

Year Three Review -- THTR

UMBC's Department of Theatre is quite a different place than it was in 2017. Though it may not seem as if we have changed very much on paper, the culture and climate of our department – indeed, our entire approach to theatre education – has undergone a sea change. Viewed through the layers of pandemic, #metoo, We See You White American Theatre¹, and the needs of a generation of post-pandemic students, the priorities described in our 2017 Post-APR Report seem almost quaint.

In this report, I will summarize our progress on the action plan that was developed following the APR. I will also attempt to paint a picture of our current priorities, array of interconnected challenges, needed resources, and how we plan to pitch our efforts in the next several years.

Achievements

1. Vision and Planning: New Plays and New Ways

- a. In 2018, the department issued a new mission and vision statement that encapsulates our values and points to our future. It now reads:

“At UMBC we believe that theatre is an ever-changing art form, responding to and creating new ideas that confront our ethical, political, and artistic ideas and practices. Degree programs... provide students with the interdisciplinary skills to become actively engaged with their art and with the world around them. A dedicated faculty focuses on each student's evolution as an artist and as a person, making the study of theatre at UMBC a life-changing experience that stimulates, challenges and inspires...Using the latest technologies and practices, we experiment with theatrical forms, create provocative new work, and give voice where it is most needed.

- b. Since then, we have initiated a number of department-wide strategies to help fulfill these ambitions and cultivate more transparency and equity. We have worked alongside our students to develop and adopt newly-minted best practices in these areas:
 - i. Theatrical Intimacy and Instructional Touch
 - ii. Auditions and Casting
 - iii. Safety Practices in the studio, shop and onstage
 - iv. Trauma Informed Pedagogy
- c. Our faculty has made a renewed commitment to anti-racist theatre-making and theatre education. In addition to workshops and trainings to attended by individuals, our entire faculty is currently involved in a two-year curriculum on dismantling white supremacy led by a consultant from AWARE-LA, an alliance of white anti-racist people organizing to challenge racism in transformative alliance with people of color.
- d. We have improved the excellence of our theatre seasons by increasing the number of plays written by authors from traditionally underrepresented groups. Of the eleven plays programmed for AY 2017 - AY 2021, three were authored by African-American playwrights, one by an Asian-American, one devised by a diverse company of students, and seven by white authors. Seven of the eleven were written by women.

2. Innovations

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Ours is a socially-intimate, in-person, in-real-time art form, and the long campus closure presented many challenges. Nevertheless, we have continued to engage our students in community building and innovative programming, using all of our community's creative muscle.

- a. Chief among these efforts was our first-ever, full-scale streaming production of *Everybody*, by Brendan Jacobs-Jenkins. We invested in video, sound and green-screen equipment such that the entire acting company of 18 students could set up a home studio. Professor Nate Sinnot and his students created extraordinary digital scene design, while a crew of students handled digital editing and processing, streaming for six performances in Spring 2021.
- b. Our 2021/22 production season included two experimental works that made social-distancing masking, and potential rehearsal disruptions a feature, rather than a bug. In early fall, guest director Susan Stroupe of Immersive Productions engaged students in making an outdoor, ambulatory production in which the audience trailed a mysterious group of characters and stories around the top of Hilltop Circle. Later on in the semester, students wrote and performed *Everything Is Performance*, a satire of reality-show culture taking intersectional identity as its subject.

Just as the profession continues to experiment in the ways of making and viewing theatre, we, too, envision working in a variety of modalities in the future: streaming production, site-specific events, radio drama, and of course, live performance.

3. Faculty

- a. Hiring, Promotion, Tenure, and Retirements

Since 2017, the senior faculty has been very busy in Search and Promotion-and-Tenure Committees. We have completed seven successful faculty actions: four Lecturers were promoted to the rank of Senior Lecturer and two Assistant Professors earned tenure and promotion to Associate Professor.

- i. After a national search, we hired Chelsea Pace, a new Assistant Professor of Movement, whose contract was renewed at the three-year mark. She will depart at the end of 2022 to pursue her booming professional career.
- ii. Upon her retirement in 2021, Professor Lynn Watson was bestowed the rank of Professor Emerita. Dr. Alan Kreizenbeck, our long-time Professor of Theatre History, retired in 2020.
- iii. We have also searched and hired three new staffers, filling the positions of Assistant Production Manager, Assistant Technical Director, and Costume Shop Manager.

