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21 April 2016

Senior Synthesis

Making Meaningful Theatre: The Impact of the Furman Theatre Department

I vividly remember sitting in the house after strike for my first Furman Theatre show, *The Children's Hour*, listening to each professor give the customary spiel about the shows for the next semester. As I sat there, unsure of what my future involvement in theatre would be, our technical director Alan Bryson spoke about theatre in a way I will never forget—he remarked that theatre is, by nature, transient. We take weeks to create something that we hope is a beautiful, moving, important display—something that captures the human experience—and then in a few short minutes we dismantle our work and it is over. This has stuck with me throughout my Furman career. Through this lens I realized that what makes theatre meaningful is how it affects those involved—the people who create it and the people who view it. Though a show will likely affect every person in a different way, the importance lies in the fact that it *does* have this impact. While taking classes and working on shows with the Furman Theatre Department, I learned that clear and creative storytelling, collaboration, and flexibility are necessary to effectively create theatre that meaningfully impacts the participants.

Above all, theatre is storytelling. The foundation of any theatrical production—even if it doesn't have a script—is the desire to communicate a story. This idea was made clear to me through the evolution of theatre over time discussed in my two theatre history classes. Through every different style—whether the extreme realism of naturalism or the abstraction of expressionism—the “theatrical story” holds the most importance. Contemporary theatrical stories are most often found in a script. Through my Furman experience, this has been reflected in the

fact that the majority of my theatre classes required me to read plays. Two classes in particular stand out—my Readings in Dramatic Literature class and my Advanced Readings class. Both classes focused on reading and discussing mainly contemporary plays. Though the topic of discussion differed based on the play (for instance, some plays were heavily theme driven), it was apparent that the underlying story was what made the piece a play rather than a treatise. The most prominent examples of this are the absurdist plays we read, such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* or *Endgame*. Though these plays strongly emphasized theme (namely, the meaning of human existence), they effectively did so by communicating a story.

Because storytelling is so vital, it is important that theatre artists tell these stories clearly and creatively. While most of my classes were geared towards doing this by virtue of teaching me how to be a useful part of the theatrical process, my design classes were the most influential in this regard. Both in Costume Design and Lighting Design, for instance, we explored how colors can emotionally impact an audience in a variety of ways. Perhaps a red tone evokes anger, or love, or even a sense of danger. Costume Design in particular resonated with me in terms of clear storytelling, as our projects required us to design costumes that would give a sense of characters, their relationships, and the overall ideas of the play in order to convey the story in the best way possible. In trying to tell a story both clearly and in the “best” way, it is necessary to think creatively, and I had the opportunity to do so in Costume Design. One project, for instance, required us to design Moliere’s *Tartuffe* for an audience of middle school children. After assessing how the characters acted towards each other, I chose to base the costumes on the attire of circus performers to infuse an older script with a familiar twist. We also designed Brecht’s *Mother Courage* with a thousand-dollar budget, which forced us to think creatively in how to costume a multitude of characters with a small amount of money (I chose to overcome this

hurdle by setting it in the “grunge” period so that I could “purchase” the clothes from thrift stores).

In terms of theatre as a whole, but specifically in design, it is important to not just be *creative* in telling a story, but also to be *clear* in how a design is conveyed. Although the concept is the crux of a design, it must be presented in an evocative and direct manner. The class during my time at Furman that reflects this value most distinctly was Advanced Rendering. By using Photoshop and Sketchup, we learned how to communicate our ideas well. This was specifically useful to me, as I had little drawing or painting experience. Learning to create digital renderings gave me a level of specificity and control over my artistic output that would make it easier to share an idea with a director and design team, which would in turn lead to clarity when realizing a design and thus clarity in the design’s ability to tell the story.

In the fall of my senior year, I was able to put the skills I had acquired into practice by designing costumes for *God of Carnage*. The director emphasized to me the importance of communicating the story of these well-off people descending into chaotic and infantile arguments. The obstacle I faced through this was the realistic style. I thus had to rely on small changes to reflect this story—for instance, characters removing jackets, pushing their sleeves up, or becoming slightly more disheveled. Through this, I was able to communicate the story within a constraint—of which, as I have learned through classes and productions, there will be many.

From an acting and directing point of view, my classes challenged me to think outside of a script and create my own story to tell. In Movement for the Actor we were tasked with developing a mask scene using masks and props we chose. Having to create something as simple as a short, silent scene reinforced the idea of effective and interesting storytelling. In this project, it was important to establish a distinct beginning, middle, and end. The masks added an obstacle

because we could not speak, but lent an opportunity to experiment creatively with the ways we moved to tell the story. Likewise, one of our first Directing projects forced me to create my own “tableau” story based on people’s poses in different paintings. In contrast to Movement, I was given a beginning, middle, and end of a story, but I needed to create a through line. Not only did these presentations require me to think in a new way about storytelling, but by watching other groups present I could appreciate creative solutions to the constraints we had.

