

## NOTES ON THE NET

### Ron Willis

In conference meeting rooms and hallways, professional journals, and countless faculty meetings, educators repeatedly question academic theatre's design and function. Listservs provide them with yet another venue. In meandering, chatty, and sometimes passionate style, electronic communiques touch on the concerns many faculty share.

Early in 1992, C. David Frankel <d7baiad@cfrvm.bitnet> joined a discussion already underway about theatre education's future directions.

To begin with some rhetorical questions: do all history majors become historians? Do all biology majors become biologists or doctors? Do all philosophy majors become philosophers? In other words, why do so many professors of theatre believe that their function consists of turning out theatre practitioners? (I refer here especially to undergraduate programs). I suggest that the theatre education profession, as it exists in undergraduate institutions, should focus on another mission: the teaching of theatre as a subject worthy of study, and concomitantly, developing a theatrical consciousness—which does not mean an appreciation of theatre as entertainment or any thing else that one might associate with (bad) theatre appreciation courses. Developing a theatrical consciousness is analogous to developing an historical consciousness—a way of making sense of reality, that everchanging flux of experience that makes up our lives.

I contend that basing our theatre programs on some such idea gets us out of the vocational training racket. Theatre studies should form a sound basis for a variety of career paths (and they do); we should recognize and celebrate that fact, not try to disguise it by touting the celebrated success stories of our departments.

I believe, however, that an important by-product of approaches founded on this idea will be an increase in the number of people willing and able to staff the theatres that Tom [Loughlin, one of the discussants] speaks of. They will be willing because they will have a clearer idea of the importance of theatre in the life of the culture, and they will have the skill to communicate that importance.

They will be able because an indispensable aspect of theatre studies involves the development of craft—a craft in service of the art and the community, not just in the service of stardom.

Lest anyone read this message the wrong way, let me unequivocally state that I believe in the highest intellectual and aesthetic standards for students of theatre and, more importantly, for theatre artists. Those students who pass through programs in theatre studies *and* choose the difficult path of the professional theatre will be best served *in the long run* by programs that . . . transcend the narrow confines of "acquired skills."

A year and a half later a similar topic resurfaced. The facetious question "Why Major in Theatre?" elicited a run of flippant responses such as "to have fun" and "because you want to." However, Tom Loughlin <loughlin@jane.cs.fredonia.edu> once again responded in a more serious tone.

Recently the list received a question from a member which asked "why major in theatre?". I recall reading through the answers, and what struck me the most was the realization that most of the answers given were more on the order of simplistic statements of theatrical dogma or cliches rather than thought-out expressions or reasons as to why one should major in theatre. . . . I think, if we carefully look into the current state of theatre in American society today, the question deserves something more than the old cliches which get so readily trotted out. The question deserves some real thought and careful consideration.

I take up this task because I perceive two realities taking place in American culture which threaten the theatre artist. The first is that theatre, pure theatre (not show business or entertainment) is no longer considered a serious art form by the American public. The second is that actors in particular—but by extension all theatre people in general—are treated like commodities within the larger economic framework of "entertainment" as a segment of the American economy. They are not treated like feeling, thinking human persons. I am currently having a great deal of trouble trying to justify to anybody, no less my own students, why they should major in a field which, as an art form, is unrespected and ignored by the public and which, on the whole, tends to treat people, at its best, like objects, and at its worst, like shit.

Let's take point 1 first—theatre is not taken seriously by the American public. I doubt very strongly that the average American citizen goes to the theatre to be anything more than "entertained." There no longer exists in the theatregoing public as a whole the notion that theatre has anything to say about them, their lives, or what goes on around them. In many respects, the average American citizen views theatre in a marginalized fashion—only a certain segment of the society engages in it—and to a great extent only produces theatre on topics which are of interest to the artists themselves, not on topics which may be of wider or more general concern.

Let me juxtapose two plays to illustrate the point—*Angels in America* and *Death of a Salesman*. The point here is not to say which is the "better" play. The point simply is that I believe Willy Loman as a character speaks to a broader segment of the general American public than any character in *Angels*, and that as a play, *Salesman* can be produced just about anywhere, while *Angels* can only be produced as a mega-spectacle. While *Angels* may be a stunning theatrical achievement, it is a marginalized play because it can't go to the public—it forces the public to come to it, and for an extremely high price. The art form of theatre is in danger of being marginalized again and again in this fashion. Every large popular musical is having exactly the same effect. None of these mega-productions will ever be able to reach out across the country and have any kind of significant cultural effect as art because they sink under their own weight and the narrowness of their point of view. Like many other art forms in this country, theatre is becoming a specialized art which can only speak to those initiated into its language and who accept its political framework and points of view. If you're a conservative right-winger, or a "just plain Joe" average American (a la *Waiting For Lefty*), theatre has left you far behind and cares little about your concerns anymore. There's nothing for you to see. Why would anyone want to major in this kind of thing? It's narrow, self-centered and self-serving.

