

“Plays, Parity, and Pedagogy
(Or, I taught a 20th century theater history course that didn’t include a single play by
Tennessee Williams and no one died and the world didn’t collapse)”

by

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“Indeed, the field of theatre studies has arguably taken a step backwards, for our ‘maps’ of theatre history are, on the whole, not just Eurocentric, but parochial in nature ‘parochial,’ that is, in the sense defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘relating or confined to a narrow area or region, as if within the borders of one’s own parish; limited or provincial in outlook or scope.’” — Steve Tillis, “Remapping Theatre History”¹

“Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” — Samuel Beckett

“[W]hat I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves.” — Junot Díaz

In the November 2004 issue of *Theatre Survey*, guest editor Jody Enders fielded a provocative question to fifteen leading scholars of theater and performance studies in search of their replies. Enders asked “[w]hat is the single most important thing we can do to bring theatre history into the new millennium?”² To be sure, today we ask a variation of this 2004 question over ten years ago.

For his short and vigorous response, Marvin Carlson’s essay not only set his agenda but also broadly characterized responses by the issue’s other contributors. “To this potentially enormous question,” answered Carlson, “I would propose a simple, three-word response: Become Less Provincial.”³ Carlson moves forward from this maxim to describe what he views as the myopic purview of theater historians in total, as when he notes,

theatre historians, perhaps especially in America, need to make a far greater commitment than they have so far done to expand the geographical boundaries of their investigations. I say *especially in America* not to suggest that theatre historians elsewhere do not tend to privilege studies of their own national or cultural theatre...this is both understandable and even praiseworthy, unless it is pursued, as it so often is, to the virtual exclusion of more broadly based work.⁴

Carlson’s position may address the activities of theater historians, but his reflections also implicitly indict the pedagogy of theater history shaped by these same provincial historians.

Writing three years later, in a 2007 issue of *Theater Topics*, in his essay entitled

“Remapping Theater History,” Steve Tillis also focuses on the condition of the provincial, forcefully chastising the condition of theater history curricula. Tillis argues

[o]nce upon a time, Europeans and Americans might have been oblivious to the theatre of the wider world and might therefore be excused for adopting a perspective that placed everything but their own theatre on the margins of their theatre histories. Such a narrow-minded perspective is inexcusable today, when information about...the world is readily available. But the fallacy of parochialism is still predominant in undergraduate theatre history studies primarily because we have become habituated to thinking in terms of...an antiquated...powerful thesis regarding Western progress that has seemed to justify our Eurocentrism. The result has been codified in what I call the ‘Standard Western Approach,’ which broadly visualizes theatre history as having undergone a rise from ‘ritual to realism’—effectively centralizing Western theatre in a ‘progressive’ theatre history while marginalizing (or even erasing) the theatre of the rest of the world.⁵

My thoughts and the thoughts of this panel in total join a conversation that – as my preparation for today revealed – has persisted since the 1980s, a conversation that while powerfully articulated by leading scholars of the field, has nevertheless failed to materialize radical, transformative pedagogy or curricula in our theater history classrooms.

While I agree with both of these scholars about their pleas for a global vision, I need to pause at the characterization of parochialism and interrogate its composition because while such a term seeks to zero in on Eurocentrism and also Euro-American centrality in the curricula of theater history classrooms, this parochialism, our nationalist self-interested provinciality, not only willfully shuts a global perspective in its stubbornness, it bears repeating that it simultaneously shuts out the vast majority of voices of our province who are not white men. Our province is a highly segregated one. To call out parochialism in favor of imagining a global perspective, I believe, too easily moves forward and over that which has also been quarantined just as adamantly as global voices inside the stalwart parochialism of U.S. Theater History pedagogy.

As such, even as I am well aware that my theater history syllabus fails in its effort to

present a global curriculum and even as I am committed to making a forthright push to more rigorously construct a global breadth in my curriculum, I am not quite ready to let our provincial occlusions persist. I am faced, therefore, with a double helixed objective. And, given my knowledge base as a scholar, the first intervention I can make to radically transform my theater history curriculum is to foreground the contributions of women and non-white others from the U.S.

