hours were far more significant in the revival of drama, for they included no indispensable act. Since they were variable in content from day to day, the Hours could accommodate drama” (p. 73).

Elizabethan Theater

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 to name a few (Markus & Server, 2004).

Elizabethan theater gets its name from Queen Elizabeth who commissioned the building of playhouses and the hiring of playwrights (Thompson, 1995). The three aforementioned playwrights were some of the most popular in Elizabeth’s employ (Markus & Server, 2004). Shakespeare first began as an actor, but soon advanced to writer and producer at the Globe theater; Shakespeare’s own theater (Grote, 1989). 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).

Elizabethan theater came to an end in the year 1642. The new English government shut down the theaters, and a more religious ideology was adopted for almost 20 years (Thompson, 1995).

6. American Theater

American theater goes have always been influenced by the English theater. Consequently, the curriculum of American theater schools reflect this point of view (Ommanney & Schanker, 1982). The main difference between British theater and American theater was the advent of realism (Markus & Server, 2004). Directors like Elia Kazan believed that scene design, lighting design, and realistic line delivery were important for “psychological truth” (Brockett & Hildy, 2008, p. 479). With a new focus being placed on these avenues, American universities began to build and house theater repertory companies to train their students. While American theater never established a permanent national theater, the institutions of higher education stepped in to fill the void (Ommanney & Schanker, 1982).

Theater Education

Landy (1982) stated that “in any given elementary school day, drama is occurring naturally and spontaneously in myriad ways” and that “[t]eachers apply it to not only affective learning but cognitive learning as well.” (p. 13 &

15). As theater education transitions into the secondary level, its purpose becomes threefold: to entertain, to teach, and to develop the life skills of the student (Landy, 1982).

Educational theater in higher education takes on a role for the training of teachers (Landy, 1982). Landy noted that for the most part the same goals apply to that of secondary education. Universities in the United States established good theater programs for the purpose of educating new teachers. The bulk of Landy's research focused on drama as part of a teacher training curriculum, and his overall theme is that the role of theater in higher education was for training in pedagogy (Landy, 1982). Brockett and Hildy (2008) also noted "[n]umerous university campuses across the country have also opened or announced their intention to build multimillion-dollar performing arts centers" (p. 540).

Colleges and universities are not only responsible for training new theater teachers, but also serve the function of producing good stewards of civility as well. Kaye DeMetz concurs with the idea of colleges and universities being the catalyst for theatrical education, but also supports an idea of civic responsibility.

7. Theater in Higher Education

Warburton (2006) observed that students interest in studying arts as a serious form of study has risen in the past decade. The benefits of having a diverse offering of arts programs range from culture identification as well as the establishment of democratic values. Wharton noted "the United States Congress reaffirmed the value of arts education, putting the arts into the core K-12 curriculum and devising national standards for art, dance, music, and theater" (p.11). This was done back in 1994 and has since had significant effects for performing arts programs in higher education. Warburton (2006) described "the number of students attending college increasing from approximately 12.7 million in 1989 to 16.5 million in 1999, the number of students majoring in the arts has kept apace, increasing from 393,700 to 643,500 majors" (p. 11).

Educational Program Development

One issue present in educational program development, regardless of the program, is that of administrative control. While it is common for grants to fund some programs administration is usually the key towards the success of the adult educational program. Martin (2006) conceded that, "it is now very difficult to sustain this way of working – or to even talk about adult education in these terms" (p. 15). The culprit: Three processes that in Martin's words, "have the effect of estranging us from political process and social change" (p. 16). Thus he concludes that the three main usurpers of adult education appear when we, as adult learners and educators, become agents of respectability, demoralization, and responsibility (Martin, 2006). He also argued that adult education is becoming respectable by adding new layers of administration. Respect then comes only by the title you possess. We become demoralized, according to Martin, because adult education is now seeking to help us "adapt" and not "transform" into better versions of ourselves. The adult learner then becomes "demoralized" because they feel they cannot change, but must instead adapt and overcome. Finally, the adult learner is cheated out of a true education because of an ever increasing "consumer citizen" role. We become responsible by dictating to our schools what curriculum should be taught and when (Martin, 2006). In the end he conceded that these processes are due to the fact that adult education must adhere more to a cosmopolitan and global community (Martin, 2006). He leaves it to the audience to answer the question as to how we can best keep adult education in a progressive mode.

8. Administering of Successful Programs

The success or failure of any educational program depends significantly on how well it is administered. Galbraith, Sisco, and Guglielmino (1997) support this position by noting "to a large extent, success of adult, community, and continuing education organizations depend upon the skill, knowledge, and political savvy of individuals who hold the administrative roles" (p. 1). This statement implies that educational programs would benefit from a primary source of support. This source would be a person or organization that acts as a pre-producing agent for the educational program. The administrator must also be an expert in the program that is in development. Galbraith, et. al. note, "becoming an effective and efficient administrator depends upon an individual's ability to gain knowledge of administration, to recognize what distinguishes adult, community, and continuing education administrators from other types of administrators, and to directly relate this knowledge and information" (p. 1).

