

"Not a bad public, that . . .": Reflections on Teaching
By Reginald F. Bain, Associate Professor of Film, Television and Theatre
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Good Afternoon.

"Let's put on a play!" I suppose that solicitation conjures up images of childhood games or perhaps an old film with a teenage Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney as apprentices in a summer theatre discovering the mystique of show business and the joys of adolescence. Certainly, it's not the subject of a Sheedy Award address reflecting on teaching. But the fact is, that is what I do and teach others to do. I have been doing it now for nearly forty years. I hope you will indulge me. I think it is honorable work.

In my early years of teaching here, I directed a touring production of a play entitled *A Company of Wayward Saints*. It is a delightful play about a modern commedia dell'arte company that is trying to find its way home after many years on the road. Tensions in relationships among the members of the troupe spill out as the actors attempt to improvise the performance. The improvisation breaks down and the actors are forced to remove their masks and reveal aspects of themselves to one another and to the audience. Predictably, in doing this, they discover their need to work together to survive and return home.

We toured this play in order to introduce people across the country to our theatre program and show off the work of some of our best students. Alumni groups around the country sponsored us and we played in a variety of spaces. One night we were booked for a benefit performance. A young boy in the community was dying and the proceeds of ticket sales were to aid the family's expenses. All the tickets had been sold. The actors were looking forward to playing the comic drama to a full house. But nobody came, except the dying boy and his parents. "An audience of one?" questioned a member of the company. "That's all you need," I said. "Do the play for the boy." In all my years of teaching and directing, I have never seen a cast work as hard or find such focus in their work. Afterwards, they met with the young man, signed autographs and returned to campus in silence. There was really nothing more to say.

I have often used that story when actors were facing the prospect of playing for a particularly small house. It is a true story. It needs little explanation. The "fun" and "work" of doing a play became the context of a very special moment of human interaction. Augusto Boal, the Brazilian director of the Theatre of the Oppressed said it well: "To teach and to learn theatre, is to learn and to teach humanity." ¹

Faculty and students have produced plays at Notre Dame since its formative years. In 1845, at the end of the second year of the college, founder Father Edward Sorin wanted to celebrate the completion of the academic year and show off the college.²

Father sent out invitations throughout the adjacent communities for a festival of student awards. By all accounts, a large number of guests turned out to tour the grounds and the new college facilities. A makeshift stage was constructed in the Music Room of the Main Building. At eight o'clock in the evening a band marched everyone into the hall for the formal program that included a student play which, as one observer noted, "for the space of an hour kept the audience in a roar of laughter."³

Plays became staples of the school year-Founder's Day, Washington's Birthday, St. Patrick's Day and, of course, commencement. A Thespian Society was established. Play selection varied from the classics to popular melodrama and farce. Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 1; Schiller's William Tell; Sheridan's The Rivals were among the many plays produced during the early years of the dramatic society.

Father Sorin liked and encouraged theatre on campus. In his later years, he wrote a play for production by the Minims-the six to thirteen year old elementary students on campus. And he cared about the quality of the work. After an obviously unsatisfactory performance the previous year, he wrote a stinging note to a faculty supervisor. He admonished him to upgrade standards for training student manners and elocutionary skills: It was, he wrote, "a crying injustice, to present before such an appreciative audience a youth not able to create the best impression . . ."⁴

Faculty who supervised these activities were not drama specialists. They came from the spectrum of disciplines of the college and differing theatrical backgrounds. They selected the plays, cast them, and staged them. Costumes and settings were suggestive and minimal. All the plays were adapted and cut since all parts had to be played by men, and there was continual concern on campus about moral content. Sometimes faculty provided their own scripts. When a play found success, the production was often re-produced for a new generation of students.

We can't know, of course, the quality of these productions. It is safe to say that all the exigencies of amateur production prevailed. Some productions excelled, some were bad, and most were of a mixed quality. But the participants seemed to love what they were doing and audiences were mostly approving.

The plays were usually performed in the Old Exhibition Hall (the first Washington Hall), a two story structure which had been erected near the site of the present theatre in 1846 for various public events. The present Washington Hall was built after the devastating campus fire of 1879. Although completed in 1881, it's formal opening took place on June 20, 1882 and was occasion for one of the most highly publicized theatre events in Notre Dame history-a production of Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus in Greek.

Father Nicholas Stoffel, Professor of Greek, had supervised the play, which featured costumes by the artist Luigi Gregori. It followed by one year a similar production at Harvard that had received international attention as the first such foreign language production on an American college campus. The Notre Dame production was repeated in 1899, again to great acclaim.