I'm going to walk through two iterations of one of my theater history course's transformation. However, I must also admit up front that the iterations I am about to outline fail (yet again) to vigorously enfold the global, but, as Beckett reminds us, each iteration of my theater history course for the 19th and 20th century *fails better* than its predecessor in my attempt to manifest a sharper more informed and more inclusive version. Like the vast majority of pedagogues in the academy teaching theater history, I am not a theater historian by training, nor did I attend one of the theater historiography powerhouse institutions such as the University of Minnesota or the University of Hawai'i. I arrive at the task of teaching theater history as a practitioner, a theorist, and as someone fully committed to immuring in my students that the act of contextualizing plays and staging practices within the cultures that produced them affords us the opportunity to more thoroughly examine how performance and society intersect and interact. In short, I am committed in my conviction that learning theater history is central to the practice of theater, which the large majority of my students aspire towards in some measure. For me, the study of theater history mobilizes a powerful vehicle for the instruction of not only performance but for critical thinking in total, especially when it is not tantamount to the memorization of dates, names, and facts. There is much more to be said on this pedagogical philosophy, but I must press forward.

I need to start by describing the environment, circumstances, and some of the material conditions of my labor as pedagogue of theater history. And, as the shaping forces of neoliberal economics sculpt our institutions, I think it vitally important that we contextualize the material conditions that circumscribe our instruction, as Patricia Ybarra reminds us in her essay entitled “History Takes Time,” which can be found in Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen’s excellent 2010 collection *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, both of which I recommend highly.⁶

So, context. I teach at a very privileged site: Dartmouth College, an elite, private, liberal arts college that in large part focuses on undergraduate education. In terms of theater, the college only maintains a Bachelor of Arts degree program. I consider this delimitation of degrees a luxury. It allows for focus on my part and for a wealth of opportunities for my students, who don’t have to elbow their way to the theatrical table against grad students. I can identify the luxury I enjoy because I have also served as co-director of a Bachelor of Arts program that served five hundred B.A. students in a large, research one, flagship state university where I taught classes regularly mixed with students seeking BAs, BFAs, MAs, MFAs, MSs and doctoral degrees in theater.

At Dartmouth my small classes are almost always comprised of students who graduated from their high schools in the top 1-5% of their class. As this *mise en scène* of over-achievement makes clear, my Dartmouth students are extraordinarily bright, ambitious over-achieving 18-22 year olds, highly anxious for approval and validation. Their overachievement affords me one particular, extraordinary factor: they will make sure they arrive to class having read every and all the materials assigned for that meeting, and as such I can load their theater history syllabus heavily as a result, which is good considering our calendar.

Dartmouth's academic calendar runs on a quarter system. The academic year is divided into four ten week terms. For the requirements of the Theater Major, students are required to take a three-course sequence of Theater History courses over three terms. The sequence is divided by chronological time. We offer THEA 15: Theater and Society I: Classical and Medieval Performance, THEA 16: Theater and Society II: Early Modern Performance, and THEA 17: Theater and Society III: 19th and 20th Century Performance. Although preferred, students do not have to take the sequence in order of chronology, which sharply guides the conception of my course's curriculum.

At Dartmouth the students who populate my theater history classroom are often not theater majors; there are no pre-requisites. In my "Introduction to Theater" classroom or in the more specialized courses I teach such as "Race, Gender, and Performance," "Latina/o Theater," or "Solo Performance" they are in the majority definitely not theater majors or minors. That is, I often teach theater history and theater studies courses to students wholly unfamiliar that theater has a history much less historiographical dilemmas, much less an intimate relationship to society. In my classes we always begin at square one on these counts. Addressing these gaps in their thinking about theatermaking serves as the second set of primary guideposts for my courses' objectives.

I have always sought to present breadth in my theater history curriculum whether it be taught at a small elite college or a flagship state institution. Here, by breadth, I speak of favoring an approach that engages as many play texts as possible. This goal arrives from the recognition of my students' lives post undergraduate degree. As the years have demonstrated, most of my students – major and non-major alike, private liberal arts college or large state university – will not go on to graduate school to pursue an advanced degree in theater. Most of my students,

theater major or non-theater major, do not (or more revealingly cannot) make their living in theater as professionals for many heterogeneous reasons. Given these considerations, theater history in their undergraduate degree becomes one of the central moments in which they will survey the spectrum of dramatic literature and, in that, the vast possibility of what theater's aesthetic, social, and communicative shapes can take. In short, this is my shot to have them read plays that pre-date the last ten years, that are experimental in form and style, and that help them think about theater and performance's role in human communication and vice versa. The theater history classroom is the shot I have to expand their horizons beyond what they will encounter in both their practice classes and professional careers beyond college where encountering *Hamletmachine* will surely be the rarest of events despite its import.