The researchers point here to the importance of not only having an administrator who understands program development but one who is an expert in the particular program that is trying to be established, theater arts being the focus in this present study.

9. Developing Educational Theater Programs

Educational theater programs prepare students who themselves want to be theater educators. Schuttler (2010) points out that these programs are time consuming and also are the least supported financially (Schuttler, 2010). Schuttler's experiences came while trying to pursue a graduate degree in theater. The development of these types of graduate programs is similar to those of undergraduate programs. Schuttler (2010) observed, "the process for initiating a program comprises three broad areas: identifying needs of teachers in your area, creating a unique program, and working with university faculty to meet those needs" (p. 1).

Regarding teacher needs, the Schuttler concludes that the needs of those wishing to study theater must be addressed. She points out that when the particular school Schuttler attended, began to develop the MA program in theater, students who wished to study in the summer were not consulted. Yet, when she surveyed the students in the program, one third of them were interested in enrolling or being part of such a program (Schuttler, 2010). Another factor that She points out is that of uniqueness. Schuttler (2010) stated, "several factors--- geography, faculty expertise, distinct program offerings, and low costs--- can contribute to the initial success of a new MA theater program, but long-term sustainability can only be achieved through a combination of these factors" (p. 2). Finally Schuttler addresses the importance of faculty for a new program, clearly points out an important part to the program's success. The credibility and availability of qualified instructors has a profound impact on the success of a program. This becomes a key potential variable for a theater program's development.

10. Strategies for Educational Development

One way to examine the development of theater programs is to view the types of strategies behind its development from high school to higher education. Researchers Brown and Urice (2003) observe, "high school theater may be the only theater experience available to thousands of students and their families" (p. 25). This suggests that one of the major strategies for the development of theater is that of high school productions. In other words, the United States relies on secondary education for most of its exposure to theater productions. This creates a paradox as college and university programs usually exist on a different level. Brown and Urice note, "because of inconsistencies, uneven production values, and inadequately trained teachers, the contributions of educational theater often are not recognized by university practitioners, administrators, or the public" (p. 25). Again the assumption can be made here that the viewing public does not place much importance to secondary theater education. 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. Brown and Urice (2003) pointed out, "many educators and practitioners believe that most high school theater students emerge from programs unable to take their place as intelligent arts consumers or as competent students in college programs" (p. 25). This observation suggests that college and university programs have limited contact with their secondary counterparts.

It becomes clear then 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. With limited recruitment and a need for trained theater instructors at the secondary level, theater programs develop a strategy that seeks to build it program beginning not at the secondary level, but instead from that of the inception of a student's higher education.

Establishing theater programs depends highly on the implementation of its standards. Lin Wright (2000) illustrated this point in her research of theater programs at the secondary level. She notes that students benefit from theater programs because theater is a "prevailing method" of experiential education (Wright, 2000). In other words, theater and drama are present in a student's life, due to the identification they experience in the theater.

The one dilemma that Wright pointed out is the lack of standards when it comes to said programs. Wright (2000) explained “the problem is that drama theater instruction has generally not been part of art education in our schools” (p. 11). Wright goes on to say that unlike music, art, or dance, theater instruction does not have a stable curriculum. 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 in itself becomes problematic for the student of theater.

Wright (2000) also argued that theater educational development is hindered because most schools at the secondary level, treat theater as an “occasional activity” and not part of a daily or weekly routine (p. 12). In summary, Wright concludes that very few students in America are given the opportunity to study theater in a formal setting. This lack of knowledge and experience could in fact make it difficult for college and university theater programs to function properly, especially for schools who are in the process of establishing theater programs.

Conclusions and Implications

Jackson (2004) concluded, “there are numerous factors to consider when designing a drama curriculum” (p. 42). The factors to which she refers to range from demographics to a student’s ability, the reason for having a program in the first place, and how the community and administration feel about the program itself (p. 42). It is these factors that guide the purpose of this study. Theater education has been a part of the human condition since the time of Aristotle.

Examining theater program development encompasses the understanding of the strategies of improving theater education as a whole. Researchers Brown and Urice (2003) argue that the United States’ treatment of theater programs exists with a gap between secondary and higher education. They point out that, “the theater teacher is the key to an effective theater program and a quality experience for students” (p. 26). This observation implies that the best strategy for developing successful theater programs is that of qualified instructors.

It is important to ensure that this medium, as a form of education, continue to be part of the adult student curriculum. To ensure the maximum success it became necessary to identify variables that lead to a successful theater program at the college and university level. These variables would serve best if they originated from the perceptions of those who had the ability to influence theater programs at colleges and universities. To this end, it became important to seek out the perceptions of those who would be in charge of administering these programs both financially and through their understanding of budget and policy.

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