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The Program at the University of Alberta
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The Theatre Design program at the University of Alberta has had a long, prominent, and successful history in the training of designers in a conservatory setting. Though part of a large Faculty of Arts, the three Fine Arts departments (Drama, Music, and Art and Design) have much autonomy, and as a result the setting of program requirements and the scheduling of the courses is relatively straightforward. The Theatre Design program's course offerings were recently updated to reflect the growth of computer usage in our field and also to add more coursework in art fundamentals, as well as to provide a better balance of course distribution. This has meant moving from a three year to a four year program.

The program is dedicated to vocational training at the undergraduate and graduate levels and is by most standards one of the best in Canada; it is also dedicated philosophically to training students in a holistic manner, teaching set, costume and lighting design together. While we recognise that not everyone will be able to practice all three elements professionally with equal flair and surety, we believe that the study and practice of all three aspects makes for a better understanding of the nature of our art.

At the undergraduate level, we offer a four year comprehensive program which is designed around the concept that students need the time to master indispensable skills such as freehand drawing, drafting, and other studio techniques such as costume illustration and model making before moving into the design of actual realised productions.

We use the metaphor of monastic life when first encountering our students to stress the rigour of the program, and the voyage of self discovery that they are about to embark on. We explain that the main purpose of this voyage is the discovery of their personal voices. We ask for a high level of commitment, and a focused dedication to the tasks at hand. We conduct four interview sessions per year to advise students of their progress. Each year we recommend students for promotion and continuance in the program.

We are blessed with a low student per faculty ratio (annually a maximum of six BFA students are accepted and at most three MFA students) and this allows the program's instructors to offer instruction in depth. By the end of their fourth year, students will have designed at least three elements which are fully realised low budget productions presented in a well equipped large black box affair we call the Media Room. There, the students have the opportunity to work with the school's technical staff, student technicians as well as interacting with the department's MFA Directors who direct the Media Room offerings. The venue usually produces the most interesting, if not always the most highly polished, work of our year. More importantly it serves as a sturdy

playground for our BFA designers to strengthen and hone their skills.

Our MFA students are candidates who have completed an undergraduate degree usually at another University, and who after some years in practice have decided to return to school. This program is intended for relatively mature designers who can identify what is missing from their training. We rarely take students directly from an undergraduate program unless there is compelling evidence to suggest success.

In the MFA area, each candidate is evaluated for ability and experience. We usually ask students to then focus on areas of weakness in the hopes of shoring these areas up. Though we have a suggested course program for all three years (we have a qualifying year) we do tailor course selection around student interests as well as the selection committee's recommendations.

Both programs are taught in three studios in the Fine Arts Building, and students at both levels work in the Timms Centre, a splendid department facility, alongside faculty designers and guests. MFA students design at least three elements for the Department's six play season. They also design a thesis production that consists of designing three elements at once, as well as produce a lengthy supporting document to explain their work. Ultimately, both the BFA and MFA programs are dedicated to the training of professional designers for theatre and its allied performing arts.

Teaching Philosophy
Early on in my own training, I realised that there was an important distinction between conservatory style training, and a more generalised training in theatre. After completing my studies at the National Theatre School of Canada, I left firmly convinced that it was imperative to offer a vocational training to young designers rather than a more generalised course. This is not to denigrate generalised programs in theatre and drama instruction: they do serve to allow students to discover if theatre is right for them, and they are important venues for the initial exploration of the theatrical experience. Once that discovery has been made however, it is crucial to have conservatory schools where students can specialise in the complex set of skills necessary to work as professional designers.

These skills or subjects must include freehand drawing, drafting for the theatre, and naturally a core course dedicated to design and construction. Naturally, knowledge in other areas is essential. Some liberal arts training in the areas of history, art history, literature, and philosophy are also an indispensable asset. But this "trivium" of courses should form the basis of any design training.

