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TEACHING THEATRE HISTORY: RE-DIRECTING AN EXISTING COURSE

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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My thanks go out to my family, for their support during my education, to the faculty of VCU for the opportunities that they have presented here, to my wife, Catherine, for convincing me to continue my education, and for her continued support throughout these three years.

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Abstract

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By Brian Robert Vrtis, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre

This thesis is written to detail the process and results of the theatre history class that I assisted in teaching during the fall semester of 2005. It details the process of formulating the class structure, how the class proceeded, my lecture process, and finally the responses that the students had to the class.

The first chapter of this paper goes into the process of getting the class formulated. When Shaun McCracken and I were asked to take over instruction of THEA 307 for the fall during Dr. Barnes' sabbatical, rather than exactly following the process that the class had previously taken, we decided to alter some of the elements of the class. We added in a

response system for the reading that the students would be doing through the semester. In addition to this, we put together a course packet of readings from plays and other books and essays to supplement the main book we would be using, rather than have the students buy another expensive book for the course that they would not entirely use throughout the semester, indeed the rest of the year. For the second chapter, I go into the class itself, its environment, the physical shape of the class as it went on and the grading for the semester. Third in this thesis is a look at the lectures that I performed for my section of the class time, the rationale behind the section layout, and where some of the readings had their basis in my assignment. Finally, the paper looks at the responses that the students had to the class itself and any possible improvements that I could be made in future classes of this type.

Chapter 1: Beginnings

In the Fall Semester of 2005, Dr. Noreen Barnes, head of the Theatre VCU Graduate program, was going on sabbatical in order to continue research on a book that she was writing. In her absence, she asked two VCU graduate students, myself and Shaun McCracken to take over the duties of teaching her undergraduate Theatre History course, THEA 307. Both Shaun and I had been Noreen's assistants for the Theatre History class in previous years, giving us an idea of the shape of the class from previous years as well as a better idea of some of the topics that would need to be covered in the class. I had previous experience in teaching a class, being one of the TAs for the Freshmen Introduction to Dramatic Literature class two years previously, which involved leading discussions on the plays read during the course of the semester. In addition to the two of us, we would also have the help of two other TAs, David White and Jenna Nielsen. Given the expected size of the class, they would be able to assist in keeping track of the students' attendance as well as assisting in leading discussions among smaller groups. Finally, Dr. Aaron Anderson would act as the faculty advisor for the course, observing our technique and advising us on the handling of the class.

Preparations for the class began the previous summer, where we met to determine the shape the class would take. The first order had been to determine what areas we would

cover in the class and which of the two of us; Shaun and myself, would handle which part of the class. Given that the semester we were teaching was part of a year-long course, it was not necessary to teach the entirety of theatre history in the course of one semester, so the class would handle 'half' of the subject matter, in this case the period from the Greek Classical theatre to the Renaissance and Elizabethan English period. In a sense, the class could be divided up into five sections; the Greeks, the Romans, the Medieval period, the Renaissance, and the concurrent Asian theatrical styles that were going on at the time. Shaun would teach the classes regarding the Greeks and the Renaissance periods in four of the European countries closely affected by it; Italy, France, Spain, and England. I would teach the classes that would center on theatre during the Roman Empire and the medieval period. Dr. Anderson, given his expertise with the area, would teach classes revolving around Asian theatre. In addition, the other two TA's would be given the opportunity to teach one of the classes during the semester, giving them an opportunity to also practice their pedagogical methods in the Theatre History classroom.

The first step in designing the class was to work out the syllabus that we would use. In my initial preparations for our meetings I had decided that my sections would each be divided up into four days; four days for the Romans, four for the medieval period. Each section would then follow the same basic format.

The first day of the section would entail the students first reading the chapter from the primary text, giving them a basic overview of the period that we would be dealing with for the next few days. From there, my lecture would concentrate on a general historical overview of the time period. Rather than the lecture focusing on the theatrical history of

the time, it would focus on the rest of the history; political, social, religious, and so on. I believe that a student of theatre needs to be shown that their chosen field, like anybody's chosen field, does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is affected and affects the historical climate around them. Given that they could have just read an overview of the theatre of the period, it was hoped that the historical overview would be able to lead them to making their own conclusions about the interplay of theatre and the surrounding world.

The second day's plan would be a more in-depth look at the theatrical and acting styles of the period in question. The readings for the class would have been those concentrating on the aesthetic 'ideals' of the period as well as possibly some of the reactions to theatre of the time. While the Christian Church was rising in the later part of the Roman Empire, it saw its dominance in the medieval time period. With the Church often being historically rather ambivalent to theatre, I thought it a good idea for the students to see some of the arguments that were being used against theatrical activities. The addition of the aesthetic guides was to give a jumping off point to what was desired in theatre of the time, as well as how the performances that went on at the time attempted to achieve that aesthetic. Overall, the second day of the period was to introduce the students to the architecture of the theatres at the time, the types of plays and playwriting that went on, as well as an introduction to what the acting style that was predominant at the time.

The third day was to introduce the students to several plays of the period. I had decided to pick two plays of the period, and to assign one of these to half of the class and the other to another half. Having read them prior to class, they would split off into smaller groups as a way to facilitate a discussion regarding the play, especially in the context of

what they had learned from the prior lectures; those on historical context and aesthetic standards.

Finally, for the fourth day of the period, I had planned on concentrating on those activities and performances that may not be normally classified as 'theatre.' The concentration would be on the popular entertainments of the period, the ways that the populace at the time would likely entertain themselves rather than going to the theatre itself. For the Roman Empire, this would be a chance to talk about the gladiatorial games, the races, and the like. For Medieval times, this would be a look at tournaments, the court dances and masques, like the gladiatorial contests of the Roman times, it may still be theatre, but the general consensus of most is to not study them as such.

Upon the initial meetings with Shaun and Aaron, however, I began to realize that I had not taken into account the time that Dr. Anderson would need for the lectures on Asian theatre. Additionally there came the question of where these extra readings that I would desire, and Shaun wanted to use as well, would be placed. It was a quick decision to have the extra readings included as part of a course packet that the students would have in addition to the primary text. This served to have several advantages for the class. First, it eliminated the need for another book, in this case an anthology of plays from which two or three would be picked for the semester. Rather than have the students spend a great deal of money for just two or three plays, the course packet would allow us to give them several plays, as well as additional materials, for a reduced cost. The addition of extra materials for the course packet was another of the advantages, as it allowed us to get together the extra readings that we had wanted to give the students without having to hand them out day by

day, risking them getting lost or the copier not functioning that day. Finally, many of the readings that were chosen were those that the students wouldn't normally have access to in the course of their undergraduate careers, and it was felt that it would be a good thing to expose them to these additional materials to supplement their education.

My initial thoughts on splitting up my lectures had taken what I thought to be the full length of the semester into account, thus I'd believed that I should prepare for four days. However, I had not taken into account that two days would be needed for Aaron's lectures into Asian theatre. Also, it was decided that the Renaissance was a period that would need to have more time than the other periods, as this was a time period that saw the emergence of a national theatre in the countries of Europe, and several of those countries would need to be looked in depth. It was decided that the necessary time could be taken out of the days that had been originally earmarked for the Roman and Medieval periods. Those were periods not generally seen to have the same amount of importance as the Greeks – the originators of what we see as the Western Theatrical tradition, and the Renaissance – where much of the classical canon originates. Rather than four days for each of my periods, I was reduced to three days for Rome and three and a half for Medieval, with the other half of that last day being split between medieval popular entertainments and Renaissance equivalents.

Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy's *History of the Theatre* had been the main text for the theatre history class for the past several years. However, in the previous year, Noreen had decided to change the main text for Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb's *Living Theatre: a History*. It was looked at as being more accessible for an undergraduate

student audience, and it was this accessibility that was a factor in choosing the text the previous year. We decided to continue using this text for the same reasons. I felt that this would have also opened up greater opportunities for using extra readings in the proposed course packet. While it was an easier read and more accessible to a younger student, the Wilson/Goldfarb text also allowed for a great deal of extra information to be introduced without the likelihood of it being repeated in that textbook. Additionally, its ease of reading may have lightened the relative workload of the students, rather than having them read a very dense text book as well as outside sources, they would have a relatively light reading in the main text and (it was hoped) a slightly more challenging text from the outside sources.

As much as possible, I wanted to try and stick to the initial plan of readings I had come up with when designing my parts of the course. With the reduced amount of time, some of those had to be compressed in order to get the important aspects through to the students. The first day of the Roman section would be the historical overview. In addition to this, I decided that I would also introduce them to the theatrical architecture of the time. For this purpose, I assigned the reading of the textbook in order to give them an overview of the time period we were entering. From the book *Sources of Theatrical History*, I also chose to put in prologue to Plautus' *Poenulus* and an excerpt from Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. Plautus' prologue was inserted to give the students an idea of what the typical Roman audience may have been like, what the typical behavior of a Roman audience of the time may have been; additionally, this would have given the opportunity to show the students one of the major differences in audience behavior between much of

history and today, namely the active audience. As for the *De Architectura* excerpt, it was to introduce the topic of the architectural practices of theatre building during the Roman Empire.

