

UW-Madison, Department of Theatre and Drama  
Graduate Program Review  
April 28-29, 2016

June 1, 2016

To: Diana Hess, Dean, School of Education

From: Mark Shanda, The Ohio State University (Committee Chair)  
Cameron Jackson, Florida State University  
Shelley Delaney, Ohio University  
Tracy Schroepfer, School of Social Work (GFEC Representative)

RE: Review of the Theatre and Drama Graduate Program

CC: Ann Archbold, Chair, Department of Theatre and Drama  
David Rosenthal, Associate Dean, School of Education  
Beth Janetski, Policy & Planning Analyst, School of Education

At the request the Dean of the School of Education a team of external theatre experts was assembled to review the current state of affairs of the Department of Theatre and Drama at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and was specifically charged to examine the graduate program in that department. The team included: Former Dean of Arts and Humanities and former Chair Department of Theatre, Mark Shanda, from The Ohio State University, who chaired the team; Executive Director and Producing Artistic Director, School of Theatre, Cameron Jackson from Florida State University; and Head of Performance, Shelley Delaney from Ohio University. This three member team visited campus and held two days of meetings with faculty, staff and students. In addition, the team had the opportunity to see the current production of *Magic Time* by James Sherman, directed by Joel Sass, playing in the Ronald Mitchell Theatre.

Due to a scheduling error, the Graduate School representative, Associate Professor Tracy Schroepfer from the School of Social Work did not participate in the two day visit (April 28-29) with the external team. Instead, Professor Schroepfer scheduled additional interviews with key members of the Department (faculty, staff, and students) during the second two weeks of May.

What follows is the team's (including Professor Schroepfer's) response to the requested review, our observations regarding the Department and graduate program, as well as recommendations for consideration. The four questions sent to us in advance of our visit served as a backdrop for all our time on campus, but the team quickly discovered that given recent events in the life of the Department, we were walking into a very unique situation. As a result, our report will not directly address each question until the end of the report, for the majority of our response considers the whole of what we encountered.

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We want to thank the entire faculty, staff and students with whom we had the pleasure of interacting for the candor and passion in making comments about the program, and particularly wish to thank Department Chair, Ann Archbold for making the arrangements for our visit and for the hospitality shown.

Four Questions

1. Are the Department's mission and the MFA student learning outcomes clear and focused?
2. Does our current curriculum/requirements and faculty/staff configurations set up our MFA students for success in meeting our learning outcomes? If not, what changes should we consider?
3. Do the Department's facilities and performance spaces support the curriculum and MFA student learning outcomes?
4. Given the resources that exist as well as our geographic location, how can we capitalize on our strengths to best develop a unique identity among other MFA programs?

Department of Theatre and Drama

Beginning in 2014, the MA/PhD Program in Theatre and Drama was split from the Department of Theatre and Drama (DT&D) to become an Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies Program (ITS) in the Department of English. The DT&D was moved from the College of Letters and Science to the School of Education, its doctoral program discontinued, and four faculty lines transferred to the newly created ITS. Currently, the PhD minor in Theatre and Drama is in the process of being discontinued. The move of the Department's administrative home and the loss of faculty lines, has greatly affected both the Master of Fine Arts and undergraduate theatre programs.

Observations

The current state of the Department of Theatre and Drama (DT&D) is troubling. The team's visit came following the unprecedented division of the faculty resulting in the shift of the department's administrative home from the College of Letters and Sciences to the School of Education, the move of 4-5 faculty to new tenure homes away from DT&D, the termination of the PhD program in Theatre, the impact of two faculty in the acting/directing area being tapped for University-wide administrative service and an alarming decline in state funding for the University. Various individuals with whom the team met described the situation as "a major schism" "a messy divorce" "family break-up" "a perfect storm", as well as "fragile and dangerous." Faculty, in what remains as DT&D, were described as needing "recovery", as being similar to "battered spouses", and "wounded beyond repair." The team can confirm that there remains a great deal of hurt from what faculty perceive was an intentional plan of action by Letters and Sciences to eliminate DT&D ("slowly starved by L&S"), a lack of trust in the University recognizing the value of the study of theatre (a comment attributed to an Associate Dean in L&S stating, "with the loss of faculty that we cannot replace, you can just become a

