

September 1, 2008

Steve Peters, ATHE President
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Dear Dr. Peters:

I am surprised and puzzled by Dr. Jill Dolan's recent ATHE article (August 1, 2008). I knew that we had somewhat different views about the state of theatre education in America, but I never would have publicly aired those differences in such a disparaging manner without first discussing my thoughts with her personally. However, since she has chosen the public arena, I am obliged to meet her there.

If Dr. Dolan had *ever* voiced her casting concerns during her nine-year tenure at the University of Texas, as a professional courtesy I could have steered her away from the many inaccuracies in her article. Perhaps she was simply too busy to see most of the productions in the department. As a person of color, I should be outraged by her unfounded accusations and false generalizations, but ultimately they strike me as ill informed and a tad silly. If she had accused me of 'reverse discrimination,' it would have made at least as much sense as the accusation she has leveled at me. Our main stage casting is not only color-blind, it is what I call color-aware. If she were truly interested in "thinking outside the box" of theatre tradition and casting, she would have been seen the highly provocative solo performances created by our graduate actors as their theses, with core training techniques provided by a professor in her own program. Perhaps our biennial New Works Festival simply slipped her mind. I dare say, over all, there is more 'new work' presented in this department than traditional plays.

At the graduate level, we advertise and commit to professional theater training for the actor. Ours is not a generalist program. Unlike Dr. Dolan, we respect and expose our students to various schools of thought in theater education and practice and have led the collaborative effort in our department. However, our mission is to train actors. One of our students who was almost exclusively interested in solo performance and queer theory when she entered the program concluded, "You can't make a living doing that." "Making a living" by conventional standards is not what artists are usually interested in under any circumstances, but we certainly try to give our students the tools that will make them competitive in the larger theatrical and film community...not in "theory" but most assuredly in practice. This training empowers our students to choose varying career paths including many that Dr. Dolan suggests. Some of our students have opened their own theaters, created solo performance, acted in regional, commercial and community/activist

theater, along with work in film and television, directing and teaching. Some of our alumni have also become great real estate agents and others terrific caterers and all of them savvy and articulate audiences – “theater geeks” to the end. We want them not only able to create their own work, but ready to excel in work that is offered them. While our program is not without flaws, I am extremely proud of our students’ many accomplishments and the dedication and talent of our faculty.

Dr. Dolan left the University of Texas for what she thinks are greener pastures. While she was here, I admired her scholarship and her tenacity and valued what I thought was her collegiality. I respected her right, indeed her obligation, to pursue her vision of theater practice. Apparently, she had little respect for mine. I trust that her public insult to me and to the program I helped develop will satisfy her need to dismiss that which she left behind and that she will not seek to further undermine our efforts for her own benefit.

We don’t guarantee our students jobs or paint a rosy picture of the industry. Surely one of the most useful things we can do to change the face of theater in America is to provide top-notch training for people of all ethnicities, genders and sizes – one of the many tasks we are dedicated to at The University of Texas at Austin. The excuse “we just can’t find enough classically trained minorities” simply does not wash any longer. In her effort to foster much needed discourse on society’s preoccupation with ideal beauty and how that manifests itself in fashion, film and theater, or how these misguided ideals *might* be advanced in *some* theater departments, she distorted the facts in *our* department to fit her argument. Unfortunately, those distortions have only exposed her ignorance and/or maliciousness and seriously diminished her in the eyes of many who know the truth.

I will respond no further to this episode, but I will return to the job of providing some of the best actor training in the country. On behalf of the innovative and talented community of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin, I await Dr. Dolan’s apology.

Sincerely,

Franchelle Stewart Dorn, *Virginia L. Murchison Professor*
Academy of Distinguished Teachers
Head of the Acting Program