For the second day of the Roman section of class, I decided to combine the play reading along with the acting styles of the time. I chose Horace's *Ars Poetica* as an example of the aesthetic ideal of the time. In addition, because Shaun was also having the students read from Aristotle's *Poetics*, I felt that it would allow for a parallel to be drawn between the Greeks and Romans, a connection that they could be given in the hopes that they could start to make further connections between Greece and Rome. Tertullian's attack on the performances of his time was included to expand the cultural background of the Roman theatre, showing some of the negative reactions to performance. Finally, I had them read one of two plays, either *Oedipus* or *Medea*. Both of these plays were the Roman versions of the texts, by Seneca. I had felt that it would be good to have the students see up front and discuss what might be the differences between the Roman versions of the plays and the earlier Greek originals.

Finally, I did not assign any readings for the third day of the period, the day that I had chosen to be a lecture on the popular entertainments of the time period. I left open the possibility that there would be handouts given in class, in case there was something that I had found at a later date that I wanted to share with the class. In truth, I believe I also felt like the students would want and possibly need a break from reading, to have an 'easy day' before starting up with the next period in the plan, the medieval era.

Medieval Readings

For the Medieval section of the class, I faced a similar compression of the time I had initially planned, and so I planned a similar compression of the material to be taught. The overall history of the time period is much harder to encompass than the relatively homogenous history of the Roman Republic and Empire, so I deviated from my initial plan and focused instead on the religious drama that rose during this time period. Again I opened the reading with the chapter in the Wilson/Goldfarb text. In addition, I assigned Hrosvitha's *Callimachus*, with the intent that we would also read it in class. The text had been in previous classes by Dr. Barnes as an introduction into the medieval period. I felt that it would be good to continue to use this, allowing the students to see what kind of subject matter would predominate the era we were entering into. Additionally, as Hrosvitha is identified as the earliest Western female playwright, her inclusion into the course would mark a significant historical milestone for the students. Finally, it would have allowed the students to get on their feet and actively participate in the class by reading it aloud. The tone of the piece is also one that allows the students to have a great deal of fun with it, lightening the mood of the room and making them a little more receptive to the material ahead.

For the second day of the section, I moved to the more secular dramas of Medieval Europe, as well as the staging practices of the time period. There were several readings assigned for that day, but most of them were little more than a page, if that, in length. Further selections from *Sources of Theatre History* were chosen that detailed what went on

the stage at some of these plays; specifically the Quem Quaeritis trope, the Valenciennes Passion Play, and *Jeu d'Adam* a French play from the twelfth century. Also from *Sources of Theatre History* was taken a description of the English pageant wagons. Additionally, an essay on the staging of *The Castle of Perseverance* was taken from Richard Southern's *The Medieval Theatre in the Round*. Finally, one of the pages of the *Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* showed a reproduction of an invoice from the fifteenth century, detailing the costs incurred by the Coventry Smiths' Guild in putting up a play. The intent was to show the students some of the varying means with which performances were put on in the time period in question. Additionally, with the *Castle of Perseverance* reading, it became an introduction to the difficulty involved in recreating a performance from scant records.

The third day, in keeping with my initial plan, was one where the students would read one of two plays from the time period and discuss them in smaller groups. The two plays chosen were *Everyman* and *Noah*, both of them anonymously written. They were chosen primarily to have a representation of one of the religious cycle plays and a more secular morality play. The final day of the medieval section was shared with the first day of the Renaissance section. Like the last day of the Roman section, this was to concentrate on the more popular entertainments of the time. As before, I did not assign any reading for the day.

The description of the class in the course catalogue indicates that Theatre History is a writing intensive course. As such, we felt that it was necessary to give the students a further opportunity to work on their writing abilities, beyond their exams. Furthermore, I wanted some way for us to see if the students were in fact not only reading the assignments

but also starting to think critically about what they were reading and what part these selections may have played in the greater history going on around those readings. Nicenet had been used before, during the 2000/01 school year as a resource for undergraduate theatre history by the TAs in that year. Both Shaun and I were familiar with the Nicenet website, and Dr. Anderson was the primary reason behind our familiarity. We decided to use that website as a means of having the students write responses to the readings that they had just finished. The responses were to be due on the site the night before the class, giving whoever was the lecturer that day an opportunity to see where the responses seemed to lie, or any recurring problems that the students may have had with the material that could be cleared up in the next day's lecture. Rather than having the spelling and grammar corrections be a one time deal, we also allowed for the students to revise their responses based on any grammatical notes that we had given in order to improve their grade.

In addition to the Nicenet responses, there would be three other written assignments. Two of these were to be the exams, one at midterm and one for the finals. The third was a written portion to the students' *commedia dell'arte* performance. This was to take the form of a journal, written from the perspective of the character they were playing. Through the journal, they were to detail the 'journey' they took in creating the performance.

The *commedia* performance was a project that Dr. Barnes had been using in previous years with the Theatre History class, both here and in prior schools. The students were divided up into small groups, about ten to eleven students each, which are then tasked to produce a *commedia dell'arte* performance. Before being divided up, the students are

given a lecture by Dr. Anderson detailing some of the tropes and characteristics of the art form, including the stories that usually resulted and the character types that show up in these performances; the clowns, the old men, the lovers. The students are then asked to pick their preferences for what role they want to play in the troupe, between the characters; Arlecchino, Pantalone, Brighella, Dottore, and the lovers. In addition there is the option of participating in the project in a more technical standpoint; as the director, stage manager, costumer, scribe, or props/set designer. Based on their preferences, the students would be divided up into their troupes. Most of the rest of the second half of the semester would then be spent in rehearsing for their performance. The object of the project was to come up with a two-act, ten-minute show that would be put on in front of the rest of the class, the professors, and any other audience that may decide to come into attendance.

The intent of the project was to give the students a hands-on project, a means of participating in the history that they were learning about. Rather than simply have them learn a quick lesson about how *commedia dell'arte* worked, they would be able to see for themselves some of the issues and problems that may have been inherent in putting on this type of performance. Ideally, they would be able to again draw conclusions on what the theatrical performances of that time may have entailed, and what parallels may be seen in their own experience.

All told, my goal going into this class was to formulate an experience that would show as much of the big picture to the students as could reasonably be expected while still maintaining the focus on their field, namely the theatre. During my time here at VCU, I have come to decide that my goal in teaching, especially theatre history, is to act as

something of a guide to the big picture. My desire is to show the students the world that surrounds the theatrical realm we work in, and to show them some of the influences that the grater world may have had on the theatre of the time that we are examining. In addition, I hope to show some of the influences that theatre may have had on the changing world. By showing some of these, I hoped to encourage the students to start making their own assumptions. Some of the readings, namely Horace, were aimed at letting the students start to see the influence Greek culture had on the Romans and where they may have differed. For a similar reason, I had felt that having the class read the Roman and Greek versions of the same plays would be useful in setting up the students to see the interplay of those two cultures. Originally, I had planned on having a reading from a medieval anti-theatre sermon in addition to the one by Tertullian, as a means of drawing parallels in the arguments used to denounce theatre in the Middle Ages and Christian Roman Empire. However, this was decided to be redundant, and so was dropped.

The commedia project, as was said before, would also be an opportunity to engage the imaginations of the students regarding that time period. Once that was engaged and the students were receptive to exploring that era, we could give the facts of the time, and they would hopefully be better able to 'see' those facts and movements of culture and theatre.

Chapter 2: Class Setting

The Theatre History 307 class was made up primarily of juniors and seniors in the theatre department at Virginia Commonwealth University. Furthermore, there are a few non-majors that take the class each semester, from about the same grade level. In the case of the Fall 2005 class, there were roughly forty students in the class. Of the majors participating in the class, there seemed to be an even split between the performance majors and those in more technical fields. The smallest amount seemed to be represented by the Theatre Education majors; I believe that there were only two taking the class.

The space set aside for the classroom was the same that it had been in previous years, Room B-53 in the Performing Arts Center's basement. The room doubles as a dressing room when the mainstage shows have a large enough cast to necessitate the extra space. There were a few chairs in the area, those that had been assigned to the room, possibly some of the extra ones that had been moved from another room. In addition there were two large tables left over from previous shows. A video projector was also part of the setup, with the control center capable of playing VHS cassettes as well as allowing other systems to be hooked up to it.