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'drama club") and a limited common understanding of the remaining faculty for a near term future for the unit. While some hope remains that the School of Education will be able to provide a new future, language in Education's strategic plan that seeks to "Create a respectful, responsive, and stable home for our arts programs" seems only to reinforce the fragility of the support for the arts within the University. The Department of Theatre and Drama is not a place where "if they would just work together" they could be an effective academic department as was suggested by one administrator; rather, this unit truly needs unique help and intervention at this time.

Further stress on the Department has been created by the University's recent adoption and implementation of the "Activity Centered Budget" system for resource allocation that appears to the faculty to link directly to undergraduate courses and major enrollment with access to department funding. Since the split of the Department between the College and the School ceded the major enrollment of undergraduate courses (TD 120 and TD 362) to Letters and Science, the lack of these large enrollment course(s) to provide financial support to the higher cost, lower enrollment nature of remaining portions of both undergraduate and graduate instruction presents a true challenge. The divorce analogy voiced by many is worth examining here for while the other spouse has left and taken the car (Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies Program), the remaining spouse's future resource base is dependent on mileage driven yet they no longer possess a vehicle (Department of Theatre and Drama). The new DT&D appears to face a significant resource challenge in this new allocation model, particularly linked with diminished enrollment numbers.

Another mystery that was uncovered during our visit was the lack of a clear understanding of DT&D's relationship to the University's Arts Institute (AI) and the original anticipated benefits to the academic unit level of that entity when it came into being. What was explained was that the Arts Institute was redeveloped as a "consolation prize" for the arts on campus following the failure of a vote of approval for the proposed College of the Arts. The original stated purpose of this new campus entity seems to have been to improve the identity of the arts on campus and to provide an umbrella of coordinated services to advance the academic arts units. What appears to have happened since the AI's establishment is a resultant competitor for limited resources, a separate bureaucracy competing for administrative attention, and a further lack of clear identity for the visual and performing arts. The direct reporting line to the Provost by AI appears to undermine Dean level advocacy and serves to confuse DT&D faculty.

Given this significant amount of academic turmoil and programmatic uncertainty, recent enrollment declines are very understandable and consistent with national trends in the arts, as STEM programs have received what some believe to be a disproportionate level of attention on college campuses. The challenges of the current situation at Wisconsin are known nationally, negatively affecting graduate

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recruitment. The lack of a stable faculty and the pervasive negative attitude so widely shared, has no doubt affected undergraduate numbers as well. The team assumes that classroom instruction has suffered due to this time of great uncertainty. While we applaud the faculty's decision to suspend admission to the Master of Fine Arts Acting/Directing program and appreciate the School of Education's desire to improve the DT&D situation, there are so many interrelated challenges such that the team is convinced that recovery will take several years and will require much creativity, effort and sustained support.

The team had the opportunity to observe a handful of classes and to be part of the audience for the current production of *Magic Time* presented in the Mitchell Theatre. The courses that we observed appeared to be engaging, presented at an appropriate level for the students, and clear in purpose. The production we observed, however, raised significant concerns about the quality of instruction in production and performance, as all three of the reviewers identified significant shortfalls in both the acting and design elements shared with the audience. The team did not feel that this production represented shared standards for an academic theatre performance at the college level. As presented in the performance, there was no evidence of comprehensive, artistic and foundational performance techniques.

A consistent theme of our observations was a lack of general ownership of the Department's current situation; "Who is in charge?" and "Who speaks for the arts?" are two key questions to which the team found no satisfactory answer. Individual faculty felt that each was in charge of a particular curricular program, which lacked both enrollment and resources, and faculty governance structures seemed to hamper rather than enable work. Ticketing for productions is no longer under department control, the new level of central support was identified as spotty at best, and the aforementioned Arts Institute has had a seemingly negative impact. All these challenges combined, have left faculty to feel they are being victimized by forces external to the DT&D. No one faculty member appears to hold any level of personal responsibility for the unit's current state and most feel powerless to have any positive impact on a highly uncertain future.