There is also a second driving goal. In the institutions I have taught at, Theater History is a requirement for a degree in Theater. As such, students who have a propensity to discount the import of theater studies, that is, of engaging in critical thought, theoretical ideas, and/or history about the creative activity that drives them, must, despite this ill-thinking, engage in the import of this idea in the one course that adamantly requires this of them: theater history. For it has been my experience that theater majors will cue up with break neck speed to gain a coveted seat in a literature course on Shakespeare (and, sadly, only Shakespeare) before they would set one foot in a classroom that offers an elective about, for example, African American traditions, African traditions, Asian traditions, Latin American traditions, to speak in the identifiers of geography or other particulars that should be of prime importance to young emerging artists preparing to enter a savage and cutthroat field. So with Theater History, "I am not throwing away // my // shot." (Because everything these days has to have a *Hamilton* reference to be timely in the cultural zeitgeist that is this moment). This material, practical reality is what I find missing in many a

scholars' recommendations about the teaching of theater history and the composition of its curriculum: the ever-changing nature of our students and their shaping inside the neoliberal university and the U.S. national exceptionalism that feeds their purview of the world.

To show the character of my 19th & 20th Century course's transformation, I'd like to work with some charts. By way of comparison, the first chart I'd like to show tracks my course's play texts from 2013. As you'll notice, my students read 19 plays over 10 weeks – absent here are units that investigated popular performance of the 19th century, units on directors and designers of the twentieth century, and a unit on the Federal Theatre Project.

All titles with a red rectangle to their right indicate plays by women, and titles with a green rectangle to their right indicate a play written by a person of color. As this chart shows, in 2013, 14 of 19 plays engaged were authored by white men, which constituted 73% of the course's primary texts. 4 of 19 play texts were authored by women, constituting 21% of the course's primary texts. 3 of 19 plays were written by people of color, constituting 16%, and 2 of the 19 plays engaged were by women of color or 10% of primary play texts. Reflecting solely on gender, four of nineteen plays read in a theater history curriculum for the 19th and 20th century, I believe firmly, sends a clear message to students: playwriting is the province of men and, moreover, men write the plays worthy of study. As a feminist pedagogue, I remember my struggle to place four plays by women in this iteration of my syllabus, and my struggle with feelings of failure even as I displaced iconic plays by men to do so. Namely, you'll notice the absence of, among others, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, Lorca, O'Neill, Genet not to mention Tony Kushner and August Wilson, the two choices that pained (my parochial self) the most.

Four plays by women is simply unacceptable. I believe I “failed better” in 2016 with my new charge to create parity in my theater history curriculum. For if I am going to be stubbornly parochial, my parochialism will be shaped by the objective to centralize the differential theatermaking of women and people of color.

(slide) Here’s the chart for my 2016 iteration of the course. Again, the color graphics on this chart tell the story of gender and race with red rectangles marking women and green rectangles marking non-white authors. My class also viewed the Barbican Theater’s *Hamlet* with Benedict Cumberbatch via a live broadcast. Additionally, we also attended a production of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) by Ntozake Shange, which we later engaged with in class when we discussed postmodernism. With these two performances, in ten weeks’ time we engaged with twenty-three works. The statistical breakdown is: 12 of 23 plays were written by men or 52%, 11 of 23 plays were authored by women equaling 48%, 13 of 23 plays were written by women or persons of non-white identity equaling 56%, 10 of 23 plays were written by persons of non-white racial identity or 43% (or 40% absent Medina), and 7 of 23 plays were written by non-white women or 30% (or 35% w/Medina).