Initially the projector was seen as something that would be an asset to the class. With David's laptop, we decided that we could burn images onto a CD, projecting them onto the screen during lectures in order to give the students a greater visual element to the class. Unfortunately, the projector did not see much use beyond the first part of the semester. The lighting in the room was such that half of the lights would have to be shut off in order to have the image be somewhat clear on the screen, with the complete lack of light being the best viewing option. This did not seem to be a feasible situation, and after Shaun's section on the Greeks, it was abandoned. Another reason for this was that I didn't feel I had given myself enough time to find images that could be used for the Roman and Medieval sections of the class, especially given the overabundance of lighting in the room.

The room's space seemed adequate for the amount of students in the class, but the problem seemed to come from the issue of seating all of them. Several times during the semester, I would note that many of the students would be seated on the floor of the room, or on one of the tables that was present in the space. In their responses to the class, several of the students also voiced their concern that the space was not adequate for a classroom, citing the lack of seating for the size of the class.

The class itself was divided into four smaller groups, numbering about ten each. These smaller groups were placed under the supervision of one of the Instructors of the course; Shaun, David, Jenna, or me. These groups were set up in order to facilitate the discussion and attendance. Each of the groups was responsible for reporting to their instructor, to sign in and be counted for attendance purposes. Attendance to the class was limited to two unexcused absences for the semester, following the Theatre VCU policy.

After the second, the student's letter grade would drop one letter grade per excess absence. As for lateness, it was to be discouraged, with a lateness of more than twenty minutes being counted as a complete absence and two incidents of lateness being counted as a complete absence for grading purposes.

When class began it would usually center on a lecture. For the majority of this time these were given by Shaun, who taught the class for the sections centering on the ancient Greeks and Renaissance era, or the lectures would be given by me, concentrating on the intervening Roman and Medieval periods. Both David and Jenna would be able to give a lecture themselves, as a means of varying the class tone and allowing further experience for David and Jenna in their teaching methods. David gave a lecture on the Spanish Golden Age of Drama, while Jenna lectured on court masques during the Elizabethan period in England. When time would allow for it, the students would also be able to get up and perform some of the texts that were being studied, such as was mentioned previously in Chapter 1. Jenna's lecture, regarding the court masques of England during the Renaissance Era, also involved a performance activity. Rather than reading an established text, the students were asked to bring in 'props' and design their own 'court masque' for the visiting royalty. Finally, Dr. Anderson led the class in three lectures spaced throughout the semester. The first two that he led dealt with Asian theatre styles. First of those was a look at Sanskrit and Noh drama, as well as shadow puppets from Indonesia and various other forms from Southeast Asia, running roughly concurrently with the Roman Empire and Middle Ages. The second of his Asian lectures centered on relatively more recent theatrical styles, namely Japanese Kabuki and Bunraku, as well as the Beijing Opera. The third of his

lectures introduced *commedia dell'arte* to the class and 'kicked off' their final project of the semester.

Prior to each class where a reading would be due, the students were required to post a response to Nicenet regarding the reading that they had just done. These responses were intended to give the students a chance to practice their writing, as well as to encourage them to start looking at the selections given to them with a critical eye, both to the reading itself and to the greater world that the reading was a part of. These responses would be due the night before class, allowing us a chance to look at what, if any, common themes there may have been to the responses and hopefully to address these issues in the lecture that coming day.

However, there seemed to be a great deal of questions regarding what the desired result of the posting was. Looking over that posts that the students gave, many of them seemed to initially feel that what was needed was a recap of what was read. Unfortunately, I couldn't give some of those students a concrete answer of what I was looking for in the responses at the time. Soon, however, responses started being posted that were closer to what it was I believe Shaun and I were looking for, with the students starting to engage in a conversation with the texts that we were giving them to read. It was in these responses I also started hearing some of the initial rumblings that would show more fully in the dissatisfaction that was apparent in the responses. Many of the responses, and a number of the students, began voicing their complaints about the book. The chief among these complaints was that the book was too easy, and that some of the students felt that it was talking down to them. Others spoke of the book putting them to sleep, or being too much

of a chore to get through. There didn't seem to be all that much that could be done regarding the book as a whole, unfortunately. Wilson and Goldfarb had been chosen as the primary text for the semester and there was no real way of switching that out, the only other real alternative being the much more expensive Brockett text. The second of the major complaints to start coming through that I caught was the deadline itself. A number of the students in the class, especially those involved with main stage shows running at the same time, voiced their opinion that a deadline of 9pm the day before that class was too soon. With rehearsals reaching in to eleven at night, and tech calls that may go on even later, it wasn't feasible to get the response in on time.

Interspersed with these lectures and activities, the students were assigned several plays to read over the course of the semester. Two plays were chosen for each of the periods, used to represent in their own way a 'representative' of the period that was being studied. Both of these plays were assigned simultaneously, with two of the smaller groups reading one and the other two of the small groups reading the second. One the days that these readings were due, the class would split into the four groups and then separated to other areas of the Performing Arts Center for half of the period. For this time, they would discuss the play that they had just read, lead by the TA heading up that particular group. Splitting up the class as a whole would allow the four of us to experience leading a discussion group for a classroom setting. Additionally, it was hoped that the smaller size of the discussion groups would encourage some students that might have been intimidated by the size of the class to share comments that they ordinarily wouldn't have voiced. After about half of the class period had gone by, the groups would recombine in the main

classroom and there would be a more general talk about the plays that had been read and a sharing of the points raised by the various smaller discussion groups.

Again hearkening back to a format that had been used previously, we used a sheet that had been the guidelines for discussing the Greek plays beforehand. The guidelines were broken up into the following questions:

- What does the language of the play tell you about how it might be produced – what scenic elements are needed, how are changes indicated, etc.?
- What would the character distribution be among the three actors? Any extras needed? Are there any children characters? What do they represent? Gods as characters? Who or what does the Chorus represent?
- What special effects are necessary?
- What happens to characters that lose possession of props or costumes?
- What is the central debate of the play? About what and between whom?
- What clues does the play provide about Greek life, customs and religious practices?
- How is the play applicable today? Would you revive it? How would you stage it?

Dr. Barnes had used these questions in previous classes during the Greek readings (they would get extended to other periods). She had herself developed them from a Greek Theatre seminar with historian Peter Arnott. Shaun and I had received copies of the handout that contained them from last year, and we had decided to use them again for the readings this year.

While the questions, as can be seen focus on the Greek plays being read, with some adjustment they could be made to fit for the other six plays that would be read through the rest of the semester. Of particular importance to me was the question regarding what the play may have said about life surrounding the theater that produced the work. Again there was my desire to have the students see and begin to understand how the big picture may reflect in the theatre and vice versa. These questions seemed to be ideal for posing to the students so that they would start to look closely at the plays read and the societies that produced them, detailed in the previous lectures as the play readings came at the end of their particular section. Additionally, the addition of the questions regarding the technical requirements for the shows that they had read could be seen as a good way to get those students majoring in the technical side of theatre as a whole more involved with the discussion. Many times it seems that a discussion of any given play seems to focus on the performative aspects of that particular piece, leaving out the insights that may be gained from a technical aspect of the show. Additionally, the emphasis of performance may cause those technical students to shy away from participating in the discussion at hand, unwilling to offer thoughts on topics they don't have any experience in. Giving them the opportunity to discuss things as relate to their own chosen fields of study may encourage their greater participation in the play discussions.

Permutations

It seemed, however, that the issues regarding the space for the class were not limited to the main classroom. Whereas there it was an issue of adequate space and seating for everybody in the class, when it came time to split the classes, there was the issue of

where exactly they could go so as not to interfere with the workings of other classes going on in the building as a whole. Initially, two of the groups would go into the main lobby of the Performing Arts Center and discuss there. The first time that happened, we received word from the Music department that our discussions had been too loud and disturbed their activities in the building. As such, we had to find another spot to work. The inner lobby of Hodges Theatre was attempted, but it was soon realized that we would have been in competition for the space with another class. The third area considered was the Theatre green room, the student lounge. The problem with that was quite simply the fact that as a major hub of activity for the department, it did not seem to be very feasible to use that space to hold a class discussion. The need for space was alleviated somewhat when it was decided that rather than splitting up into four separate groups, the discussions would be based on which half of the class read which play. This made for a larger group to handle, but with two people leading the discussion, the larger size of these groups remained manageable. Additionally, this cut back on the amount of spaces that would need to be found when having a discussion, as one group could use the main room and the second group could be moved to a nearby room.

