

ATHE Conference Plenary, “The Elephant in the Room”  
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In his wonderful, uncharacteristically generous report on the Educational Theatre Association’s International Thespian Festival in Lincoln, Nebraska, in July, Charles Isherwood describes how 2,000 self-described “theatre geeks” eagerly rehearse and perform and gossip, preparing themselves not only for their roles in the festival, but for lives in the theatre. Isherwood notes the T-shirts for sale in the auditorium lobby “with the words ‘Theatre Geek’ emblazoned upon them above masks of tragedy and comedy; these young drama enthusiasts,” he says, “are clearly happy and proud to declare themselves thespians” (7/13/08, NYT, Arts and Leisure sec., 1).

While an article about such a festival could be snarky and sarcastic, Isherwood instead records how impressed he was by performances of classics and contemporary plays and musicals, at which he consistently found tears in his eyes, and chronicles the long-standing quality reputation of the festival’s productions. The students learn, but also teach one another, trying out songs from less acclaimed musicals and mounting interpretations of a fairly standard range of classic and contemporary plays. The general impression Isherwood imparts is of a group of students and teachers happy to be involved in the festival, doing high-standard work for appreciative audiences. His article concludes, “Theatre geeks rock!”

My concern—which I currently see as the proverbial “elephant in the room” for our field—rests on what happens to these happy thespians after they graduate, when they apply to our college and university theatre programs eager to continue the fun they experienced as theatre geeks in high school. How is it that our programs tend to dissipate all that commitment and energy and pride, instead of stoking it and refining it and channeling it into new and different ways of continuing a life as a theatre geek? Why is it that so many of our undergraduate majors become disillusioned so quickly, dropping our programs for communications degrees because they decide that media might offer them more lucre, even if it’s not as much fun? Why do we impede their fun in ways that makes changing their majors likely? What kinds of pressure do we impose by assuming that we’re grooming them for acting careers in professional theatre, instead of encouraging them to refashion their theatre geek-dom into careers as dramaturgs, arts administrators, critics, grant administrators, philanthropists, or maybe most importantly, theatre aficionados who will attend performances regularly and support theatre financially? And most importantly, what structural, cultural, and ideological influences pressure our departments to create this situation?

I just finished a nine-year tenure in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin, one of the largest departments in the country. During my stint there, the undergraduate major was reduced from a high of around 450 students to approximately 300, by various assessments meant to admit a stronger, leaner class. I also saw the growth of the MFA program in acting. Moribund when I arrived, thanks to the leadership of nationally acclaimed actor Fran Dorn, the three-year program soon gained a competitive reputation.

But despite what might seem these successes, the students in our undergrad and graduate acting programs never seemed very happy. Many undergrads left, and many grad students complained about the narrowness of what they learned. The grad students

suffered a schedule that prevented them from taking advantage of the department's other curricula, including our flourishing graduate program in Performance as Public Practice, which aimed to expand applications for theatre and performance studies outside professional, mainstream theatre into community-based and socially active settings. With pre-professional programs intent on feeding the US regional theatres, if not Broadway, the majority of our students weren't encouraged to imagine other ways of plying their trades, or of using their studies creatively and with more agency than mainstream theatre employment practices for actors often allow.

Most discouraging to me was watching graduate students who'd been through three years of rigorous training in acting, voice, and movement arrive at the showcase moment of their MFA program tenure. Thanks to Fran Dorn's professional connections, the students traveled to New York and Los Angeles to present work for casting agents, directors, and other people in the business. But when they returned, many of the students reported that the feedback they received concerned their looks more than their talent. More than one went on a crash diet; the first three-year class started nearly in unison a version of The Zone diet that reduced all of them to wan and wasted stick figures in a few weeks' time. Men and women alike were told by showcase spectators that they needed to lose weight, fix their noses, their teeth, their skin, their facial bone structures, all in the service of hewing closely to the "type" in which they'd inevitably be cast.

For this a student needs three years of expensive MFA training?