Freehand drawing is essential to teach the awareness of form, as well as the ability to conceive ideas in a three dimensional form. Technical drawing forms the basis of a clear communication of ideas. There are arguments naturally for work on three dimensional models as a basis for the development of ideas and concepts for design. But in the main, the process that I have followed in my own work, the conception of design from sketch to precision drawing remains the way I teach, though not the

way I was taught at the National Theatre School. In my final year, as a student at the National Theatre School, I moved away from the model first approach in favour of drafting first. Ultimately, our goal at University of Alberta is to teach students to develop a sound process that is comfortable for them.

The core design course in a studio setting is an essential element in the making of architects, designers, and naturally theatre designers. Such studio courses are the backbone of all programs, and are a way of introducing students to the process of discovering ideas and of developing concepts which will be the basis of a future practice. In guiding these projects, one functions as both director and design tutor. It is a way of "simulating" the actual process of designing, albeit without the risk and pressures of actual construction. It is hoped that these projects will build the students' confidence in their abilities to derive design concepts, and to express them with aplomb. The core design course also provides students with the opportunity to practice research skills, model-making techniques, as well as drafting scenery. In costumes, the students have an opportunity to do research, sketch out preliminary ideas, and to display their understanding of character.

In encountering students, it is as critical to build confidence in their skills as it is also important to communicate that the most important feature of their design is the balance between idea and technique. Designers must find a Zen like balance between process and imagination. Focus on process alone can be stifling: focus on idea alone can lead to disorganisation and a lack of clarity. Designers are creatures made and destroyed by precision. I seek to communicate this sense of balance to our students.

Theatre design is closely akin to metaphor making. It requires a certain level of simplicity of idea, directness, and a sense that less is probably more. A design with too many ideas lacks subtlety. I teach my students to metaphorically throw a single dart at the dart board and to hit the bull's eye.

Having said that, I think it is important to allow for a variety of aesthetics in theatre design. The primary question to be asked at our critiques is how well is the design serving the play? How well does it answer the challenges posed by the author?

Design for the theatre has changed over the twentieth century. As the century opened, tastes and interests focused design in support of the realist's theatre manifesto; design provided an answer that was anchored fully in the notion that the "significant act" in design was the presentation of an accurate idea of time and place as the key ingredient in providing a world for the play. Despite the various movements in the theatre's development in the twentieth century, the idea of time and place remained central especially in North America. By the 1980s, post-modern ideas entered architecture, and into the realm of design for the theatre. History and period seemed less embarrassing in the "modern" context. The modernist insistence on the integrity of material gave way to the faux. I personally responded in my work by looking for ways to combine old and new. I allowed for faux-marbre for example, but always supported it with a contrast of cold steel. I was a modernist full of conviction in modernism, and its ideals. Still, I liked being able to blend the old and new, and I

embraced the renewed interest in surface. At NTS, working as a guest, my students and I explored various combinations that looked at plays with this as a central inspiration. The many ideas generated in areas of critical theory began to shape the nature of our understanding of the theatre as well. As a result, today a design must address the text and accompany it with its own ideas. Play production is now more concerto than symphony. The play, (the violin) may be accompanied by (the other instruments), the visual production. Counterpoint, non-linearity, dissonance, contrast, and transposition of time and place all have found a place in theatre design.

At the same time, in the 1980s I accommodated the Pop Art movement of the 1960s. In the 1990s, I began to try to incorporate ideas that were part of contemporary art from the realms of installation design and from the realms of contemporary sculpture. Many of these works dealt with archaeology in a broad sense and with human memory in specific ways. My fondest inspirations at the moment come from visits to museums such as the Tate Modern, and The Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art along with monthly readings of Sculpture Magazine. Architecture remains of interest, but not for its period historical values.

All these factors have informed my own work and indeed my teaching. I try to challenge my students to break boundaries from the perspective of many of these movements and ideas often knowing that they will not be immediately understood by the public. At the same time I note that our students must still make a case for the design based on the actual text before them.

That said it is important to recognise that strong and effective design must come from many sources and processes. Dogma and theatre are like oil and water– they make a poor mix. A dogmatic insistence on one appropriate form of theatre is too limiting. And it is important to make students aware that a good design is not about style, but about a design's power to evoke the appropriate understanding of the play on the part of the audience. In class and in discussion, we ask what the set reminds us of; is the set taking us to the right place?