The structure of the class changed somewhat when the commedia project was begun in the latter half of the semester. The goal of this final activity was to give the students an opportunity to get hands on experience working with something that they had studied in the classroom, in this case the performance of a *commedia dell'arte* show, which had seen its greatest popularity between 1550 and 1750, placing it right at the tail end of the overall time period that our class had concentrated on for the semester. The class was

divided again into four troupes, much like the earlier discussion groups and replacing those prior divisions. These four groups consisted of eleven positions, seven of them performers, the other four more focused on the technical side of the project. The performers were divided into roles that would be found in a typical commedia troupe. Two lovers or *inamorato* whose attempts to unite would likely drive the story that the groups would wind up presenting. Hindering the lovers would be the character of Pantalone, often seen as the father of one of the lovers, an old miser that wants to marry off his child into a wealthy family that he may get more money. The other of the Old Men characters would be the character of Dottore, the bumbling, know it all physician or scholar. Two of the characters would be the servant characters, the zanni clowns that would often assist the lovers, assist the Old Men, or generally act as the comic relief of the show. These would be Arlecchino, possibly the most famous character to come out of commedia dell'arte, and Brighella, the cynical 'darker' of the servant characters. Rounding out these characters was Capitano, the cowardly, braggart soldier. In addition to these characters, each troupe would also consist of the director, who would codify the performance into an actual scenario. The director would be the one to crystallize the improvisations of the actors into a performance. A stage manager was also assigned to the troupe as an assistant and scribe for the director. Finally, there were two designers for each of the troupes, a costumer to handle clothes and masks, and a set designer that would get the props and furniture together that the scenario would require.

The beginning of the project was a lecture by Dr. Anderson, the contents of which were an introduction to the tropes and characteristics of the commedia art form. Among

these topics were the history of commedia performances, the characters and stories that made up the troupes that used this art form and an introduction to the masks and physicality of the characters. The students were encouraged to participate in exercises practicing and demonstrating the movements and some of the stock comedic bits of the commedia characters. Finally, the students were given forms listing the positions that each of the troupes would have, and asked to indicate their top three choices, if they had any preference as to what they wanted their participation to be within the troupes that would be formed. Based on the information that was given from these forms, the instructors divided up the class into four troupes, attempting to put as many people in with their first choice of position as we could. For the most part, this was easy to do, as the preferences lined up nicely with the available spaces. Given what we knew about the students and their relation with each other, it was also a good idea to try and keep separated those students that didn't get along, or whose pairing may have proven detrimental to the group as a whole. This was difficult to do with 100% accuracy, but we tried to do what we could with the information that we had on the students in our class. The idea was to have a group that managed to work together in order to create this project through their combined effort. This would obviously have been harmed if there had been students that would have fought throughout the process or if one or two students wound up dominating the entire process. For two of the groups, we had to make do without one of the lover characters, our numbers had changed somewhat, as students added or dropped the class. The lovers also seemed to be the less popular position, so it was probably one of the easier positions to do away with. Likewise was the original position of scribe. With very few people requesting that position,

we also decided that the duties of the scribe folded nicely with those of the stage manager, so the two were combined. At the end of it all, we had two groups of eleven and two of only ten. Each of these performance troupes would be placed under the supervision of one of the TA's, to act as advisors for the project, as well as to carry on the class discussions for those days when there wouldn't be a rehearsal.

The overall story behind the project was that the students' troupes would be traveling commedia dell'arte troupes that have recently returned from touring to put on a performance for the local countess. The winning troupe would be chosen by the countess to act as her private company of entertainers, a contract that would have secured the fortunes of the victors. The task was then for each troupe to create an original, ten-minute piece as a showcase of your acting company. The students were to name the company, come up with the scenario for their show, as well as come up with names for their other characters, the ones that would be playing the zanni, Pantalone and so on. For their back-story, the companies would be assumed to have toured in either Spain or in France before returning to Italy for the command performance.

This 'prior touring' would inform the second part of the project; a written journal dealing with their persona's experiences while on the road. These experiences would be informed by the history of the time, history that they could research outside of class as well as the history that would be talked about in the class itself. Those going to France could expect that their personas had a better time of touring than those going to Spain. France at the time enjoyed touring Italian troupes and often these performers could expect to have several good performances along the way. By contrast, Spain would have been less

accommodating to the touring actors, forcing restrictions on them as well as there likely not being a chance for many profitable performances as they toured. While it may not have been strictly necessary, many of the students desired to get together and devote some of their time to going over each other's journal ideas, in order to present a more unified history of the company altogether when the individual papers were due. Students were encouraged to be creative in the story given as well as in the physical makeup of the journal itself. One of the notable examples from a prior class came in a handcrafted box, shaped like a book. Inside the box was the journal itself, along with several other trinkets and mementos of the persona's journey. While this was an exceptional case, it was to be hoped and again encouraged that the students would take some time in creatively designing the layout of their journals.

While the project was underway, the remaining class periods in the semester were split between normal lecture days and rehearsal days. During the rehearsal periods, the students would be split into their troupes in order to continue work on their projects. It was also possible; schedules permitting, to hold rehearsals outside of class time, these would likely be away from the TA overseeing the group. Much like the small discussion groups, the rehearsals would need to have access to other spaces beyond the main room. In this case, however, the students would not be able to double up in groupings. Since the project was also in a way a competition, none of the groups wanted to rehearse where another of the troupes would be able to see or hear what they were doing. It had been mentioned that they were allowed to 'steal' elements of other troupes' shows that they liked, before and during the show should they see something that they wanted to use. Given this, they were

leery of any of their show getting 'leaked' before the actual performance date had come. Rehearsals for the group I supervised initially began with a discussion of what sort of plot they would put on for their show. Mine had been one of the groups that were missing one of their lovers, so the fact that they couldn't do the standard story of 'separated lovers reunited' had to be taken into account. Instead, they decided to do a story that would happen supposedly after the events that most commedia scenarios finished with. On the day of the wedding, the innamorata is without her husband to be, who has disappeared. The rest of the performance consisted of the innamorata searching for the innamorato, while the zanni attempted to capture her to bring to Capitano. At the end of it, the innamorata and Capitano would fall into a closet where they exchange clothing, with the suggestion that they were involved intimately there. While this was going on, Pantalone and Dottore, the parents of the couple, chase each other in order to get hold of the wedding cake, having begun to search for the innamorato and given that up at the promise of free food. Once it was established what the storyline of their show would be, the troupe set about rehearsing in for performance in the Richard Newdick Theatre. The rehearsals had an improvisatory air about them, especially the two students playing the zanni, as new things were tried and the director solidified those things that seemed to work best to his mind. The work on costumes was done primarily in the designer's off time, and centered mostly on getting masks together for the various characters, as well as some simple costume pieces, and one dress that had to come off easily so that it could be switched during the closet gag. The set designer luckily didn't have to build anything for the set, and any of the furniture that was needed would already be available in the Shafer St. building.

The performance itself occurred on the second to last day of the class, with all four of the troupes performing at the Newdick theatre. The audience was the rest of the class, along with the TA's, Dr. Anderson, Dr. Barnes and a few other students who had come by to watch as well. Each of the troupes had two, five-minute acts to their performances, which they played back to back, with a couple of minutes interspersing them so that the groups could break down and set up what they needed for the set. After all of the performances, Dr. Barnes critiqued the shows and gave her judgments on the best performances. Afterwards it was a matter of getting the journals in from the students.

Exams

There were also two exams for the class, the only two exams in the class as a whole. Both of these followed the same basic model; a series of identifications, two short essay questions (chosen from three), and a long essay. Rather than give these exams during the class period, they were to be open book, open note tests that the students would be given a week to finish. As with the Nicenet posting, the spelling and grammar of the students' tests would be a factor in their grade. One of these exams served as the midterm, covering the material from Greece, Rome, and early Asia. The second, the final exam, covered the Renaissances and later Asian theatre. The vocabulary identifications were to be taken from the terms lists that preceded each of the sections in the course packet. These had been chosen primarily from vocabulary that showed up in the Wilson/Goldfarb text and were intended to show that the students understood what these terms were and (more importantly) why these particular things were important to the time period. The essays were an effort to show that they could synthesize the information that they had taken in

and could use that information to support conclusions that they had drawn regarding the question of the essay.

The consensus between us when the midterms had been fully graded and were to be returned was that the students had fared pretty poorly, especially when it came to the grammar and spelling component of the test. Many of the students turned in exams with numerous grammatical errors, some had not even written in complete sentences for the majority of their exam. It was decided before the class that these were returned that we would speak with the students as a whole and go over some of the more common problems that we had seen in the exams; namely the grammatical problems, the common spelling errors, the use of rather poor outside sources (Wikipedia especially). Our intent was to let the students know some of the areas in which they could have improved, but in hindsight (after looking at the students' responses to the class) it may have been a bad idea, or one that could have been handled better.

