STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Rachel M. E. Wolfe

As a professor of theatrical arts, I approach pedagogy with three main goals: to inform students about the wide variety of subjects and roles that theatre has to offer, to equip them with the skills they need to engage with those subjects and fulfill those roles, and to encourage students to explore whatever aspects of those things interest them most. The last goal is especially important in the arts because the best art is always made in the areas which most spark the artists' own interests. To achieve these goals, I structure my teaching as a dialogue between myself and my students, often alternating lecture with discussion, integrating instruction with group work, and asking my students to demonstrate the skills they have gained through self-chosen or self-designed final projects.

To give a basic example of this teaching structure, consider the format of my directing course. During the first half of the semester, students are given an inside seat to my own directing process as I direct a mainstage show. Talking them through every aspect of my decision making and each component of a director's job in turn, I give students the opportunity to offer opinions and suggestions to the process: the class sits in on auditions and offers feedback to help cast the show, for instance. This practical process consists of equal parts receiving information about the role of the director and skill-building through collaborative dialogue with the instructor, allowing students to try out knowledge as they receive it in a hands-on way. At the same time, we view a variety of shows by different directors, each showcasing different styles and serving as a case example for the directing concept under scrutiny for the week (Yaël Farber's recorded version of *Les Blancs* to study blocking, for example). This ensures that students are informed about more directing options and processes than just my own, and allows them to discover which genres and styles spark their own directing interests for the second half of the course, which is taken up by the major project of directing their own one-acts. Students may choose any one-act provided they make an informed case for its practical production during the directing pitch that serves as their midterm. The latter part of the semester is then dedicated to shepherding them through the process of directing on their own. In-class work is largely given over to discussion of challenges and problems that have come up in their process, group problem-solving in which the students offer suggestions and potential solutions to each other in much the same way as they fielded opinions to me during the first half, and continued guidance from me on new issues like portfolio-building and the process of dealing with reviews. The final for the class is the public presentation of their one-act as a festival performance, alongside the new directing portfolio they have begun with this project. At every turn, students are encouraged to apply the knowledge and skills they have gained in the course to the things that interest them most, working collaboratively with one another and me along the way.

I think that the more student participation is required the greater their skill development will be. This belief is reflected in my approach to grading, in multiple senses of the word. Because theatre is a collective enterprise in which artists must reliably turn up and work together, I always incorporate an "attendance and participation" category into my course grade breakdown. This ensures that students get credit for showing up to class and participating in class discussions, building the skills they will need to put on collaborative theatre projects. When it comes to written assignments, I have a policy across all my classes of requiring students to turn in assignments electronically as Word files. This allows me to make full corrections to the assignments easily using the "track changes" feature in Word, so that when I return them with

feedback students can see precisely and extensively what they need to change in order to do better next time. There is also always a "next time," as writing assignments build on one another and incorporate skills developed in previous assignments. In this way, there is further dialogue between me and my students in which the pairing of instruction and participation allows me to help them hone their skills. Finally, I run all of my on-ground classes using an electronic course manager in which students can see and track their own grades throughout the semester, fostering transparency in my grading process and encouraging them to take an active hand in shaping their own grades.

My course design choices are focused on expanding students' exposure to a diversity of perspectives and subject matter through a combination of course material selection and integrating guest artists into my classes. I design my course syllabi in both skill-focused and thematic classes to feature examples drawn from diverse times, locations, cultures, and viewpoints. For example, in my special topics course on ghosting in the theater, I assign numerous global works including a kabuki play, a contemporary Ghanian drama, and an experimental Peruvian piece alongside more traditional offerings like Ibsen's *Ghosts* or Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. This course is not specifically a world theater or theater history class, but rather a theory class focused around the operations of memory and theatrical recycling put forward in Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage*. Yet the supplemental readings for this course, drawn from a wide variety of different cultures and written in a number of different genres, enable students to find the diversity of their own backgrounds and interests reflected in the array of readings on offer. By exposing students to variety in every possible context, I aim not only to include those students who do not feel represented by the Western canon but also to raise awareness of the wide scope of world theatrical traditions among those students who do. Beyond reading diverse writers, my classes offer in-person interactions with a variety of theatre-makers. My last World Drama class featured two guest artists on two different days: a professional storyteller during our week on African oral traditions as theatre, and a classical Indian dancer during our week on traditional Indian dance-drama. Both guest artists gave example performances accompanied by talks on their respective art forms, and in their teaching evaluations the students singled out these instances of live performance as being the most informative way to learn about these traditions. I make sure to assign the viewing of at least one live performance[1] in every class I teach (usually tied to a paper assignment) in order to ensure that students are exposed to not only my viewpoints on theatre, but other artists', as well. In this fashion, students get variety not only through my choices about what to include in the curriculum, but through direct learning from multiple artists/instructors.

I have gotten very positive feedback from students about these practices and about the degree to which I ask for and respond to their input. It is my strong belief that teaching to the broad palette of students' interests—rather than focusing narrowly on my own—inculcates in them an active desire to learn that extends beyond my classroom and will serve them well in their lives after college. It is my job to give them a taste of what's out there and equip them with the tools they will need to engage it, then let them choose which paths to walk and how far to go.

[1] Although during the pandemic, with theatres shut down, this morphed into watching a videorecording of a professional stage production, usually through the National Theatre Live database.