Theatre has produced precious little, if anything, which can legitimately compete with television and film to grab the hearts and minds of the American public. Its single strongest selling point, its ability to get people to congregate in one place and share a communicative event, has been eviscerated close to beyond repair. Theatre no longer brings people together because people don't want to be brought together to discuss/think. Anyone teaching in a college classroom these days knows that students on average do not want to

go to class to engage in thinking and discussion. What theatre HAS recognized is that people want to be entertained, and consequently followed that path to insure its survival in some form. There's no compelling reason anymore to go to the theatre which stands out over against going to the movies or staying home and watching television (or surfing the Internet).

In fact, if we were brutally honest, we have to admit that theatre today is merely a stepping-stone for movies/TV. No one in this country can make a living wage (as defined by the US Census Bureau) solely by acting in the theatre. They must supplement their income through commercials, TV or film work. It would seem far more honest to say to kids "you're not really majoring in theatre; you're simply getting some training to prepare you for your real career in the movies or TV." Perhaps we simply ought to consider shutting down theatre departments and opening up Film/TV/Commercial Departments and teach kids how to act in commercials, soap operas, sitcoms, action/adventure shows, and formula films. That's what the American public is taking seriously and that's what they have full access to.

The second point is that the business treats people like objects. Why would I want to major in a subject or a skill where I will eventually be reduced to a "type," and lose every semblance of humanity I have? People will constantly judge me, not on the talent I possess or the values I hold, but whether or not I CAN MAKE MONEY FOR THEM. Can I sell their car for them? their brand of beer? their underwear? Will I attract large amounts of people into a movie theatre? Am I tall enough? sexy enough? Do I have the right hair? the right attitude? the right clothes? Is my body a good body? Can somebody film my body so that others will come to stare at me? Am I box office magic or box office poison? Do I know the right people? Do I have the right agent? Do I have enough monologues? Is my head shot OK? All these questions which those who major at least in the performing end of theatre ask bespeaks a mentality of dehumanization and repression because THAT'S ALL YOU MEAN TO THESE PEOPLE. The performer is a commodity to be traded on the open market, no different than a pork belly or a wheat future. You have to "hustle" yourself, a word neatly lifted from the jargon of prostitution. And all this oppressive conduct, the sexual harassment, stereotyping that goes with it, is justified in the name of "the business. That's the way it is." You really want to encourage and defend a

major in a field with these kinds of hiring and employment practices? We are teaching our students how to be kow-towing beggars, asking for people to constantly give them work and a chance to earn their daily bread. Should we have any kind of conscience at all and say to them "there are other alternatives and you can create your own situations" we condemn them to a life of part-time sweat and labor, part-time employment, and part-time fulfillment. They will spend a good deal of their lives scratching to make honest dollars, or they may eventually succumb to other levels of commodity-playing with games like "Get The Grant." Or they may become like most of us; academics who hold the values of "professionalism" in some sort of ivory-towered weird cocoon situation while not actively engaging in the business full-time ourselves. The basic dishonesty and insincerity of the business aspects of theatre render impotent and meaningless any sense of "artistic integrity" or merit.

When we talk about the question of "why major in theatre" I think we have some responsibility to look at the art and industry we have created and ask some ethical and moral questions about it. Stock . . . answers like "if it's in your blood, do it" and "it's got to be something you want to do more than anything else" and all the other catechism answers simply don't cut it when you're discussing an ACADEMIC COLLEGE MAJOR. They're myths. So is the answer of "theatre will give you a broad background and help you to think creatively" a myth. Any well-taught major can and should do that; any competent teacher can help a student achieve that regardless of subject. There's nothing inherently different about the process of critical thinking and problem-solving which theatre presents that learning to write a high-quality Italian sonnet or speak fluently another language or examining how to create a double-ionized polymer can't present.

Two things I'm well aware of. One is that I have painted in very large strokes. I'm sure there are several examples that people will point out to demonstrate that not all is as gloomy as it seems. There are always exceptions to every general thesis about art and human interaction simply because the human species is so diverse. I also realize that most of what I am painting is negative, and I am sure people will want to point to some positive things happening. I just think it's important to point out that, even if, while the Titanic is sinking, the band in the ballroom may be playing magnificently, the

Titanic is still sinking. If you want to go and listen to the band, fine. It may be wiser, however, to find a way off the ship.