In the early years of the 20th Century, theatre production on campus began to change. Competing student groups emerged to challenge the thespian organization. Students favored original musical reviews of slapstick and topical comedy. There were several attempts to re-establish the dramatic society, but nothing took hold.

At about the same time, theatre began to enter the curricula of American colleges and universities.⁵ The first degree-granting program in theatre was created at Carnegie in 1913. Carnegie was a technical school and the theatre program focused on professional training. The first liberal arts programs were developed at schools like Northwestern, Cornell, and Iowa around 1919. By 1930, Iowa was offering a Ph.D. in theatre.

At Notre Dame, in the early 1920's, a Department of Speech and Drama was established out of the old elocution and oratory programs. Prof. Frank Kelly of the speech faculty offered a course in play production to, as one student put it, "resurrect the dead form of dramatics at Notre Dame; for after all, one cannot present plays successfully unless one first learns how it is done."⁶

The following year, the administration, which had become concerned about the behavior of audiences and questionable content of campus variety shows established the University Theatre. Composed of members of the departments of Speech, Music and other departments this organization was charged with providing "co-ordination of all campus work of a dramatic character."⁷

Throughout the ensuing years, the Speech Department offered electives in drama. The University Theatre continued to coordinate production and did restore serious play production to campus. Women from the community, and eventually from Saint Mary's, began to take roles in some plays. A much-heralded production of the First World War play, *Journey's End*, was produced, by special arrangement, while it was still on Broadway. A Gilbert and Sullivan series was much admired. Student variety and musical reviews prospered.

Theatre was abundant on campus. But Notre Dame was slow in developing a serious curricular theatre program. Indeed my friend and colleague, Prof. Tom Stritch, has characterized theatre at this point as being relegated to "the basement of Notre Dame art."⁸ The long-standing suspicion of theatre's moral correctness, as well as a lack of mission and organization prevailed.

It was not until 1954 that Notre Dame saw the beginnings of a serious academic theatre program. That summer Washington Hall was renovated with new seating and technical equipment. Father Arthur Harvey, a Holy Cross priest, arrived from Catholic University where Father Gilbert Hartke and others had established a program that had been credited with raising the status of theatre on American Catholic College campuses. Harvey's organizational skill and high standards for production brought new recognition to the theatre on campus and in the community. An annual subscription season was initiated.

New faculty and an expanded curriculum made it possible to offer a strong theatre concentration within the speech major.

This was the foundation upon which the present theatre program is based. Of course, much happened in the intervening years on campus and in the department. An eighteen-year cooperative theatre program with Saint Mary's ended in the 1980's. Theatre is now linked with a vibrant film and media studies program. We have had an infusion of vital young faculty--scholars, teachers and artists. This has brought us new status, visibility and growth. In addition, there has been a strong influx of encouragement and institutional support. I am sure you're aware of the most recently publicized aspects of this: construction of a new performing arts center has commenced, a new endowed chair in Shakespeare is soon to be filled, this semester we become the home base of the British Shakespearean touring group Actors from the London Stage which is part of a larger Shakespeare Initiative of the college.

My links to this history are strong. I was one of the first Notre Dame students to benefit from that new curriculum in the fifties. A decade later, I returned to campus to teach directing.

Directing, as we know it today, only emerged a little over a hundred years ago. Previous ages had relied on established conventions or rules as to how the game of theatre was to be played to determine the staging. These varied from age to age depending on the culture, the dramaturgy, the physical stage, or the acting style. Sometimes staging was the responsibility of a committee of people, each with a special task. Other times the playwright, or an actor or manager took precedence.

The craft and art of the director unfolded throughout the 20th Century and continues to evolve today. The revolutionary development of the Realistic/naturalistic school of theatre and the almost immediate anti-realist reactions to it produced an eclecticism of dramatic forms and styles in the theatre that has proceeded to this day. A new stagecraft created by the invention of the electric light and subsequent technological developments made possible realistic, spatial and multi-media environments. The conventional proscenium stage prevailed, but alternative options became commonplace. Though some form of realistic acting became the norm, new physical and psychological explorations emerged. The dominance of text-based theatre was challenged. Someone was needed to bring together these complexities and give the event a direction-a viewpoint. In effect, one might say, that now the director defined the conventions by which this game of theatre is to be played with this audience at this time and in this space.