I do not teach these particular plays solely because they are written by women or people of color. I teach these plays because they are superb, rich examples of paradigm shifting cultural forms in performance on the whole with rightful claims to their import in and for the Western theater canon, and yet, they have been sequestered to the margins of theater history curricula. I teach these plays because I want to foreground the nonneutrality and thus partiality of the Western Theater tradition we have passed forward generation after generation. I teach these plays because despite the fact that they have been shuttled to the margins, they are as theoretically rich and dramaturgically compelling as those produced by white, male playwrights

which are more regularly placed on theater history syllabi. Each of these works does a superb job at not only demonstrating a major shift in cultural forms but also a major shift in numerous other realms that are equally pertinent not only the study of theater history but also for the study of systems of human social organization.

I don't have the time here to detail my students' responses to this radical curricular shift, but can elaborate in our discussion time soon to follow. At the end of the day, my students were ignited by this shift in tone and content. And, to underscore this paper's title, none of my students cried foul because of Tennessee Williams' decentralization. I was hoping they would cry foul at August Wilson's absence – more shockingly some did not know who he was. Throughout our ten-week term I maintained a highly engaged conversation with my students about my syllabus' choices, which goaded many historiographical questions – another key objective of the course.

I envision the radical transformation of my theater history syllabus as a years long shift, executed amid several factors at hand such as the labor of self-education it will take on my part to comprehend thoroughly the plurality of performance practices of Asia, Africa, or Latin America. This will be pitted against the ever-present responsibility to maintain a rigorous research agenda as well as teach and sharpen other courses of my portfolio as well as serve as a mentor to students, as well as participate in service activities for my department, institution, professional organization, and local community. I envision an end point of thoroughly revising my theater history courses that will coincide with my retirement, (not kidding) but I am committed to it in order that future pedagogues will not face this sort of epic transition.

In a poignant and vulnerable essay, entitled “Theatre History (Ir)Rationale,” scholar Will Dardario asks the pertinent questions that I too ponder whenever I prepare to embark on the epic

journey that begins with syllabus construction for theater history and ends by reaching the finish line at the end of ten weeks of instruction. As Dadarrio generously professes, when he contemplates this task he experiences a feeling of anxiety that “reverberates wildly through [his] bones.” I feel much the same, and I would suggest this type of reaction suggests the enormity and enormous responsibility of the task. Dardarrio’s thoughtful rationale also offers that *what* we teach is only half the import of teaching theater history. He posits the other half is *how* we teach. Within the shape and content of that how, he wisely asserts, is what we can call our *practice* of teaching.

Over the course of the past few weeks a tremendous outcry has been sounded here in Chicago when a leading musical theater company cast a white actor to play the lead role of Usnavi, a sharply drawn Dominican-descended character, in the company’s upcoming production of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Pulitzer Prize-winning musical *In the Heights*. I see the event of this casting and my theater history syllabus’ radical transformation as deeply connected. How do we arrive at a place where a director and company of theatermakers/producers/artistic directors would make this sort of decision? How do we arrive here, where, the actor who auditioned much less accepted this lead role would regard this as acceptable in the schematics of representation that theater both imparts and shores up? Who were their teachers? And what did their practice of teaching enfold? How can my practice of teaching theater history help create emotionally intelligent, critically informed, historically minded future leaders in enterprises and activities not only for theatermaking but also far beyond and outside it?

Yes, we all should become less provincial. This will take time and tremendous energy to self-educate ourselves. But, in the meantime, our provinciality should rally for its desegregation. I encourage us all to read materials about the pedagogy and ideology at hand in teaching theater

history. Every time I allocate valuable research time to this task, I am energized by possibility and reoriented to new directions. It fortifies my courage to make bold, dynamic, choices, which so far, has paid off tenfold in the courses I teach.

Endnotes

¹ Steve Tillis, "Remapping Theatre History," *Theatre Topics* 17, no. 1 (2007): 1-19. 1.

² Jody Enders, "Introduction: Theatre History in the New Millennium," *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (2004): 173.

³ Marvin Carlson, "Become Less Provincial," *Theatre Survey - the Journal of the American Society for Theatre Research* 45, no. 2 (11, 2004): 177-180. 177.

⁴ Carlson, 177. Emphasis original.

⁵ Tillis, "Remapping Theatre History," 1-2.

⁶ Patricia Ybarra, "History Takes Time," in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, ed. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 250.