Working with these ideas in the small scale of a classroom was essential in instilling in me the understanding that creative and clear storytelling is necessary. The true test, however, was in how well I could translate this work to my work for the productions. Though each show I acted in had moments in which I contributed to the storytelling, *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Pillowman* offer the most obvious reflections of this. In *Threepenny*, my street singer character was a clear storyteller as I helped introduce many of the scenes. In terms of more imaginative storytelling, I recall a rehearsal when we were all trying to figure out how to convey the passage of time that Macheath remarks upon in the script. Though we could have added a pocket watch or clock chime, we wanted to stick with the Brechtian idea of representation. As such, we decided that I and another street singer would show the passage of time using a sundial and flashlight. Through this simple action, we were able to help advance the story in a way that kept us in the world of the play but clearly communicated to the audience what was happening in the story.

My classwork and production work thus taught me the importance of telling these stories in a meaningful way. This storytelling, however, is rarely an individual task. The second thing, therefore, that my experience in the Furman Theatre Department taught me to value is collaboration. While working with others seems an intuitive part of the theatrical process, I have

learned that collaboration is not necessarily just teamwork. The beauty of collaboration in the theatre is every person on the project bringing ideas together so that every element of the production comes together to tell one story. Bouncing ideas off of each other is a necessary part of the process, which was made clear to me through the production meetings I attended for each of the shows for which I worked backstage. A more specific layer of collaboration is design meetings, which I was able to attend and take notes on when I served as stage manager for *Rumors*. While the first meeting saw the director and each designer bring forward their personal ideas, the second meeting evolved into an arena for discussion and fluidity of ideas.

Upon arriving at Furman, my knowledge and experience with any part of theatre aside from acting was limited. This soon changed, however, as every professor emphasized the importance of collaboration in making a theatrical work successful. In *Introduction to Theatre*, Rhett Bryson explained every part of the theatrical process—from scenic and lighting design to acting to directing—which illustrated to me the importance of a theatrical team. Even so, in my initial experiences during *The Children's Hour* I was aware of that collaboration but not quite aware of the form it took. It was not until my crafts classes (Costume Crafts and Stagecraft) that I first realized the extent to which every person is involved in a theatrical process. During Stagecraft, for example, our lab time was often dedicated to working on the set for the current show. In this regard, I was able to see a chain of communication and the evolution of ideas throughout the process—from what the set designer and director had decided upon visually to how we would be able to practically carry it out. For instance, myself and the other students were tasked with painting the stage a “schlepitchka” texture for *The Winter's Tale*. The collaboration in this instance, therefore, ran from designer to technician and was focused on how best to carry out a design.

Another form of collaboration that I constantly relied on throughout my time at Furman is collaboration among actors. This became apparent through my scene work in each of my acting classes. In Acting 1, our end-of-semester project was a scene of our own choosing with a partner. By discussing our ideas of the given circumstances, moment before, and objectives in our scene my scene partner and I were able to discover certain ideas about the scene we had not considered individually. Because of our collaboration, we were able to experiment with new ways to play the scene that enhanced our illusion of the first time. Collaboration in scenes was present in my Actor's Movement class as well. In our final stage combat scene, we had to alter a given set of stage combat moves to fit our dialogue. This required us as scene partners to work through objectives and decide where on the stage we could best accomplish all we needed to do. In this case, we had an additional collaborator in our stage combat instructor Cliff Williams, who gave us ideas about where to fit in the combat based on what our scene was like. It was, as a result, our combined efforts that led to successful final scenes.

My collaborative work in these acting classes translated to my work with actors and directors during rehearsals for mainstage productions. It was, however, a gradual process. While I was initially less inclined to offer my own suggestions on a scene other than by simply doing them in my acting, as I worked on more shows I came to realize the importance of actually talking out my ideas with others in the show. In *Threepenny* I was encouraged to do so as we started the rehearsal process with discussions of who our characters were. Through this, the Street Singers as a group began a conversation that lasted throughout the process about who we were and how we felt about different characters in the show. Collaboration was thus essential in creating our mini-ensemble especially because of our improvised interactions with the audience during intermission. Since *Threepenny*, I have grown to realize the value of more of this “off the

script” collaboration. During *The Pillowman*, I constantly conversed with the other actors about our motivations and tactics within the scene. This collaboration not only built up our ensemble but also enabled us to have a bigger stake in the work.

While my crafts work and acting collaboration tended towards the micro view of a production, I further learned of the necessity of collaborators from a macro perspective through my design and directing experience. During both Costume Design and Directing, I discovered the difficulty in creating and realizing concepts alone. Every Costume Design project forced me to think not only as a designer, but also as a director who knew how the costumes would fit into a broader picture of the production. In my ten-minute play for Directing, I had to play all of the designers along with the director. These projects were difficult as I had to consider the entire scope and small details of a production, which illustrates the absolute necessity of having a collaborative team. During Directing, I had general lighting and sound ideas that I put into place, but a lighting or sound designer could interpret my ideas and convey them more effectively. Thus, in these instances the lack of collaboration reinforced its importance.