A careful review of the self-study combined with the consistent number of concerns raised by those with whom we spoke regarding workloads, indicates that the current internal committee structure is working against the success of the Department. The eight different department level committees listed in the self-study appear to be remnants of a level of faculty engagement for a much larger unit. Given that of the current nine faculty members in the unit, only three tenured faculty are eligible to serve in a wide-variety of service expectations, a careful examination of how service demands can be restructured is warranted.

Production is the core of the laboratory experience of any student engaged in the study of theatre. The DT&D attempts to model best industry practices in this area,

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but two current challenges undermine this effort. The first is the severely limited financial resources available to support production. Evidence was presented that production budgets have been flat for nearly twenty years. While all academic units in the School of Education could no doubt benefit from additional support, the production support levels in the Department are critically affecting the quality of the education being offered in both the undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

The second undermining factor is the clear lack of respect and authority in the production hierarchy that at times contrasts with the academic hierarchy present within the Department. This inconsistency is faced by most academic theatre organizations, but appears to be more challenging in the current DT&D environment in Madison. As appropriate to dissipate confusion in lines of responsibility, faculty needs to grant clear-cut authority to the Producer, Production Stage Manager, and Managing Director. The decision-making authority must also then be widely communicated throughout the faculty, staff and students. Faculty must be held accountable in meeting production deadlines and set the highest possible standards for their students to emulate. The lack of clarity of production position authority combined with the assumption that no one is responsible for difficult decisions has made for an extremely challenging production program.

There appears not to be a common understanding shared among the three resident designers (lighting, scenery and costume design) of the desired expected learning outcomes for the design and technology students. This lack of a common vocabulary and expected outcomes results in a disservice to the students studying with these three individually gifted faculty. The team is uncertain whether common ground can be achieved among the group, but strongly encourages extensive dialogue on this subject should the MFA in Design and Technology continue.

The lack of a shared understanding of the desired expected learning outcomes for the design and technology students was also expressed by the Department's two assistant professors with regard to the senior design faculty, who also expressed this same sentiment about the assistant professors. The differences focus on assistant professors wanting to be more "relevant" in their teaching and research, and feeling that the senior design faculty want to continue with teaching only the more tradition theatre.

Assistant professors also felt that the depletion of senior faculty and separation from the research faculty has left them without sufficient mentorship. They agree with the senior faculty that communication throughout the Department is an issue and that for the most part all faculty are focused on their own area, which contributes to a lack of direction for them.

On the positive side of the ledger, the team encountered an extremely passionate and engaged academic staff. In contrast to faculty conversations that spoke

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primarily of personal needs, the staff consistently spoke about the quality of the “student experience” and their commitment to offer the best learning situations possible given the current state of affairs. The staff spoke of their desire to teach the very best of theatre students, and impart to these students “life lessons”, regardless of their ultimate career path.

We also saw a high degree of respect for the Vilas classroom and production facilities. Despite their intentional (by the architect), disjointed nature, spaces appeared clean and well cared for. We observed no safety concerns and, although some areas could be improved with a bit of organizational intention, overall the facility is in good shape. The College will need to conduct an audit of production technology equipment and develop a plan for ongoing upgrades and replacement. The current, most pressing need is the overhead rigging systems located in the Mitchell Theatre, which are original to the 1970’s era building. These overhead lifting systems have exceeded their expected functional life and will need to be replaced soon. The DT&D has removed some systems from current service as a precautionary measure, but in the near-term, the loss of these features will begin to limit their instructional use and will soon become an obvious safety hazard.

The DT&D has adopted a clearly articulated 16 week production process that identifies critical milestones in the design and production process, and defines both student and advisor roles. This professional approach provides an easily understood process, emulates successful production processes used by commercial theatre (only with an elongated timeline), and provides a strong foundation for accountability among artistic colleagues. There seems to be inconsistency among faculty in respecting this structure, which the graduate students report is having a negative impact on their learning.

