STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

RACHEL M. E. WOLFE

It is my belief that undergraduate training should always be undertaken with an eye toward the skills and knowledge that students will need after they leave school. As an instructor of theater, my job is to equip my students with the tools they will need to be effective lifelong storytellers and artists. In the service of this goal, my approach to undergraduate theater training is built on two basic premises: that academic and studio work should build on one another, and that undergraduate education should expose students to as great a variety of approaches, time periods, world traditions, and theatrical styles as possible.

The first premise arose from my observation that most students who choose to take classes in theater departments do so because they want to make theater in some capacity, yet often find the links between studying and doing hard to draw. I frequently see students who want to become theater professionals thrive on their studio classes and production work while disregarding academic theater classes as irrelevant to their real goals. This attitude is part of what educational theater programs exist to correct. Theater practitioners are storytellers, whose job it is to communicate ideas in engaging and relatable forms; and frankly, the best stories are told by people who have done their homework. Studio classes should equip students with the skills they need to tell stories, and academic classes should give them the tools they need to acquire and effectively deploy knowledge of the topics those stories are about. In order to help my students see this link between theory and practice, I always include some relevant analytical work in my studio classes and some view toward the artistic implications of the topics discussed in my academic classes.

Two examples will illustrate this approach. My intro to acting course is largely based around in-class activities that provide practical training in basic skills like movement, projection, and enunciation. In the second half of the class, however, we move on to the more complex topic of making choices about how to deploy these skills in relation to a script. During this unit, I have students attend a play and write a short acting analysis on the choices made by one of the performers, focusing on directly observable actions like gesture rather than on the character's emotional state. Having to analyze and write about another person's acting from an intellectual perspective encourages an actor-in-training to contemplate her creative choices *as choices* rather than as intuition, drawing links between the cerebral work of preparation and the kinesthetic work of acting. On the other side of the coin, my academic class on nineteenth-century European theater largely focuses on introducing students to the major movements, playwrights, and cultural realities of the nineteenth century in Europe, with a primary focus on analytical writing. Even so, a part of each class period is dedicated to discussing how the day's script might be relevantly presented now, onstage. For each play we read in this class, I ask my students to write down something they found relevant about the text and something they found irrelevant or outdated. In class discussions, we use the lists of outdated topics as a jumping-off point for discussing the particulars of the nineteenth-century context, while the relevant lists serve as the catalyst for discussions of how to make this old play resonate with present-day concerns in a

theoretical production for a contemporary audience. This portion of the discussion often yields artistically inspiring results: I once had a class decide that the ever-present but unseen serfs in *The Cherry Orchard* were equivalent to the janitors who cleaned the campus classrooms, and the students themselves to the willfully ignorant upper class. With activities like these, I encourage my students to connect their intellectual work with their theatrical practice as equal parts of the storytelling enterprise they are here to learn.

In addition to helping students draw these links, my other major role as an instructor is to expose new theater artists to the range of options available to them as storytellers. Undergraduate students come to us to discover what's out there and to learn the skills they will need to engage with it. Each student has a different background, and there is no predicting what will spark any given individual's interest. Yet interest is indispensable to an artist, and all theater practitioners do their best work on projects that fire their imaginations. As an educator, it is my job to give my students a taste of the extraordinary variety of theater out there so that they can discover what sparks their interests and pursue those lines of creativity beyond my classroom. In order to do this, I embrace variety in the course syllabi I design. My introduction to play analysis course, for example, is divided into a series of units, each focused on engaging with scripts from the point of view of a different type of theatrical practitioner: playwright, director, designer, actor, and stage manager. Each unit ends with a project that requires the student to approach a script from that particular role, e.g. creating a brief design pitch at the end of the design unit. In addition helping students identify which theatrical roles suit them best, this variety of jobs gives them a basic knowledge of the perspectives that their collaborators will be coming from—a student who loves directing will have to work with designers on any play he directs, and he will be a more effective collaborator if he knows the kinds of challenges that designers face. Beyond job descriptions, this class is designed to expose students to diverse theatrical styles across times, locations, and genres. The play readings are drawn from Greek tragedy and Latin American feminist farce, contemporary American realism and the answering surrealism of Suzan-Lori Parks' antiracist deconstructions, the familiar works of Shakespeare and the alienating epic theater of Brecht. As a student might encounter any or all of these styles as she goes on to practice theater in different contexts throughout her life, a basic knowledge of all of them will serve her well even as the variety presented will help her figure out which traditions fire her own imagination. This smorgasbord of an intro course gives students the opportunity to sample what a degree and a career in theater has to offer, so that each can go on to design his own path on the basis of the role and style that speaks most to him.

By following these two premises, I hope to equip my students with the tools and information they need to be effective theater artists in their lives beyond the academy. Integrating theory and practice helps them both develop the skills they need and learn to deploy them in combination. Exposing them to variety in their training allows them to hone their own interests, and also prepares them to work collaboratively on projects from a variety of theatrical traditions. I espouse this approach so that I can help students create a foundation of basic skills and broad knowledge that they will be able to build on in their future careers, long after the time that they leave my classroom.