The director begins this task by developing what we call a "directorial concept." A sometimes-maligned term because of certain excesses, it refers to nothing more than the product of personal intensive study and thought about the text. I like to think of it as the result of "living with the play," and establishing a relationship with the playwright. Probing the literal and metaphorical texture of the play. And filtering it all through the director's own sensibilities-why he or she wants to do this play and how this might be made present for the audience. In my own work, development of a concept may take a

year or more. For the students, the time frame is usually more condensed. These discoveries provide a conceptual framework, a set of parameters that guide the director through the problem solving of the production process.

Director's structure this process, but they do not work alone. There is no simple formula for putting on a play. Directing is about unleashing the creative energies of artist collaborators. It is providing "the passion that lights the fires," says legendary director Peter Brook.⁹ Some directors are autocratic, some democratic, and some move back and forth. Normally, the visual environment is first determined in collaboration with the designers. But it is in rehearsal with the actors that the details of performance are evolved, by playing out the actions of the characters and the ideas and images discovered in that puzzle that is the dramatic text. Rehearsal is about challenging oneself and one's collaborators. It is about work, play, imagination, repetition, discipline, and detail. It is the director's job to facilitate it all and, at the same time, maintain focus on the underlying dramatic structure and find those factors that will unify and harmonize these efforts into a meaningful relationship with the audience. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. We don't really know until the audience arrives and theatre happens. But the process of juggling all these complexities can be exhilarating.

Can you teach someone how to do this? Probably not. Famed director Sir Tyrone Guthrie has cautioned that "the only way to learn how to direct a play, is . . . to get a group of actors simple enough to allow you to let you direct them, and direct."¹⁰ Traditionally, directors have been trained by apprenticing with an established director. Inevitably, in the United States, with the evolution of academic programs in theatre more directors have come from school theatre programs.

Certainly, the immense intellectual and artistic resources one finds in academia are a favorable environment for budding theatre directors. Liberal arts' students bring to directing the breadth and rigor of their general education. We may not be able to teach the creative impulses in the individual that makes a director. But we can help the individual discover and use those impulses.

The lab theatre season is the showcase for work growing out of the courses in directing and other creative classes. It also involves many students in the cast and crews of these plays who are found through open auditions among the student body at large. Student actors and others have come to know the lab as one of the best ways to break into departmental theatre. It is a place where people can feel free to try things, succeed and fail. Although it is not widely publicized, I believe it produces some of the most exciting theatre on this campus.

Each semester the final projects for the beginning class are offered to the public in an evening or evenings of one-act plays. Full-length productions are programmed throughout the year. These are advanced projects proposed by students who have already completed the first course. Students are encouraged to create the kind of theatre they want to create. Play selection is quite diverse including classical and standard fare, contemporary drama, original work and company developed material. The advanced

projects are given a small budget, are scheduled for a full thirty-rehearsal period, and are provided priority of rehearsal and production space. Student directors are required, with the help and advice of the theatre staff, to put together a full production organization of student designers and technicians. The plays are scheduled for a two-night run.

Before there was an actual place designated as the lab, students had to compete for use of the mainstage of Washington Hall for curricular work. Eventually, the stage became booked solidly. I, therefore, challenged the advanced students to find alternative spaces that might house their projects. After all, I had long been fond of quoting to them American scenic artist, Robert Edmond Jones, pronouncement that "the theatre is only an arrangement of seats, so grouped and spaced that the actor . . . can reach out and touch and hold each member of his audience."¹¹

The response to that challenge astounded me. Students created theatre in a variety of found spaces: There was Oedipus at Colonus, which depicts Oedipus' death and reconciliation, produced around the lake at Saint Mary's as the audience moved from scene to scene around the groves on the banks of the lake. The production opened with Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, bringing her father to this sacred place on a boat. A theatre lobby was the found space for constructing the mound of Beckett's Happy Days with the audience seated around on the floor as the character Winnie lives out her life, first buried by this mound to her waist and then to her neck. A festive reading of Saroyan's The Time of Your Life, which takes place in a San Francisco bar, staged here in a coffee house in downtown South Bend with the audience seated at tables (with beverages served) as the play proceeded around them. There were many more such projects in any location student imaginations could dream-up and their ingenuity secure.