Grading for the class took into account four aspects of the class, each of these having a certain weight on the students' final grade based on the relative importance that we had placed on that aspect. Highest of these were the written assignments; the two exams were worth a total of 40% the grade. These were the main recourse we had to determine that the students were taking in and processing the information that we were giving them. Slightly less than that was the *commedia dell'arte* final project, worth 30% of the final grade. This project took up a great deal of the latter half of the semester, and so it seemed appropriate to weight it accordingly. The Nicenet posts were worth 20% of the grade. Similar to the exams, these were a major means of determining if the students were

processing the material. Furthermore, with this being a writing-intensive course, a great deal of the grading weight should reflect the importance of the writing in the class. The final aspect of the class was attendance and participation in the class discussions, making up 10% of the final grade.

Chapter 3: Lectures

My lecturing responsibilities for the class centered on the sections concentrating on both the Roman Republic/Empire and the Middle Ages in Europe, given Shaun's experience with classical Greece and the Renaissance, as well as my experience with the sections of class I was to concentrate in. Admittedly, I feel more comfortable in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but these eras were outside of the scope of the class. I had done a previous lecture as my TA lecture the prior year, regarding the popular entertainments of the Roman Empire, and those two time periods have held my interest, so I felt somewhat up to the challenge at hand. I have been coming to the opinion that, because theatre is a part of a larger world around, that larger world needs to be presented as a context for the theatre history that the students would be learning. I also felt, accurately or no, that there is a sense of isolation amongst the students; that they feel it is not necessary to pay attention to the extra world history, or even much of the history of theatre, and concentrate on the theatre of today.

Whether or not my assessment was accurate, it led me to look at the class as a means to show the students participating the ways that their theatre may have been

informed by that of the past, as well as the interplay of the theatrical forms and practices of the past and their surrounding cultural context. Before the class could begin however, I would need to get the information together that I would present to the students. I will admit to feeling daunted by the task at hand, just beginning in my teaching career, my stock of knowledge is still forming. What could I do to give the students a class that would not consist of me simply repeating what they had already read in the Wilson/Goldfarb text? What should my lectures concentrate on? How should I progress?

I went over my thought process for the section layout in the first chapter, and will go into it in more depth here. Initially, my thought was to devote four days to each of the eras I was to concentrate on. The first day was to go over the historical landscape of the time. Rather than look at the theatre for the first day, it was going to be all of the stuff that was going on around it, that informed the theatre and that got informed by the theatre itself. In truth, I think the history would need to have been edited somewhat. Both of the time periods that I was covering spanned several centuries each, to go in depth into either of them would have been too much for the scope and concentration of the class. However, giving them a grounding in the development of the Roman Empire and the Medieval feudal system was intended to give them a sense of the landscape in which the theatre they were about to read was developing. The cycle plays of the Middle Ages, for example, were a theatrical form that owes a great deal to the general spiritual and cultural background of the time. To look only at the work in a vacuum would, I feel, be a detriment to the understanding of the piece.

The second day of the section was to involve looking at the theatrical history more closely. Once we had established the overarching history of the section, it was time to concentrate on the main thrust of the class, namely the theatre. The day would concentrate on the starting and development of performative activities in the areas we were looking at and how those moved into more formalized theatrical activities as time went on, or in the case of the Romans, fell out of favor for other performance activities. Along with this was going to be a look at the structure of the theatrical spaces and how they were put together and developed. The idea of the second day was to focus in on the more physical aspects of the theatre, as well as to ideally start leading the students into the process of deciphering information from sometimes scant sources. Sometimes there was very little left over from the theatres of the time. Only a few Roman theatres are still standing and there is little left of the Medieval theatrical spaces left except for the writings and paintings of people that witnessed what went on and the interpretations of previous scholars. With these materials, I hoped to show the students some of the process that went on in reconstructing these theatres, possibly leading them into making their own judgments as time went on, or building the foundation that would lead to future activities of the like.

The third day would actually involve looking at the plays themselves. Since much of the day was going to be devoted to the discussion revolving around the plays selected, the lecture had to be fairly short. For this day, I decided to concentrate on what the acting style may have involved. From what I'd seen, this is the part of theatre history recording that seems to have the sketchiest amount of material, so the lecture could still be short and convey a decent amount of the information that was still out there. With the lecture about

probable acting styles still in their head, the students would be able to look at the discussion questions that were being asked and be able to make some inferences based on what they just heard as well as what had been heard during the previous two days. The discussion of the plays would be done in the four smaller discussion groups, and would center around one of two plays from the time period. Two plays was intended for all of the sections of the class, in order to introduce the students to a wider array of theatre from the time periods being explored in that particular section of the class. While only one of the plays would be read by each of the discussion groups, they would as a whole be able to hear about the other when the discussion groups reconvened for the remainder of those class periods. Gratifyingly, several of the students also admitted to reading both of the plays from the sections, and the Renaissance section of the class split up the play readings so that the entire class would in fact be able to read both of the plays that Shaun had selected for that section of the class.

The fourth and final day of my plan was to focus on those performances that may not have previously been thought of as 'theatre.' For the Roman section of the semester this was to have focused on the festivals, and the gladiatorial combats and races that made up the majority of those celebrations. In addition to this, it was my intention to also speak about the touring clowning troupes at the time period, famous for the Atellan farces that would be one of the roots of *commedia dell'arte*, which the students would be learning about later in the semester. For the Middle Ages, this lecture would have been focused again on the celebrations and festivals of the time period, feasts such as the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Boy Bishop. The goal of this final day was to show the students a

broader definition of theatre or theatricality than they might have at first encountered. Furthermore, it was to introduce them to practices that they may not normally have been exposed to in another theatre history class. Something that I had picked up from classes with Dr. Barnes was an appreciation for the validity of these 'other' types of performances.

In the initial meetings with Shaun and Dr. Anderson, I realized that my scheduling had not taken the Asian theatre lectures into account. Two of the days would need to be set aside for those lectures, one for the earlier types of theatre and one for the later forms. Also, it was seen that we would need to put in more time for the commedia rehearsals. While it was possible for the students to rehearse for this project outside of class time, the difficulty inherent in getting ten or more schedules to align properly made that a difficult proposition at best. As such, we decided that they would need to have as much in-class rehearsal time as was possible. The extra time had to come from some point in the semester, so it was decided that it would come out of the Roman and Medieval times. There would be some extra time devoted to the Renaissance, but that was already taken into account. As disappointing as it was, the fact is that the Classical Greeks and Renaissance Europe take up a much more important position in the theatre history landscape than Rome and the Middle Ages. With their lessened importance, I was left with three days to handle Rome and three and a half to use with Medieval Europe.

The first day of the Roman section was to be a look at the general history of the Roman Republic and the later Empire, to serve as a foundation for the rest of that section. With only three days, however, I needed to compress some of my planned lectures to take place in one day where I had first planned on two. For the first day, this came to be a

combination of both the general history of Rome and a look at the history of their theatrical development. The first half of the class dealt with the rise of Rome, its split into the eastern and western empires, and its final fall. Looking back, with the small amount of detail I had planned to give this topic, it was probably for the best that I combined this day with a look at the theatrical history of the time period. The theatrical history began with the Etruscan influence of the north, Rome's moving away from and assimilation of that culture. From there I spoke about the Atellan farces and Fescennine verses; the earlier types of Roman performance. The three large names in Roman playwriting; Plautus, Terence, and Seneca, were discussed, along with the types of plays they wrote and the influence the Greeks had on the Roman theatre. The day was then brought to a close by discussing the Roman theatre spaces themselves and how they developed.

For the second day, I had assigned the two plays to be read for that section of the class. In this case, both of the plays were Seneca's; his versions of *Medea* and *Oedipus Rex*. The Greek versions of these plays had been read in the previous section of the class under Shaun's direction and I wanted them to be able to read the Roman versions so they would be able to compare the two. It was an attempt to show how the stories had been evolving from their Greek origins, to allow the students a chance to start critiquing plays, as well as to explore what the possible reasons for using the Greek tragedies may have been. Before the discussion, I also planned to give a lecture on what life was like for the actors of the time. As previously mentioned, this was to try and bring the students into an imaginative mindset, making them receptive to exploring how these plays may have been

put on. The final day of the Roman section dealt with the more popular entertainments of the time; chariot racing, gladiatorial combat, and staged battles like the *naumachiae*.