4. Achievements in Creative Research

Our remarkable faculty maintains an outstanding record of scholarly and creative accomplishments – too many to list in this short report, but I must boast of these highlights:

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- a. Professor Lynn Watson was sub recipient for an NEA Grant for her work on “Performing Arts Methodologies and Health Science: Fitzmaurice Voicework, fMRI, and Working Memory.” This study was published in the Voice and Speech Review in 2019. For this scholarship, she was awarded the 2019 Dudley Knight Award for Outstanding Vocal Scholarship, Voice and Speech Trainers Association.
- b. Professor Chelsea Pace’s book, *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy*, was published by Routledge in 2020. She and her work have been featured in the New York Times Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, The Baltimore Sun, and the BBC. She served as Intimacy Coordinator for the Amazon Studios series, *Harlem*, among others. Her Intimacy Choreography has been seen in productions throughout the region.
- c. Professor Colette Searls’ book, *A Galaxy of Things: the Power of Puppets and Masks in Star Wars and Beyond* will be published by Routledge in 2022. Her work is regularly featured at Puppetry International, Light Festival (Baltimore,) and American Society for Theatre Research.
- d. Professor Eric Abele has broken ground on new pedagogies in Digital Costume Design and Non-Western Costume History. This research has led to the development of new coursework. He has been commissioned to contribute a chapter to a new textbook, *New Perspectives on Teaching Fashion History*.
- e. Professor Nate Sinnott won a Helen Hayes Award nomination for his work on *You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown* (Imagination Stage.)
- f. Professor N. Hartman has been commissioned to direct *The Amish Project* at The Munich Film Akademie, Summer 2022. A documentary film of Professor Hartman’s rehearsal process and the production will open in 2023.
- g. Professor Susan McCully’s play, *All She Must Possess*, had its world premiere at RepStage (Columbia, MD,) in 2018. In 2019/20, her play *Girls on A Dirt Pile* was recognized as Best Production of A New Play (National) by the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival. Professor Eve Muson was named as Outstanding Director, and Nate Sinnott for Outstanding Scene Design for the same production.

5. Resources for Creative and Pedagogical Research

Our faculty have also taken advantage of the grants generously awarded by CAHSS and the university. In the past three years, our faculty together have received two Charlesmead Awards, one START Grant, a CAHSS Dean’s Pedagogy and Teaching Award, and a Drescher Faculty Research Support Fund. Through CIRCA, we have received two Pedagogy Fellowships, three Research Fellowships, a Block grant, and a Summer Research Fellowship.

6. Enrollment and Recruitment

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At the 2021 Fall Opening Meeting, our Interim Dean mentioned that, generally speaking, the CAHSS enrollment numbers are dropping. We are pleased to report that our enrollment has remained fairly stable since 2017: 104 majors at the beginning of Fall 2017, 115 in 2018, 112 in 2019, and 109 in 2020.

Of our two majors, the BFA Acting major has seen the most significant bump, having almost doubled in enrollment between 2017 and 2020. We attribute this to two initiatives taken since 2017:

- a. With the creation of Articulation Agreements between our department and those of half a dozen Maryland Community Colleges, we have taken aggressive steps to recruit transfer students. Students who have fulfilled many of our prerequisites may finish the BFA degree in two years through our new Accelerated BFA Program for Transfer Students. We have enrolled and graduated at least a half a dozen accelerated students since 2018.
- b. Based on advice from Undergraduate Admissions, we now require an audition of all prospective students to enter the major. This signals that our program is competitive and serious, bringing us in line with other undergraduate programs. We held a series of virtual audition days in 2020/21, yielding perhaps as many as ten incoming freshmen in Fall 2021.
- c. We have also seen a remarkable jump in the diversity of students in our BFA Acting Major: in Fall 2017, 27% of students self-identified as BIPOC; in Fall 2020, 67%. Again, we feel students of color are perhaps attracted to the department because of our articulation agreements and our expanded vision and mission.

7. Student Success

Our advising efforts, from Orientation through Commencement, have paid off tremendously. Under the supervision of Associate Chair Eric Abele, our number of graduates have nearly doubled since the post-APR Report: 15 graduates in 2017/18; 29 in 2019/20.

Challenges

1. Full-time Faculty Hiring

With the recent retirements of Professors Alan Kreizenbeck and Lynn Watson, and the anticipated departure of Assistant Professor Chelsea Pace, we find ourselves lacking three, full-time, tenured or tenure-track professors starting next year. Together, they taught fifteen courses each year; without them, almost 50% of courses required for the BFA and/or BA degrees are taught by adjuncts. This compromises the Department in many ways, principally in continuity of teaching our curricula, and may also already be impacting student recruitment, retention, and the Department's reputation for quality creative work and instruction. We have requested to open at least one search during 2022/23, putting a new lecturer in place in Fall 2023.