I started acting on the stage when I was seven years old. I decided to major in theatre halfway through my college career because I thought theatre had the power to move people's emotions and affect their lives, their souls, their hearts, and their actions. I thought I could combat the evil in this world by using the stage to expose it for what it was so that all people could see it clearly and fight against it as well. I thought, by showing humans caught in vulnerable situations, we could better understand the mysteries of what life is about, how we have to get along, and what might be successful ways to do that. I think, and still do think, that these are the reasons you should major in theatre. I find that, in my own personal acting "career" I am doing none of that and so am considering hanging up the spikes for a bit and re-thinking my situation. In my classroom and around my colleagues I find none of us much want to talk about these themes; they're too heavy and hold the potential for forcing us to destroy everything we have built as a pre-professional BFA degree-granting NAST-approved program. I think college theatre departments ought to seriously get back in the business of training artists who believe these things and nothing else. If you major in theatre for any other reason, get out. You don't need a college major to succeed in show business.

Tad Davis <davist@mercury.umis.upenn.edu>, agreeing with many of Loughlin's concerns, drew upon a 15 year-old memory to identify one cause of the problem.

I read an article in a major theatre journal about a recent performance. The audience came into a dark room filled with "smoke." Lights began playing at random through the smoke. An actor arose from somewhere, mounted a unicycle, and rode in circles through the mist, disappearing and reappearing. Finally the actor slowed and stopped, dismounted, and disappeared. The smoke cleared, the lights came up. End of performance.

I knew right then I was in trouble.

Most of this pseudo-art has been foisted on us by academics—which may be a good reason NOT to major in theatre. As long as the people running the show think this kind of performance is something worth giving, and worth asking other people to pay money for, we'll continue to go straight down the tubes. The drama's laws

the drama's patrons give. You can take the art out of the entertainment, but you can't take the entertainment out of the art.

Frequent Listserv contributor Sally Harrison-Pepper <harrison-pepper\_sally@msmail.muohio.edu> cautioned Loughlin that his specific play example might not have the applicability he sought in his argument.

There are a lot of feminists who would strongly disagree with your statement that a broad segment of the general American public can identify with or find much resonance in Willy Loman or in *Death of a Salesman* at all. It's all in how you slice the pie, isn't it?

Loughlin reiterated his principal concern with *Salesman's* relative accessibility as a straightforward, clear story that can be produced "in the simplest of settings with a minimum of fuss."

The discussion is not yet over. As such topical deliberations often do, it has mutated into a cluster of separate but related interchanges focussed on such matters as teacher training, the viability of using guest artists as instructors, the shape of future theatre programs, and the ways of curricular innovation.

As with the discussions taking place in conference meeting rooms and hallways, professional journals, and countless faculty meetings, closure on matters of this sort is seldom reached. What is readily identifiable, however, is a base of professional concern. The articulation of issues, the parsing of commentary, and the resonances of similar thinking are easy to effect on the net. This sample illustrates but one of many kinds of thoughtful interchange.

Now let me sound a different note. Net users who missed the announcement will want to know of the new *Guide to Theatre Resources on the Internet* compiled by Deborah A. Torres and Martha Vander Kolk of the School of Information and Library Studies at the University of Michigan.

The 47K guide is available in the following ways:

anonymous FTP:

host: una.hh.lib.umich.edu

path: /inetdirsstacks/theater:torresmjvk

Gopher:

via U. Minnesota list of gophers

menu: North America/USA/Michigan/Clearinghouse of Subject-Oriented Resource Guides/All Guides or Guides on the Humanities/Theater; D.Torres, M. Vander Kolk

Gopher .link file:

Name=Clearinghouse of Subject-Oriented Internet Resource Guides  
(UMich)

Type=1

Port=70

Path=1/inetdirs

Host=una.hh.lib.umich.edu

Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) for WWW/Mosaic:  
<http://http2.sils.umich.edu/~lou/chhome.html> or  
[gopher://una.hh.lib.umich.edu/00/inetdirsstacks/  
theater%3atorresmjvk](gopher://una.hh.lib.umich.edu/00/inetdirsstacks/theater%3atorresmjvk)

Comments on the *Guide* can be directed to Deborah A. Torres or Martha Vander Kolk <[sils.theater.project@umich.edu](mailto:sils.theater.project@umich.edu)>.

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## Book Reviews