I try to get my students to excavate the text for its ideas and to get them to use those ideas to shape the design. At the same time it is important to recognise that students need to have the liberty to develop their own ideas– to become echo chambers for the text.

I also seek to get students to walk a high wire and test the limits of their own understanding of what is acceptable; at the same time it is critical that students understand that they are part of a larger picture and that they need to become flexible in the face of criticism. This is the most challenging aspect of teaching and indeed the most challenging aspect of designing. The students need to become good listeners, yet they need to be active contributors. This balance is difficult to achieve and requires a certain level of maturity on the part of all designers.

There are many design schools, especially in Europe where students do not have sufficient opportunities to create designs that move beyond paper. It is important in training designers to give them an opportunity to practice their art in the form of realised and built productions. These situations should allow students an opportunity to "fly solo" with as little direct involvement from

advisers as is possible. The instructor's role is to provide and to ensure that students get the resources required to execute the design, as well as receive support in the event of conflict in the process. The advisers survey the designer's process and make certain that the designer is providing the right documents and information. It is essential that comments about aesthetics be reserved to critiques after the project has opened. It is critical to preserve the primacy and indeed privacy of the relationship between the student director and student designer.

The methods we use to practice our art have changed a great deal in my lifetime. Computers have made a mark on my work, and continue to make changes on our practice. I try to teach that embracing the computer is important, but that the infernal machine is not the most important element in the process. At the same time I have fully integrated computers in my own practice with interesting results. Ultimately any technique that communicates what is necessary is all that is required.

It is essential, I think, that young designers need to grasp that the key ingredient in their development is a kind of fearlessness in the face of challenge; all designers need to provide quick decisions under pressure. It is my hope that the students I have taught can function in any environment, and turn moments of confusion and chaos into moments of triumph. Designers solve problems which may seem intractable to others. They are calm, have a great sense of humour and understand that the theatre is not a life and death matter, but rather a place to have "serious fun" to quote Tyrone Guthrie. I also hope that my students will acquire humility and understand their role in the process as limited and most successful when they have good relationships with directors and technicians. It is also important that students recognise the importance of maintaining a passionate belief in their own dreams, and that they make a commitment to those aspirations and dreams. They must learn to follow those dreams with dedication and passion at their own expense, but never at all costs.

Evaluating Students

The basis for the evaluation of design students is always a difficult process as it is in so many of the arts. In many ways my own evaluation process depends on my own intuitive response to the designs that students have created. To be sure my own tastes come into play, but I make every effort to consider the degree to which students have participated in the project. How open were they to change? How flexible and at the same time how well have they managed to pursue their dreams. In most respects, it is important to assess a student's ability to read the play. How well have they responded to the play's needs? Design is finally a process of distillation. Not every detail is necessarily meaningful.

In evaluating students, I consider effort and application. How hard they have worked is important, but not all important. It is also necessary to evaluate imagination. This is more difficult but nonetheless crucial. We need to give students a sense that they can have larger dreams.

Here at University of Alberta and at The National Theatre School our students are evaluated in interviews. Here we try to focus our comments on progress, and development. Skill levels are reviewed and students are encouraged to work on specific weaknesses. Where possible we try to steer away from generalised comments on personality in favour of specific commentary on strengths and weaknesses, and on skill sets. Students are evaluated for their professionalism. Are they making their deadlines, are they arriving on time. Can they deliver under stress?

At the National Theatre School, the program did not award grades or marks; instead students were simply given comments and criticism. At the University of Alberta on the other hand grades are awarded and used as markers in awarding scholarships and bursaries. I believe we would be better served if we moved to pass/fail because ultimately the grading system seems to suggest that a B minus is alright. In an academic sense it is alright, but a professional designer who is only at a B minus is not really doing very well at all. Grades can give a false sense of security.

Ultimately we evaluate students in absolute terms. How well did they succeed on the project can mean: how well did they work with their director; how have they managed in moments of crisis; how well did they turn imminent failure to advantage. Perhaps most significantly were they able to realise their own goals. If they did, then it is likely they will succeed as a designer.