Thanks again to Fran Dorn's powers of persuasion, the MFA acting class boasted great racial and ethnic diversity (much more so than our woefully, predominantly white undergraduate program and even, to my chagrin, our Performance as Public Practice program). But I was regularly surprised by the casting choices made for our university theatre productions, which required students of color to perform in subsidiary roles (sometimes, frankly, in servant roles) while their white colleagues, although the minority students in their classes, received the leads. Apparently, not-conventionally-slender women of color and lesbians posed a particularly thorny problem in this context.

Why should a university acting program conform to the most egregious racial and body-type profiling practices of the mainstream profession? As an African American woman, Dorn herself has played across the canon of American drama. In the last ten years, I've admired her performances as Christine in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and as the Gypsy in *Camino Real*, both at the Shakespeare Theatre in DC. I had the great pleasure of seeing her powerhouse run as Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at Austin's Zachary Scott Theatre, and watching her in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* at Austin's State Theatre. But I rarely saw graduate students in our program color-blind cast in comparably meaty theatre-historical roles.

The undergrads fared far worse, as the very few students of color routinely turned up as servants or backdrops in productions that conformed to conventional casting and staging practices.

I don't mean to launch an ad hominem attack on my former department or any of my colleagues, all of whom I respect and admire (and miss). In fact, I'm curious how and if other college and university departments do this differently, or whether we're all held hostage to trickle-down effects from television and film casting practices that dictate such rigid conformity to type and to such narrow notions of beauty. Perhaps only "character actors" are allowed to think outside the box of their bodies. Perhaps the late

Heath Ledger, for instance, gets so much press for his transformative turn as the Joker in the new Batman flick, *The Dark Knight*, after his Oscar nomination for *Brokeback Mountain*, because physically, he could rest on his laurels as a romantic (and heterosexual) lead. Why aren't *all* actors considered "character actors"? Isn't that what all of them play? Characters who aren't *them*?

It pains me to think of all those theatre geeks who love the freedom and creativity of performing, the community wrought by long hours of commitment to a common pursuit, the thrill of the audience, the intimacy of the dressing room, the camp-like spirit of can-do-ship seeing their passion squelched by the awful authority of cultural convention. How horrible to think of all those students arriving in our programs only to be told—by implication if not explicitly—that their bodies are wrong, that their color, ethnicity, size, weight, face structure, or sex appeal will consign them to shadowy support roles to those whose genes make them desirable to a very narrowly defined culture of beauty and low expectations of talent.

How nice it would be if instead, we could encourage our students to be healthy, as well as creative and committed. What if we taught them how to create their own theatres, where they can make art outside the dictates of an unimaginative mainstream, as my colleague Paul Bonin-Rodriguez does in his undergraduate senior seminar on the entrepreneurial creative artist? What if we taught them to be critics and dramaturgs who bring to wide attention the violence done to our bodies and souls by physical standards impossible for normal people to fulfill without surgical intervention? What if we taught them to be smart, activist actors, who tried to change the industry from within, as well as from outside? What if we encouraged them to keep reasonable hours, to eat well, and to give up smoking, instead of tacitly condoning anorexia that helps them look "right"? What if we cultivated performers who don't fit norms, as my colleague Lisa McNulty at Manhattan Theatre Club is trying to do with the Butch Casting Project ([www.butchcastingproject.com](http://www.butchcastingproject.com)), dedicated to "celebrating butches, trannies, and genderqueers in the arts, media, and entertainment"?

Some of our students do find the courage and the imagination to apply their training outside of norms. For instance, Anastasia Coon, a lesbian UT MFA acting student who graduated several years ago, moved to San Francisco where, in addition to plying her own acting talent, is teaching genderqueers how to use their voices to conform to their new, chosen gender interpretations. Flordelino Lagundino, a Filipino MFA acting student who also graduated from the reorganized program, has since worked with Perseverance Theatre in Juno, Alaska, where he's created community-based theatre projects with the local Inuit population.

I continue to believe that university theatre programs should push at the envelope of cultural expectations about the arts. If we defy conventional beauty and body image standards; if we routinely commit to color-blind or cross-race cast our productions; if we teach students to critique representations of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and other identity markers in our own and mainstream productions, along with their aesthetic and ideological values; and if we teach students to reach outside conventional theatre to form their own companies and to create their own plays and performances, then we've truly added something to the national dialogue not just about the arts, but about citizenship and democracy. Supporting the status quo is untenable.