I was introduced to a new form of collaboration through my experiences working in arts administration—first at Horizon Theatre Company through Furman Advantage and then at The Warehouse Theatre as an internship class. Before working at these internships, I focused on the importance of an ensemble backstage and onstage. However, I came to realize that the front of house and administrative team is a part of the process as well and in fact forms their own ensemble. While the goal remains the same—tell the story in the best way possible—the path to this goal changes. Instead of creatively interpreting a script, as a front of house assistant I had to keep patrons satisfied and in the right frame of mind to receive the story. Thus, I indirectly collaborated with the back of house crew. I also had to work with my fellow front of house

workers to creatively solve problems—like dealing with patrons who arrived at the theatre late due to miscommunications with tickets. While at Warehouse as a development associate, I observed more of this collaboration in the office. Because each “department” of administration was so heavily intertwined, many of the tasks I had dealt with multiple people in the office. Mailings that I sent out for development usually included marketing materials as well—this underscores the importance of taking advantage of every opportunity to promote the theatre. Nevertheless, this would be impossible without the different administrators working together towards a common goal.

Collaborative storytelling is the heart of theatrical production. But there is a final element of theatre that is vital in the making and performance of a play that was reiterated through every experience I had in the Furman Theatre department—flexibility. In part, the importance of a willingness to adapt lies in the nature of theatre as a live art form. In acting, it is impossible to be glued to a certain idea of how to play a scene because part of the art is found in the way it interfaces with audience reactions. This principle holds true in design as well. Though it generally does not change during the run of a show, designers must often be flexible during the rehearsal period when new needs for the show arise. I have seen this especially through my work in the costume shop, but also in acting and in my foray into stage management.

In reference to the costume shop, Margaret Caterisano once said to me, “Nothing is precious.” This statement highlights her ability to easily adapt to problems that arise (or that we create for ourselves). I initially struggled with this idea, as I wanted everything to be exactly as it was intended—I wanted to follow a pattern to the letter or to sew in a perfectly straight line. Once I accepted her statement, however, I was able to look upon mistakes I made or obstacles as an opportunity for something new. Rather than lose confidence because reality did not match my

expectations, I could adjust to whatever was new and move forward from there. Flexibility was also crucial in the costume shop because of the time constraint. There are dozens of days I have been moved from something I was working on to something that must get done more quickly. During *Hair*, for instance, Margaret asked me to step away from costume pieces I was constructing to help finish the masks because actors needed to practice with them. Practically, too, we constantly must adapt to our constraints. Certain pieces might get bought rather than built and realism could be sacrificed because we do not have enough time. Each day I worked in the shop therefore tested my ability to change in response to different challenges.

Flexibility in acting is present not only because of the aforementioned live audience, but also in terms of rehearsal. There have been times during many shows I have been a part of that I have presented an idea or used a certain objective that did not read or simply was not what the director was looking for. As a result, I needed to be open to giving up my idea and searching for something new. While acting in *Book of Days*, one of the scenes that I struggled the most with was the one in which I spoke in tongues. Each time we did it, I tried to use the notes I had been given and combine it with my thoughts about the scene. Even so, as we reached the close of the rehearsal process it still was not reading. We had to give up what I had been working on and take it in the complete opposite direction. In addition to this, sometimes aspects of the production change during rehearsal—placement of the set might change or blocking might have to shift. In some instances, a production concept might evolve through the process. During *The Pillowman*, we had been planning to use shadow puppets to tell the stories that populated the script. Due to time constraints, however, this idea could not become a reality. As a result, we as actors had to change how we approached telling the stories and collaborate with the director to creatively interpret them. Though it was difficult, it was crucial that we were willing and ready to creatively

solve this problem to make sure the production was successful. An actor's readiness to alter what they do is thus essential to ensure rehearsal is not a stagnant process.

Perhaps the position that most clearly defines the need for flexibility in theatre production is that of stage manager. I worked as an assistant stage manager for both *Doubt* and *Pomp and Circumstance* and saw some examples of this, but it was not until I was the stage manager for *Rumors* that I understood the full implications of "being flexible." My role during the run of the show was essentially dealing with any unforeseen things that happened. So, for instance, the second night of the show a practical light shattered on stage during a scene. I had to think on my feet about how best to solve this issue in real time—by sending an actor onstage with a broom and dustpan. A willingness to adapt to new circumstances in this case enabled me not to be paralyzed by unexpected events. Flexibility and clear communication were paramount in ensuring that the story of the play was still being told despite complications.

Creating good theatre is not easy. It takes creativity and passion for the art coupled with commitment and discipline to make a valuable finished product that can positively impact an audience. Through my experience in the Furman Theatre Department, I learned the importance of storytelling, collaboration, and flexibility in a theatre environment. By understanding and implementing these ideas whenever I am part of a production, I can become a better theatre artist and learn to create meaningful art. Every theatrical production is ephemeral, as Alan observed those four years ago. But what I have discovered throughout my time at Furman is that is not the important thing. It is what we do in the moments we work on a show that matter. It is an actor learning how to empathize because of a character they are playing. It is a designer discovering an innovative way to connect with the audience visually. It is a stage manager gaining the confidence to lead others. And it is a student coming to a Furman play for a CLP and being

genuinely moved. While at Furman, I have seen each of these situations unfold, and each time has reminded me why I do theatre: to have these opportunities to generate change—within and without the theatre.