The graduate students interviewed reported a number of issues. First, they find the production meetings to be tense due to faculty displaying hostility and “bullying” behavior towards each other. They feel that there is more hostility at the meetings than there is collaboration and they often feel stuck in the middle. The students are also uncomfortable because they can see that the undergraduate students and guests producers, etc. attending the meetings are aware of the hostility. The students report that a shared lack of understanding as to what connotes theatre in today’s world is problematic, as is the lack of a shared goal. Finally, students report feeling the burden of knowing that the budget needs to be in the black, the program needs to be built up and it needs to work with other departments. They report feeling more like employees than like students because getting the production work done is so often prioritized over their learning. They understand that the pressure comes from the fact that the productions must bring in money to support the graduate program but having that understanding does not alleviate their stress or desire for more of a learning environment. A part of the faculty’ teaching obligation is a commitment to model the very best practices possible and from the students interviewed, this obligation is not being met.

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The faculty was consistent in expressing both an individual openness for a changed future and a potential willingness to work towards new goals; however, we found no ability for the faculty to articulate a common vision for the future much beyond survival. Some faculty described the unit's situation as a dichotomy between "tradition and advancement." One graduate student stated that faculty are split between "'This is how we have always done theatre' versus 'theatre is changing and the Department needs to change with it.'" There is a hopefulness that the College of Education will provide both the leadership and the resources necessary to re-start a program that has had a strong national heritage and reputation, but has fallen on some distinctly hard times in the past four to five years. The faculty appeared to be focused more on what has been lost than what might be possible and will likely need further encouragement to come together and seek effective change.

Recommendations

R1: The lack of a locally available, regional theatre with a formal, reciprocal connection; the diminished number of faculty in the acting/directing area of the discipline; and the well-below nationally competitive levels of graduate student support all combine to have the team conclude that there is no compelling reason to re-start the MFA in Acting program. We advise that the best course for DT&D's future is to pursue the highest quality instruction as possible for undergraduate stage performers focusing all current performance resources and new faculty hires (proposed below) on the undergraduate population.

R2: The team confirms the DT&D assertion that graduate students in theatre must be funded through graduate teaching, research, or other assistantship programs, typically half time with a livable wage and tuition remission. The end of the MFA acting program would release some current funding (intended support for MFA Acting candidates currently used to hire adjunct instructors) that could be repurposed to bring the graduate teaching associate support level up to something more nationally competitive and to slightly expand the number of graduate students in the remaining, re-imagined (as suggested in recommendations R8 and R9) design and technology program (12 students total over the three-year program).

R3: The team recommends that students be taken out of the middle of disagreements, that the hostile environment of the production meetings be eliminated, and that the focus of the faculty and academic staff be on the student's learning needs and not on the need for productions to be financially successful. For this to happen, it may be necessary for faculty to consider bringing in a counselor with conflict resolution skills, who can work with them and the academic staff.

R4: The team recommends that the 16-week production schedule be made available to all participants, including those who are not DT&D faculty, staff or students. The schedule should be followed as closely as possible such that students can plan their coursework with confidence that the time will be available to them. Faculty must

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commit to holding themselves responsible for respecting the 16-week production schedule as well.

R5: Regardless of our recommendation that the graduate acting program no longer offer the MFA in Acting and that the Department focus only on the BS degree in theatre for actors, a critical need remains for new tenure-track faculty hires in the acting/directing area. We recommend at a minimum that four positions be pursued over the next two years. The four faculty would include a voice specialist, a movement specialist, and two acting faculty, all of whom would be skilled and capable in stage direction. The new core of four faculty, linked with current faculty expertise in Asian theatre could be combined to give the acting/directing program a unique identity nationally.

R6: The team also recommends that the Department consider an additional production offering in their season with a focus on Asian Theatre. In the current planning cycle, this would be a fifth production. Such an annual offering would build on the heritage of Asian studies for which Wisconsin is known, celebrating the leading work in this area of actor training by such past faculty as A.C. Scott and Phillip Zarrilli, and add to the unique identity for the Department to which the faculty aspire.