In between the Romans and the Middle Ages was Dr. Anderson's lecture on early Asian theatre forms; Sanskrit drama, Noh, and some of the performances of Southeast Asia. My initial plan of going over the general history of the Middle Ages, upon further reflection, did not seem to be the best course to take in this case. With only three and a half days, the history of the growing feudal states and nations of the era may have been too much, even in a quick review. Instead, I decided to divide up the theatre history into two different types; the heavily church-based mystery and cycle plays, and the more secular based morality plays, as well as the farces of that time. For the first day of the class, I concentrated on the church sponsored plays of the time. At the start of the class, I decided it would be a good idea for the students to have some sort of idea of the world that produced the theatre that they would be exploring. The hope was, like talking about the acting of the Roman times, that it would engage their imaginations, allowing them to have a foundation to start thinking critically about the readings. For the same reason I then continued with a reading of Hrosvitha's *Callimachus*, again to get them to engage with the artistic styles and storytelling of the time. After that my lecture dealt with the development of the religious forms of theatre, from the tropes used during church services to the mystery and cycle plays of the time period. I dealt primarily with the plays themselves and their development, waiting until the next day to talk about how they may have been staged.

The second day of the Medieval section of the class was, as I said, when I discussed the staging of these plays. From the readings they got some information

regarding the pageant wagons and how they may have looked, there was also an account of some of the special effects that were used for the staging of these various plays and an interpretation of the inscriptions surrounding a stage plan of the play, *The Castle of Perseverance*. The lecture for that day centered on these staging practices and how we think they may have been. Based on the relative lack of information and preserved, physical structures, much of the lecture was in what people thought the staging may have been. The second part of the lecture concentrated on the more secular forms of Medieval theatre, specifically the allegory and morality plays.

Like the previous Roman section, the third day of the Medieval section dealt with the plays that the students. Within that, I also had a short lecture dealing with how the actors of these pieces may have performed, how they may have been set up for a show, what training and rehearsals they may have had leading up to the plays' production. After the short lecture, they again split up into their discussion groups to talk about the two plays that they read previously. For this reading, I had chosen one of the religious cycle plays, *Noah*, and one of the secular morality allegories, *Everyman*. After this day, I shared one of the days with Shaun, the two of us concentrating on the popular entertainments of both the Medieval time and the following Renaissance, which shared some similarities in their entertainments. The lecture focused on the tournaments and festivals of the time, especially the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Boy Bishop.

Much of the information that I used for my lectures I got from Oscar Brockett's History of Theatre text. It had been the text that I used for my own undergraduate theatre history class, so I was familiar with the depth of the information in that text. Rome and the

Middle Ages, as I had mentioned, were not my areas of expertise and I found the information from there and the *Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* to be a great help in getting my lecture notes together. The biggest reason, I believe, for having used those texts rather than the Wilson/Goldfarb text was a desire to be able to teach information that is outside of the text that the students read. The W/G text has a good deal of information in it, especially for a class taught to students who would probably not be going on to pursue further careers in theatre history, but the Brockett text allowed for a much more in depth look at the history surrounding the topics I would be teaching. The readings that I assigned were either from the Wilson/Goldfarb text or from the materials that we had put together for the class' course packet. Before each class, the students were to read the assigned materials and then write a response to them on the Nicenet site. The length of this was something that I was not sure how to mandate. I didn't think that there needed to be a set minimum length to the postings, on the other hand, I didn't want the students to think they only had to write one or two lines of text and then call it done at that. My usual guideline when looking at the responses of my discussion group was to look for at least one to two paragraphs, something that I usually saw from the responses in my group.

One of the difficulties that I faced in presenting this material was the seeming lack of interest in it from the students. From looking at the responses that the class gave, I started to get the impression that they didn't particularly like the Roman or Medieval theatres. Several of the responses that I got seemed almost to dismiss the Romans as people that only stole from the Greeks and did nothing else, nor had any real effect on the history of the theatre after them. With the Middle Ages, there seemed to be a fair amount

of resistance to the material based on the religious aspects of the Medieval period, something that initially baffled me based on the religious aspects of the preceding Asian theatre forms. This seemed to get especially pronounced in their written responses to the plays that were read. My attempts became initially to try and place things in a modern parallel. I began trying to bring the information across to them in a way that they could see some of the influences that have come to us from the Romans. As time went on, I admit that I attempted this less and less and instead concentrated on just getting the information out to the students.

Chapter 4: Responses

The first of the complaints that I heard personally regarding the class was an issue with the Wilson/Goldfarb textbook. The text had been chosen last year for a couple of reasons; first, with Brockett's text rising in cost, securing enough copies for a class of forty students would have likely been prohibitively expensive. Second, the Wilson/Goldfarb textbook was seen as being more accessible to the students. With an easier writing style, a greater effort to link historical topics to modern parallels, and a series of sidebars looking at important questions and topics, it was thought that that particular text would appeal to the students more than the very densely packed, Brockett textbook. I had not heard any complaints regarding the book last year with Dr. Barnes' class, but that was not the case this year. From near the beginning of the class there were rumblings from some of the students that the book was too juvenile for them. There were times that the comment came back that the book seemed like it was written for a high school audience, rather than a class for college juniors and seniors. Other students commented that the reading was incredibly dry, some saying that it put them to sleep. In this case, the question becomes one of what could have been done to keep them engaged in the book. In this case, there doesn't seem to have been much that could have been done. The only other text that I know of that could

have been used in its place, Brockett's theatre history book, was becoming more and more expensive. It seems unlikely that the students would have been willing to spend over a hundred dollars on even a better book. Another factor in viewing the book as a minor concern is that it appeared that the comments were of a relative minority of the students. Unfortunately, it may well be that there is no other option available at the moment. For the most part, it seemed that the course packet itself was well received, in some cases better than the textbook itself. There is probably some further tinkering that can be done with the readings included in the packet, but it looks like this particular inclusion was a good idea.

The Nicenet postings became another source of contention in the class. Our original requirements were to have the responses posted by nine the evening before the following class. To many of the students, this was seen as being too restrictive a deadline. With rehearsals going on to the late evening, those students having to work late on the mainstage shows said they weren't able to post in time. Others said that they would forget when the deadline was, or that they hadn't posted yet. Most telling was the class day when the students broke up into their groups to put up a court masque. As Jenna explained it, these masques often had a request built into them to give to monarch, the idea being that the monarch would be so impressed with their show and production that he or she would grant the request based on that. The request that one of the groups made for their own masque was a cancellation of the Nicenet postings.

There was also, for myself, a dissatisfaction with the responses that the students would give at times. Sometimes the response was simply a rehashing of what the student had read. Other times there would be a response that was little more than one or two lines,

saying little of any content. On the other hand, there was no real quantifiable response that I could give at the time to the question of “what do you want” from the responses. I could somewhat see in my head what the ideal (to me) response would look like, but I couldn’t quite articulate what that vision was. Looking back, what I believe I was looking for was, more than just proof that the student had read the assignment, that they were starting to think about the assignment critically. I was looking for the students to take these readings and begin to apply the information that was there to the readings that they had done before, to the theatre that they were going to be studying at the time. I was looking for the students to show that they were not looking at the history and readings as something that just existed at one time and had no effect beyond that once, but rather as a continuum of events and effects that interplayed through time. There were those students that were doing such things with their responses, but at times it seemed that all I could see were the ones that I was vaguely not satisfied with.

At the end of the semester, the students were given a form that they could fill out in response to the class as a whole. It was an effort to see how the class was received by the students; what went right, as well as what could be improved upon for next time. The form came in two parts; the first was a series of questions regarding the materials of the class and classroom, the second dealt more specifically with aspects of the class itself, the instructors, the material, what could be changed or improved upon. These responses focused on four things primarily. The first two - the textbook and the responses - I have talked about earlier.

One of the primary concerns that came out of the response forms was the inadequacy of the classroom. There were several comments regarding the lack of chairs or desks in this particular classroom. I have remarked in Chapter 2 how the seating in the area left many of the students sitting on the floor or on one of the tables that had been placed in the room earlier. During the class, it had seemed to me to be a minor problem in the class, but it would seem that most of the students voted the classroom setting as 'Fair' at best, with six of the 39 responses rating it as 'Poor.' The lack of seating in the room was possibly out of Shaun's and my scope to take care of in that case. Either there needed to be more chairs brought in, or we could have attempted to move the class to another location.

More concerning to me than the seating arrangements of the classroom were the students' responses to our demeanors, responses which were almost overwhelmingly negative. Shaun had mentioned during the beginning of the semester that Dr. Anderson had received an e-mail from one of the students regarding her teaching demeanor. While she didn't go into many specifics, the contents of the e-mail seemed to deal with her sense of humor and interactions with the students themselves. It wasn't the last of these she was to hear about, but again she did not go into details regarding their content. By the end of the semester, she had confessed to feeling burnt out from the feedback she had been hearing from the students.

The attitude that the students objected to was described as condescending, overly sarcastic, and there were complaints that they were being treated as though they were small children. Many of the responses from the end of semester forms spoke of the hostile

environment in the classroom and belittling attitude of the instructors. One or two asked that the actual instructors teach the class rather than the TAs.

