

September 9, 2008

Dear Steve,

Thanks for sharing Prof. Fran Dorn's response to my "Elephant in the Room" plenary remarks. I'm glad that our panel has prompted discussion and debate; I understand that was why you invited me and my colleagues to share our thoughts.

I deeply regret Fran's dismay with my manifesto. (And although she's distanced herself from me by calling me "Dr. Dolan," I will call her "Fran," because I honor the friendly collegiality we shared at UT.) She takes personally—on behalf of the UT department—what I intended as a call to our field to hold ourselves more deeply responsible for fulfilling the dictates of a theatre and entertainment industry that too often requires our students to damage themselves psychically and physically to become players at its table.

As I underlined in my essay, I had no intention of attacking anyone. As I said, I don't think the practices at UT are unique, and the responses I've received to my remarks from people in programs around the country concur that this issue crosses many of our departments. We collectively share responsibility for our tendency to forego a more thorough critique of our most common training practices. I quite admired the MFA acting program at UT for its commitment to giving our students the tools they need to "make them competitive in the larger theatrical and film community," as Fran notes; it's the expectations and constraints of that larger community to which my complaint is aimed.

What I was trying to suggest was that many of our training programs are held hostage to an industry that demands the kind of bodies we're then required to produce. And I don't think that you need an MFA (or to pay for one) in order to be typecast!

I truly regret that Fran thinks I'm generalizing and accusing and dismissing and distorting the facts of the work produced by my former department at UT. I was proud of the New Works Festival, the brainchild of Prof. Suzan Zeder, onto which our faculty signed with enthusiasm. The seven- to 10-day festival every other year showcased a wider range of talent, styles, genres, and indeed representations of identity and body image than our more conventional mainstage season. And yes, indeed, the MFA students' solo performances were wonderful, nuanced, often personal or autobiographical embodiments of their diverse backgrounds, interests, and commitments, beautifully presented and often deeply moving.

But our mainstage season for the most part hewed to convention, which too often required casting choices that lacked a progressive vision. Exceptions here generally proved the rule. That wasn't Fran's fault; it was no one's fault and everyone's fault, mine included, as is so often the case in our departments. I think we've on some subconscious level given in to industry expectations. So, in reaction or response, we create our separate fiefdoms within our departments and try to cohabitate. At UT, I helped to create the Performance as Public Practice program in one corner, and Suzan created the New Works Festival in another corner, and Fran had the MFA students do solo performances (which the agents didn't see, as far as I know) for their thesis projects in another corner. Some students cross from corner to corner, but for the most part, we guard our turf warily and nothing about the field or the

industry changes.

I do think that's the elephant in the room. If what I said was inelegantly expressed, or lead my former colleagues to think I was attacking them, or if I didn't share enough responsibility for letting these practices continue unremarked (publicly) at UT, for that, I'm truly sorry.

I also regret if it looks like I launched the manifesto as a swipe at my old department as I was leaving. As I wrote, I was thinking forward, but had no intention of doing so at the expense of my recent past.

But I'm not sorry for raising this issue, or raising it in the ATHE context. It's not particular to UT. It's a condition of training programs around the country. I hear this from students all the time, when I visit other colleges and universities, at conferences, from grad students interviewing for our program, from faculty to whom I speak . . . we should take responsibility for it as a field and at least talk about it.

In this regard, once again, the theory/practice behemoth needs dismantling. From the moment I began my career as a scholar twenty years ago, I've been too often told by practitioners that I don't have the right to speak about practice. In this case, I'm being told by a nationally known and respected actor that she knows better how the "real world" works. But exactly my point is that the real world desperately needs changing, and only by bringing all of our talents to bear on envisioning different ways of making our art (and making a living wage) will students be able to accept their bodies and their identities with pride and pleasure instead of shame.

Let's not unearth the fault line between "theory" and "practice." How tired I am of that binary, which serves none of us. I'm a scholar, teacher, and critic, and a thoughtful, committed spectator determined to point out the damage done by conventional representational expectations. We need to stop accusing one another of "ignorance" across a shopworn divide. Anyone engaged in theatre and performance studies theorizes and practices. It's the accusations otherwise that are more than a "tad silly."

People who know me (Fran included) know that I'm not ignorant or malicious. My respect and fondness for my UT colleagues always was and remains sincere. I was proud of our ability to collaborate despite what were sometimes difficult institutional constraints and I continue to boast of their talent and innovations.

I was invited by ATHE to write a manifesto that addressed an issue we, as a field, aren't confronting, to get people to think and talk, to disagree and debate. (See, in fact, my blog *The Feminist Spectator* for comments that indicate the piece did in fact prompt productive conversation.) If that's happening, that's good, and I guess I'll just take my knocks from Fran.

I didn't mean to be harsh and I certainly didn't set out to slander the good reputation of my colleagues or of our MFA Acting program and its students or any faculty at UT. If my prose didn't clarify that it's the industry with which I quarrel, and if I didn't make clear that I believe we should all (myself included) take responsibility for envisioning different ways of training actors (even those planning on a professional career), then for that failure, I do indeed apologize.

My manifesto came from a place of deep caring for the students we teach and the programs we run, a commitment I know I share with Fran and my UT colleagues. I take my critical engagements very seriously; at the same time, I want to be liked and respected as much as any of us. I try to live with my own contradictions, which still sometimes surprise and confuse me. It pains me to know that my words caused enough dismay and consternation to prompt Fran's uncharacteristically caustic rebuttal.

Eric Bentley describes the critic's position, and with his words, I'll end: "The critic is uncompromising, not because he [sic] regards himself as infallible, nor even because he feels very sure of himself, but because it is his job to be so. It is true, he enjoys this job; he enjoys a fight; his writing embodies his zest for living. Yet he doesn't enjoy all of the job. The constant infliction of pain is a burden to him, the price he has to pay for the right to practice his profession. For the journalist-critic, the only alternative to a sharp tongue is a mealy mouth."

With all my best wishes and deep respect,

Jill Dolan