Having directors find their own stages was responsible for some singular theatre, but it was difficult to administer. The directing class was held in the third floor student lounge in Washington Hall. It was a large room with upholstered furniture, carpets and a piano. Old time students will remember it as the theatre's green room (or gathering place for actors during productions). One day, in the early seventies, members of the class asked me why we couldn't use the room for our evening of one-acts that semester. I had no good answer. The room was cleared and that semester the directing finals were held in the lounge. It was such a success that the furniture and carpeting were left in storage. From that day on, the third floor of the old theatre was known as "the lab."

The lab theatre was renovated in the mid-1980's as part of the most extensive renovation of Washington Hall since its opening. The room still has four structural poles to maneuver around, but removing some old storage rooms along one side expanded the space. The ceiling was raised and a lighting system added. There are about 100 seats, but it is flexible. Audiences may sit on the floor, stand, move around or sit on the chairs placed in any number of conformations around the space and in relation to the actors.

The lab is truly a lab. The focus is on the process and not product. So much of the success of a work depends on preparation and the give-and-take of rehearsals. Some of the work is brilliant, some mundane, some over-reaching, some inadequate. There have

been too many good ones to single out. But let me give you a brief sample: A production of Megan Terry's 1960's transformation play, *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, first performed in a squash court of the old fieldhouse and then re-staged for the lab because the director wanted to explore the potential effects of space on the conceptual process. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* directed to obviously focus on the idea of actors doing a play thus challenging the audience to suspend their disbelief and experience the nightmare of the play made real through the actor. An electrifying evening was created by the production of *The Ultimatum*, written and directed by an African-American woman. She sought specifically to use the play as a way of engaging the African-American campus community to participate as both artists and spectators. In Martin Sherman's *Bent*, the director sought confrontation with her audience. We were made to march in and out of the lab, sit on the floor, wear pink triangles, and observe the Nazi's treatment of homosexual prisoners in this theatre turned "concentration camp." The classical story of Jean Anouilh's *Medea* was presented as taking place in a contemporary world of bikers. And finally, a most intriguing evening of two rarely performed German expressionist plays was offered. The plays were selected simply because, in his research, the director had found them thought provoking and challenging.

I have supervised hundreds of projects like these through the years. That means aiding them in their efforts, but carefully balancing my involvement. They come to this work to create something of their own, something unique and meaningful for them and for an audience. Each student is different. Some are at my door every day. Others keep their distance. I meet with them regularly to facilitate their thinking about the play and the process, address any problems, check on progress, and offer encouragement. I attend rehearsals only if invited. After the production, they are required to submit written evidence of their research, analytical work, concept formation, a critical self-evaluation and the promptbook record of the process. I meet with them for a final discussion and offer an evaluation of the work.

We have occasionally provided another outlet for student directors-our mainstage season. The mainstage series is normally where students work under our faculty directors and designers. It is the capstone of our production program utilizing all the considerable resources of the department. Through the years a select group of students who have completed the classes in directing have been chosen to direct in this season. Student designers have similarly been chosen. It is a most unique opportunity for liberal arts undergraduates that would be hard to find at comparable institutions.

As I've noted, theatre has happened on this campus since its founding. That's because, in essence, theatre is a natural way of thinking about who and what we are. It is rooted in our humanity, in our intuition to play. We refer to the theatre event as "a play" and the actors as "players." As children, we use this creative power easily to recreate ourselves and sometimes to survive. Later, we tend to suppress this intuition in order to conform to being an adult. All the arts provide a means of probing this power in their own unique ways. But for those seriously seeking to move on into the profession of theatre, or simply to satisfy a personal aesthetic need within the context of their liberal education, the

resources of the theatre program are here. Programs, facilities, and teacher/artists to help students re-awaken, explore and experience the dramatic imagination in all of us.

When Chris Fox called to tell me I had won the Sheedy Award, I was stunned. You see I had just completed my last semester of active teaching at the university. It was a Saturday morning and I was contemplating the joys of retirement. The thought of winning such an award had never crossed my mind. I don't think a theatre professor has ever won it before.

I've always thought of teaching as the best job that anyone could have. No need to give me an award for doing it. There's a wonderful line in a scene from Robert Bolt's beautiful play about Sir Thomas More-A Man for All Seasons. The young ambitious Richard Rich has asked More for advice on a career. "Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps even a great one," More says. "And if I was, who would know it?" protests Rich. "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that . . ."12 More's answer has always provided me perspective on the question of recognition for what I do.

But, don't get me wrong, it is nice to win. I am awed by the list of former winners of this award--some of my favorite teachers and treasured colleagues. I am humbled to be in their company. I am most grateful and highly honored to receive the Sheedy Award. Thank you.