After Shaun had mentioned the comments she had heard about from Dr. Anderson, I tried to watch my behavior, making sure that I was trying to approach the students on at least a somewhat equitable footing. I believe the problem may have lain in the basic attitudes we have when dealing with people, and why when I initially heard about the complaints Shaun was getting I didn't quite understand what was going on in that case. Both Shaun and I can be teasing at times. With me that is my way of friendly interaction with people, being able to break the ice and ease the atmosphere when needed. It may have been the same with Shaun; I don't know. Since we have similar dispositions, I didn't notice it being a problem in the classroom. It wasn't until I'd gotten the responses back that I'd seen what reaction there had been to our actions in class.

From looking at what we put together with the class, as well as the responses that were given to us afterwards, I've begun to formulate some ideas on what may have been changed, and what may be improved upon with future classes. Despite the objections some of the students had to our desire to keep spelling and grammar as a factor in their grades, I do believe I would keep doing this. Being able to properly write an essay, or communicate effectively in a written format is going to be a factor in a student's future career, especially those students looking for careers in technical or educational fields. Perhaps some of the objections came from the perceived weight that these factors would have in their final grades. I cannot completely speak for the other TAs in the class, but while spelling and grammar had an effect on the grades of their exams and responses, it was not as much of

an effect as the demonstration that they had incorporated the information into these written works. From the responses that I received, it seems as though the belief was that the grammar of the written works would be one of the primary factors in their grades.

As had been mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, the students felt like the deadline that we asked for in posting their responses was too restrictive. Some asked if next time, provided there were to be Nicenet postings in the future, that the deadline be pushed back further into the night. I think that this may be a good idea, and in keeping with my desire from these postings, I believe what may work out better would be to have the postings be due after the class in which the readings were discussed. I'd wanted the postings to reflect what the students were taking away from the information that was presented to them, coupled with what they may have picked up from classes. I think that it may have been easier to have this done if the students had the benefit of hearing further contextual information for the readings before they were asked to respond to them. After hearing the lecture, and some of the history that their readings related to, they may have a better footing with which to respond to the readings as a whole. There is the danger of the students simply responding to the lecture, and not to what had been read – which would especially be true if the student had not read the material beforehand. Another possibility would be to limit the responses to once a week, instead of twice. This carries the possibility of the responses being limited to half of the readings, however.

Reading some of the responses these students had to the class, I also wonder how much of their resistance and negative response was also a result of a disconnection of sorts with the perceived power relationship in the classroom. Rather than an established faculty

member, what the students got were several graduate students – some not terribly far from their age – teaching them and in charge of the class. This may have resulted in a twofold scenario. One, the students may have resisted somewhat being taught a subject such as theatre history by other students. There may have been a feeling that they shouldn't be taught by people that aren't much older than they are, who don't have the degrees that they are studying for themselves. Two, this may have instilled in myself, and possibly Shaun, a desire to 'force' the students to take us seriously. It may have been that we did, subconsciously, talk down to the students in a manner. It may not even have been as much as had been reported; it may have expanded in the minds of the students because of their lingering desire to have a 'real' teacher.

Whatever the case, while THEA 307 may not have turned out as successfully as I had hoped, there is still the opportunity to learn from what went on in this course. The negative responses to aspects of this class have still highlighted areas that can be improved as time goes on and I move on to teach other classes. In the future, I look to have a clearer understanding of what I would want from my students, especially if I decide to keep the practice of posting response after the readings. Going into this class, I had only a general idea of what I wanted to see from the students, now I think I have a better understanding of it. I want to have the students be able to communicate the fact that they are reading the material, and – more importantly – they are thinking about it.

My graduate studies have given me, I feel, a greatly in depth knowledge of the more modern aspects of theatre history and theory. In order to feel like I would properly be able to teach a comprehensive theatre history class, I will need to 'reconnect' with the

more general theatre history that I had studied during my undergraduate. With the class split between myself and Sean primarily, I was able to concentrate on just two primary 'sections' of theatre history. The next time I am able to teach a class on theatre history, I will likely be on my own. Obviously, this will mean that I'll have to have a working knowledge of those sections of theatre history that I didn't teach this last time around. I think this will also help me in my teaching 'persona'. As later classes that have been taught have shown me, and others, I believe that the more comfortable I am with the material, the stronger I am in presenting the material. The logical next step is of course to continue increasing my comfort level with the material that I had not taught last semester, as well as continuing to expand my knowledge of what I am comfortable with, becoming more comfortable teaching in front of a class.

Appendix A

Class Response Summary

At the end of the semester, the students were given a form for responding to the class that they had participated in. The responses were anonymous, with two different sections. The first was a survey style set of questions regarding the class materials and setting.

Response numbers

1. Describe the classroom setting:
 - a. Excellent: 2 (5%)
 - b. Good: 14 (36%)
 - c. Fair: 17 (44%)
 - d. Poor: 6 (15%)

2. Describe the equipment in the classroom
 - a. Excellent: 0 (0%)
 - b. Good: 14 (36%)
 - c. Fair: 17 (44%)
 - d. Poor: 8 (20%)

3. Describe the materials used in the class (textbook, course pack, handouts)

- a. Excellent: 7 (18%)
- b. Good: 13 (33%)
- c. Fair: 14 (36%)
- d. Poor: 5: (13%)

4. Describe the workload for this class.

- a. Heavy: 11 (28%)
- b. Moderate: 28 (72%)
- c. Light: 0 (0%)

5. Describe your first TA this semester.

- a. Excellent: 9 (23%)
- b. Good: 24 (62%)
- c. Fair: 5 (13%)
- d. Poor: 1 (2%)

6. Describe your second TA this semester.

- a. Excellent: 7 (18%)
- b. Good: 19 (49%)
- c. Fair: 12 (31%)
- d. Poor: 1 (2%)

Some of these questions also had comments written next to them. The most common of these were comments on the lack of chairs in the classroom near the 2nd question. One or two of the comments also dealt with the textbook's inadequacy.

As well as these questions, there was another page to the class response, where the students were asked to write their opinions regarding aspects of the class. Some of these responses are quoted along with the questions themselves below.

7. What is the thing that stands out the most for you from this semester?

The majority response to this question was the commedia project. Following slightly behind that in number were Dr. Anderson's Asian theatre lectures.

"Attention to modern application, this helps the history part seem less stale."

"It felt like Nicenet was a waste of my time. Having rehearsals and other classes at night, being able to post by 9 was really hard. The textbook was far from exciting but informative. The structure was good – you always knew what was expected of you."

"The TA's all were very condescending (mostly Shaun) and made for a kind of hostile learning environment."

8. What would you change about the class?

"More organized classroom setting – it's very difficult to focus when there are people on the floor and nothing to write on."

"The testing. More small quizzes over the course of the semester so we can have a base of knowledge throughout."

"Have more activities like the commedia scene."

"The belittling attitude of the TAs."

9. Describe the primary instructors. Were they helpful? Did they convey the necessary information to you in a way that was easy to understand? What would you change about your instructors?

"Brian was funny and inventive, knew his information. Shaun was belittling. Aaron was stellar."

"Jenna doesn't talk much. David's Spanish lecture was awesome. Brian sometimes gave the impression of being nervous which made him seem unprepared."

"The atmosphere in the room was tense, so often I felt there was disrespectful behavior from both the TA's and the students. I felt talked down to on many occasions. Also, sometimes it seemed that the TA's were teaching straight out of the book instead of offering additional insight."

10. Any additional comments.

"Aaron Anderson should have been more active in observing the TAs"

"Small groups keep each TA teaching the same thing so everyone is on the same page. It allows for more question and clarification."

“Two things: The textbook sucks. It’s written for and by 8th graders. Why such the emphasis on grammar. Grades in a ‘History of Theatre’ should revolve more around our understanding of, say, the history of theatre, than the proper uses of colons and apostrophes.”

Appendix B

Class Syllabus

Theatre 307 – Theatre History

Fall 2005

T-TH 11-12:20 PAC B53

Dr. Aaron D. Anderson

Office: 827-2170 E-mail: adanderson@vcu.edu

Office hours: by appointment only

Instructors: Shaun M. McCracken (mccrackensm@vcu.edu) and

Brian Vrtis (vrtis_6@yahoo.com)

Office phone: 827-1677

Teaching Assistants: Jenna Neilsen and David White

This course covers the history of the Western theatre from its origins through the Renaissance, in practice, dramatic literature and theory. Students will develop critical and analytical skills in terms of understanding and making connections between historical events and theatrical innovations/influences; demonstrate that understanding through participation in a performance project/paper, written exams and classroom exercises and discussion. This course is designated as a writing intensive course. Students should be prepared to make revisions to all written work.