In terms of diversity, our current faculty do not yet meet our standard for inclusive excellence and the number of artist/educators of under-represented groups is small. Though the diversity of our majors has steadily increased, especially in the BFA Acting Major, our full-time faculty remains entirely

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white. At the moment, we are compensating with the addition of many wonderful BIPOC guest artists and adjunct instructors, but this is neither sustainable nor desirable.

We take heart from the success of our most recent search for a Fellow for the Program for Faculty Diversity in the Arts. Though we did not succeed in placing our candidate, the 2020 search yielded fifty-three applications from candidates of color, more than any search conducted in the Department's past. Clearly the job posting communicated a sincere commitment to inclusive excellence, a candidate's intellectual and artistic growth, and a vibrant department.

To aid in these efforts, the Department needs

- a. Additional or reallocation of funds to raise adjunct faculty fees as we undergo several years of searches for full-time positions. Competition for BIPOC theatre educators and artists is fierce (and our own adjunct faculty are being recruited for substantial positions at other universities.)
- b. Ongoing training and incentives for current faculty and staff training in Equity, Ethical Approaches, and Inclusive Excellence with regard to hiring and teaching concerns. Though there is little resistance to these notions in theory, members of my faculty are at different levels of knowledge, habit, and practice. The university is rich with resources and workshops sponsored by CAHSS, OEI, FDC, iB3, for example. I propose rewarding participation in an agreed-upon number of workshops with a micro-credential, or with offering a larger travel allowance for the year. (If it's worth it to the college to pay faculty for the PIVOT Training, surely this urgent work must be considered just as valuable!)

8. Recruitment

- a. Our total enrollment has remained remarkably flat. However, we have yet to fulfill our ambition to substantially increase our enrollment across both of our majors. We intend to retain our small class size and intimate learning environment; at the same time, we can accommodate far more students in our classes and on our stages, perhaps as much as 30% more. With the exception of the efforts mentioned above, we have not had much movement on the Student Recruitment actions described on pages 2 and 3 in the Post-APR Action Plan.
- b. It appears that we vastly underestimate the enormous amount of labor it takes to run a cohesive and sustainable recruitment effort. To that end, we have taken some preliminary steps to give recruitment the attention it deserves, some of which require a reallocation of current resources and request for more:
 - i. I have appointed Professor Adam Mendelson to serve as Chair of our Recruitment Committee, to centralize and reinvigorate its efforts. The time required – including that dedicated to off-site activity at festivals, coordinating our faculty's efforts those of the Offices of Undergraduate Admissions, Scholarships and Linehan Artist Scholars programs, devising and administering programs to bring prospective students to campus – will be offset by one course release per year. This is a reallocation of his

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time and course assignments; there probably won't be any perceivable effect on budget or curriculum.

- ii. At the moment, we do not earmark very much money for these activities – travel and registrations, nor have we traditionally spent much to update promotional materials. Quality production photography and video are essential for marketing and competition with other institutions – much less archival purposes. Since Creative Services will no longer provide the services of the university photographer, we can expect to spend many thousands of dollars each year for a professional photographer.

9. Student Well-Being and the Life-Art-Work Balance

Our theatre students (and colleagues,) have been profoundly destabilized by a world that sometimes appears to get bleaker by the minute. Paradoxically, our Department has also become more idealistic -- we crave experiences that meet what my colleagues in Education call, "Affective Functional Competencies" -- self-awareness, social responsibility and community-minded action, collaborative mindset and integrative action, sensitivity to context, cultural/global humility. And while the Art of Drama may help expose and repair the harm we inflict on each other, Theatre-Making and Theatre Education have long traditions of sexism, racism, ableism, exclusion and erasure of all kinds.

The classical model of theatre training no longer serves – it wears as a badge exhaustion, perfection and specialization; it devalues family, enthusiasm, and difference. Young artists/students demand and deserve better working conditions -- more diversity, more attention to structural racism, more attention to mental and physical health, better hours, better boundaries, better academic policies, more choice, better teachers.

We've made a good beginning. In the semesters leading up to our next Academic Program Review, we will continue to reflect how we might become even more responsive to our students, and more central to our university community.

ⁱ "We See You W.A.T.." <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/>. Accessed 14 Feb. 2022