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Artistic Literacy: Theatre Studies and a Contemporary Liberal Education

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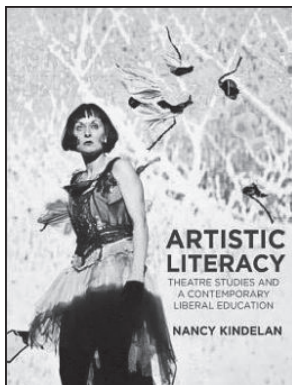
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CUR Book Review

Artistic Literacy: Theatre Studies and a Contemporary Liberal Education

By Nancy Kindelan

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Palgrave Macmillan,
978-1-137-00858-3, 2012.
216 Pages, \$70.80

When I can, I go to the theatre. There is nothing like watching a live performance as it unfolds before you, invoking a sense of voyeurism and, at the same time, involvement. For a couple of hours, you can escape from your own reality and willingly be transported into the lives and circumstances of others. Although many of us consider the theatre a form of entertainment, it also provides teachable moments that the playwright artfully uses to convey a social message to a receptive, but often unsuspecting, audience. As the play develops on stage, we often imagine what is happening backstage, but very rarely do we consider all of the preparation and activities that took place months before the production came to life on opening night. However, that preparation can provide true teachable moments when undergraduates are given the opportunity to participate in scholarly and creative activities within the discipline of the theatre.

Nancy Kindelan, the author of *Artistic Literacy: Theatre Studies and a Contemporary Liberal Education*, describes how performing-arts programs across the country help “develop intentional and responsible learners through analytical, cross-disciplinary, innovative, individual, and team-based problem-solving activities that promote both personal and social awareness.” She adamantly states that, “This book is a call to action.” She sees it as a means to inform higher education about how the theatre’s curricula and research activities can promote creative thinking and provide experiences that are educationally transformative and thus “enhance the quality, substance, and integrity of the baccalaureate degree.”

The book is organized into two parts. In the first part the author provides an overview of the challenges higher-education reformers are facing in order to improve upon what she considers “the purpose and meaning of a contemporary undergraduate

education.” The second part of the book is more specific about how theatre programs fit into the context of a practical liberal-arts education. For example, Chapter 8 presents case studies that show how “immersive learning projects” encourage and help to develop skills and abilities that we want our students to achieve, such as teamwork, social thought, civic responsibility, and ethical decision making. Theatre students engaged in the production of plays—especially ones that deal with social injustice and change—are forced to become active, “responsible learners” through inquiry-based analysis and creative interpretation. Kindelan emphasizes that this experiential learning is just like conducting experiments in the science lab; she asserts that the theatre’s modes of inquiry share in the “research methodologies of the academy.”

Collaborative experiential learning is a hallmark of theatre pedagogy and of undergraduate research. Students learn how to read a playwright’s words very carefully and take notes on how the parts of the play—“the story, characters, language, ideas, rhythms, and overall environment—work together in illuminating its portrayal of humanity.” Students explore the cross-disciplinary content of the play, its historical setting, and the culture of the time, which helps to inform their interpretation. This then allows the students to fashion the production of the play in such a way that it helps provide the audience with a richer experience, one that is more meaningful and relevant.

A common occurrence in fine-arts programs nation-wide is students engaging in scholarly and creative work with theatre faculty and with one another. Undergraduates involved in the production of plays create storyboards, write informational program notes, or “organize talkback sessions for the audience,” all of which help students to turn factual information into thoughtful and relevant interpretation. These creative activities allow students to experience the scholarly practice of the theatre, which helps them learn by doing. Kindelan references Graham Wallas’s four steps of creative thinking—preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification or revision—and likens them to the process that scientists use to conduct their inquiries. The essential point is that it doesn’t matter what the discipline is, undergraduate research offers an opportunity for students to learn discipline-specific content and apply it. But more importantly, undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activities help students to learn, and put into practice, the methods involved in creating new knowledge or works of art, music, or drama.

This book does an excellent job of showing how the discipline of theatre studies can provide empowering and transformational experiences for our students. It demonstrates why the performing arts are an essential component of an undergraduate education regardless of the student’s intended major. The theatre, just like any discipline, can be explored and experienced through the high-impact pedagogy of undergraduate research.