R7: In addition to the proposed four new faculty in acting/directing, the team recommends the hire of a critical tenure-track faculty member in the area of History/Literature/Criticism who can offer the foundational history survey course necessary in any theatre curriculum, as well as offer script analysis and research methods with a focus on production. The Department cannot be expected to rely on the departed faculty, now in Letters and Sciences, to provide the fundamental teaching of dramatic history and literature to enable any DT&D degree program.

R8: The team feels there is a unique opportunity for DT&D to continue to offer the MFA in Design and Technology. Local resources such as Electronic Theatre Controls of Middleton and Full Compass Sound of Madison, when combined with the Mitchell and Hemsley theatres in Vilas Hall, the scale of the scenic studio, the strength of the faculty and staff in design and technology and the depth of related study in engineering design, and management on the UW campus, culminate in providing fertile ground for a nationally unique and competitive MFA in Design and Technology. The team would encourage the faculty to carefully examine these various resources and develop an effective three-year program of study that is grounded in theatre history, design and management principles, and contemporary technology that capitalizes on the city's strength in these areas. The team briefly considered the suggestion that the DT&D become an undergraduate only program, but did not feel that a unique identity could be gained by such a move.



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R9: An additional feature of a revised program in Design and Technology, is the possibility of developing short-term continuing education certificate programs in subjects like lighting technology, stage automation, and overhead rigging systems, as well as basic theatrical production. The team believes there is a regional audience of high school teachers who accept supplemental contracts to support theatrical production who could benefit from short-term practical design and technology instruction. In addition, on a national level, the team believes that there is a market for early and mid-career designers and technicians to advance their skill sets in these areas while not pursuing a degree. A certificate program has the potential to provide an income stream to support other aspects of department instruction, partially offsetting the loss of the unit's service courses to Letters and Sciences. This potential new future for the Design and Technology area will take full faculty buy-in and creativity on behalf of the College to both envision and enable progress.

The Department, however, is cautioned to take care not to let design and technology demands become the "tail that wags the dog." Storytelling is the heart of theatre and must be respected. Design and technology appropriately serves to enhance the desire to speak effectively to the human condition. As one member of the team put it, "the goal of theatrical production is to remove as many obstacles as possible that prevent the hearing of the playwright's words and the audience's engagement with the story being told."

R10: The Department must have regular access to the Shannon Theatre in the Memorial Union for instruction and laboratory production on a proscenium stage. The team understands that a new "rental agreement" is under negotiation between the leadership of the Memorial Union and the current head of the Arts Institute. Regular and affordable access to a proscenium theatre is essential in supporting both the BS degree as well as the MFA in Design and Technology. For the necessary success of the DT&D program, the Dean is challenged to make possible the using of the Shannon Theatre as a teaching facility every semester and as a performance venue at a minimum of every-other-year.

R11: With the departure of some faculty to the College of Letters and Sciences, the pending retirement of one faculty member and the potential departure of others for new opportunities elsewhere, the School of Education has been given the opportunity to develop an entirely new Department of Theatre and Drama. To that end, the team recommends potentially re-branding the unit as a cohesive and healthy Department of Theatre. In addition, given the lack of in-depth understanding of the field of theatre in the College's leadership and the wounded nature of some current faculty, the team strongly encourages the use of external consultants in assisting with the recommended future faculty searches.

R12. The team is concerned that to realize fully this unprecedented opportunity to reset the future of the Department for the next chapter of its existence, the very best

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thinking about theatre education nationally must be applied. The team feels that critical assistance from some key individuals (consultants from the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST), the University/Resident Theatre Association (URTA) or leading faculty from peer institutions) would greatly enhance the outcomes of this Department-wide reset.

R13. The team also strongly encourages diligent use of the promotion and tenure process, including effective mentoring of junior faculty, to best prepare candidates for promotion or tenure for success and to enable the senior faculty to determine current and future faculty alignment with the anticipated common future for the Department. Each promotion, hire or re-appointment is a critical juncture as a new version of this Department emerges.

R14. The team recommends that due to the loss of multiple senior faculty from DT&D, the mentoring support for assistant professors be revisited a look to leverage additional support from colleagues in the School. In this time of few new faculty lines or replacement of current faculty lines, it is important that assistant professors be given the support necessary to be successful.

R15. While the team fully recognizes that faculty governance is a hallmark of the University of Wisconsin-Madison administrative structure, given the unique demands placed on the DT&D at this time, we strongly encourage that the Department adopt only those committee structures demanded by University regulations. We advocate the elimination of the quasi-administrative position of Director of Theatre, the discontinuation of the separate "University Theatre" identification from the academic department, and a re-empowerment of the academic staff in production operation decisions (restoration of voting rights) to shift the focus to being an effective academic theatre unit and reducing the service load across the board. The department chair must be positioned to hold all fully accountable for both academic and production demands as appropriate to the particular role each faculty and staff member inhabits.

R16. The team also recommends that the voting status of the academic staff be restored as soon as possible, within the limits of University guidelines. Our suggestion is that all votes that must leave the Department for use by higher administrative authorities be limited to faculty, but all internal actions related to both the academic and production programs be enriched by full academic staff engagement.

R17. While the current search for a new director for the Arts Institute has not yet concluded, there is hope that new leadership will bring new opportunity. The team strongly encourages that the Dean of the School of Education be one of the first meetings held with the new AI leadership with the hope of establishing a new working relationship between the School and the AI, leveraging the potential that is

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seen in this unit and desired by all involved in the arts. This umbrella organization has great potential to advance the future of the Department of Theatre & Drama (DT&D).

The team understands that the relatively small size of DT&D may be a challenge as the University seeks greater efficiencies in academic administration. The potential of a merger with the Department of Dance to create a more sizable unit was briefly discussed. The team strongly feels that such a merger is not advisable at this time given the overall turmoil present in theatre. However, once the revised DT&D emerges to a new level of success with a strong BS of over 120 enrolled majors and a nationally recognized and unique MFA in Theatre Design and Technology with an occasional certificate program, such a merger option could be explored.

Four Question Direct Responses

1. Are the Department's mission and the MFA student learning outcomes clear and focused?

The mission of the new Department of Theatre (and Drama) needs to be narrowed and re-articulated given the new reality the Department faces in the School of Education. As things stand, the MFA student learning outcomes for acting/directing are a moot point based on the team's recommendations. The MFA outcomes in design and technology need to be examined in light of existing faculty strengths, the establishment of a historical, literature, and design core for all students in the program, and an eye to consistent shared experiences across the sub-disciplines over the three-year course of study.

2. Does our current curriculum/requirements and faculty/staff configurations set up our MFA students for success in meeting our learning outcomes? If not, what changes should we consider?

The department would be well served to arrive at a common definition of success and determine where the unit wishes to place priority on both process and product. See the team's above recommendations regarding potential focus, as well as the suggestion for increased leverage of local theatre design and technology resources.

3. Do the Department's facilities and performance spaces support the curriculum and MFA student learning outcomes?

Yes, the general facilities in Vilas Hall are adequate to support the curriculum and the students. Better placement and a larger space for the student computer lab should be considered given the universal need for this technology. Additionally, the University must provide access for teaching and

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regular production in the Shannon Theatre in the Memorial Union to provide all the necessary access to a proscenium theatre for effective learning.

4. Given the resources that exist as well as our geographic location, how can we capitalize on our strengths to best develop a unique identity among other MFA programs?

Formal relationships with Electronic Theatre Controls, Full Compass Sound and nearby regional commercial theatre producers (Forward Theatre, American Players Theatre, The Milwaukee Rep, etc.) should be actively cultivated.

As suggested, this was a visit to examine an extremely complex situation. The members of the team are all available for further follow-up should the School of Education desire any additional information or clarity regarding our response. Having identified great potential for the future of the Department of Theatre and Drama, we also find ourselves hopeful as well. We are optimistic that the pain and challenging transitions for DT&D are nearing their end. Through careful planning, appropriate investment by the School, critical hires over the next couple of years, a new understanding of the Arts Institute and a renewed spirit of opportunity within the Department, we believe great things are possible again for the study of theatre at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.