Required Texts:

Wilson and Goldfarb, *Living Theatre*, 2nd ed. (at Carriage House Book Shop)

Course pack # 01 (at Uptown Copy on Main Street)

Mel Gordon, *Lazzi*.

Attendance/Participation: 10% of grade. Please note that this is a *crucial* part of your grade. You are allowed no more than two absences. With a third absence, your final grade will automatically drop one full letter and will continue to drop one letter grade with each additional absence. Furthermore- besides adversely affecting your own learning process- arriving late for class disrupts the learning process of fellow students, therefore tardiness in excess of 20 minutes will be considered a complete absence, and every two instances of tardiness- of whatever duration- will equate to one absence for grading purposes. Also, we reserve the right to declare a “no lateness” policy should the need

arise. Briefly put, this means that if the door to the class is shut and you are not inside by the time class begins, you are absent: no exceptions.

Nicenet Postings: 20% of grade. You will be required to submit responses to all reading assignments to the Nicenet classroom. All postings are due by 9pm the evening before they will be discussed. You will be permitted to re-write responses (for spelling, grammar, and punctuation only) to improve your grade. Class Key: 7Z33409T50

Written Assignments: 2 exams at 20% each, Commedia paper/project: 30%. The latter will be your participation as a member of a *commedia dell'arte* troupe, and research/report on your role in the company – history of the character you play, how plays were written, designed, directed, or traveled. The group commedia performance will be a public performance.

VCU Regulations: You are responsible for being familiar with and abiding by, all University rules and policies regarding disruptive behavior, plagiarism, and disabilities. All of these policies are contained in the University Handbook.

Course Schedule:

(All reading assignments and homework are listed in **bold** and are due the day they are listed in the Course Schedule.)

****Note: Assignments and dates are subject to change.****

August

- 25 (Th)** Review of Syllabus, Course Overview.
- 30 (T)** Greek Theatre Introduction (**W/G=Chapter 1, Coursepack=Poetics, Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre.**)

September

- 1 (Th)** Greek Theatre Continued (**Coursepack=Thespis Meets a Critic, Skeptical View of Tragic Conventions, Aeschylean Choreography, Back stories on Oedipus and Medea.**)
- 6 (T)** Greek Plays (**Coursepack=Oedipus Rex/Medea**)
- 8 (Th)** Greek Plays (**Coursepack=Lysistrata**)
- 13 (T)** Roman Theatre (**W/G=Chapter 2, Coursepack=A Representative Roman Audience, How to Construct a Roman Playhouse.**)

- 15 (Th)** Roman Theatre (**Coursepack=Senecca's Oedipus/Medea, Ars Poetica, Tertullian**)
- 20 (T)** Roman Theatre, popular entertainments (handouts will be distributed in class.)
- 22 (Th)** Asian Theatre (W/G= pg. 87-93, 100-104, 113-116, **Coursepack=Mahabharata, Ramayana**)
- 27 (T)** Medieval Theatre (W/G=Chapter 4, **Coursepack=Callimachus**)
- 29 (Th)** Medieval Theatre, staging practices (**Coursepack=The Staging of Liturgical Drama, Castle of Perseverance, Medieval Stage Directions, Stage Magic at Valenciennes, English Pageant Cars, Costs of Mounting a Play**)

October

- 4 (T)** Medieval Theatre (**Coursepack=Noah/Everyman**)
- 6 (Th)** Medieval/Renaissance popular entertainments (handouts will be distributed in class.)

- 11 (T)** Italian Renaissance (W/G=Chapter 5, Coursepack=The Wonders of Perspective Scenery, King Oedipus in the Olympic Theatre, Sabbattini)
- 13 (Th)** Introduction to Commedia (Coursepack=Commedia and the Actor, additional homework: Pick 2 favorite lazzi from Mel Gordon's book and bring them to class with you.)
- 18 (T)** Midterm Review
- 20 (Th)** No Class (Reading Day/Fall Break)
- 25 (T)** Midterm due at beginning of class. Commedia Rehearsal
- 27 (Th)** French Renaissance (W/G=Chapter 8, Coursepack=Torelli in Paris, Prescriptions for the Ailing French Stage, Types of Operatic Settings, Reading and Casting a New Play.)

November

- 1 (T)** Commedia Rehearsal

- 3 (Th)** Spanish Renaissance (W/G=Chapter 7, Coursepack=The Stew-Pan, A Theatre Riot, Observations on Le Cid)
- 8 (T)** Commedia Rehearsal
- 10 (Th)** English Renaissance (W/G=Chapter 6, Coursepack=Short History of Religion in Renaissance England, The Fortune Contract, Elizabethan Audiences, Municipal Prejudice Against Plays and Players, The Interior of the Swan Theatre.)
- 15 (T)** Commedia Rehearsal
- 17 (Th)** Asian Theatre (W/G=pg.88, 93-99, 105-113, Coursepack=Sukeroku: Flower of Edo)
- 22 (T)** English Renaissance Plays/Court Masques (Coursepack=Masque of Blackness, Dr. Faustus.)
- 24 (Th)** No Class (Thanksgiving Break)
- 29 (T)** English Renaissance conclusion (Coursepack='Tis Pity She's A Whore)

December

- 1 (Th)** Commedia Rehearsals
- 6 (T)** Commedia Performance
- 8 (Th)** Last Day of Class, wrap-up and evaluations, review for final.
- 15 (Th)** **Final due in your TA's mailbox by noon.**

Appendix C

Lesson Outlines

First Roman Lecture: 9/13/05

Historical overview

- By tradition, Rome founded in 753 B.C.E.
 - Dominated by the Etruscans to the north
 - Greek settlements to the south
- Republic is founded in 509 B.C.E. after expelling the Etruscans
 - Begins expanding, conquering the Italian Peninsula in 265 B.C.E.
 - Punic Wars with Carthage
 - By 240 B.C.E., Rome had gained a number of Greek territories
 - Conquered Greece by 146 BCE
 - Greek culture is a great influence on Rome
 - Roman adaptation
 - Taking elements of a conquered people's culture and incorporating it into their own.
- The Republic ends in 27 BCE, Roman Empire period.
 - Expansion over much of Europe and Middle East.
 - Control of the Mediterranean
- Introduction and spread of Christianity
 - Initial problems with meshing
 - Constantine makes the practice of it lawful.
 - Becomes the official state religion of Rome in 393 CE
- Empire is split in 285 by Diocletian – Eastern and western parts
 - Reunited briefly under the reign of Constantine, capital is moved to Constantinople.

The split becomes permanent in 395.

The Western Empire is usually said to have ended in 476 CE, with the last of the native born Roman Emperors.

Eastern – Byzantine – Empire continues.

Considered itself the heir of the Roman Empire. Greek feel to things as well.

Conquered by Crusaders in 1204

Re-established in 1261

Empire finally ends with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453

Early theatrical influences

Etruscans

Etruscan religious ceremonies shared many similarities with later Roman models

Acting, dancing, prizefighting, competitive sports

Belief that the entire festival had to be repeated if something went wrong (*instauratio*)

Ludi Romani repeated 11 of the years between 214-200 BCE

Fescennine verses

Improvised, often obscene dialogue between clowns at harvest and weddings

Held by Horace to be the origin of Latin Drama

Livy states that the first theatrical performance dates from 364 BCE

Performers imported in to help lift a plague in Rome

Ludi Romani

Started by the Etruscan ruler Tarquin the Elder

In honor of Jupiter, every September

Much of the entertainments seen in other Etruscan festivals

First Roman festival to present Greek Drama (240 BCE)

Atellan farce (*fabula atellana*)

Takes its name from the southern town of Atella

Little is known – probably derived from other mime performances in the region.

Short (300-400 lines) largely improvised scenarios

Domestic situations or parodies of mythology

Stock characters, usually ‘rustics’

Relation to the satyr plays; the two terms sometimes are used interchangeably by some

Mimes (*fabula riciniata*)

Connection to the Greeks

Associated primarily with the ludi Florales, a festival in honor of one of the fertility goddesses

Mime came to be a designation of any number of theatrical affairs
 Usually short and ribald
 Mime troupes also brought out incidental performances – juggling,
 acrobatics

Pantomimes (*fabula saltica*)

Popular during the Empire
 Like ballet, a storytelling dance
 One dancer, sometimes with a subordinate.
 Stories from history and mythology
 Musical accompaniment and a chorus that sang explanatory
 text.

Roman theatre

First Roman playwright believed to have been Livius Andronicus (Andronikos)
 May have been a POW, came from the Greek territories in southern Italy
 Translated works from Greek to Latin.

Gnaeus Naevius first Roman born dramatist
 Added Roman allusions to the Greek stories

Both worked in comedy and tragedy, later the forms go their separate paths.

Comedy is divided into two genres

Fabula palliata – based on Greek subjects

Fabula togata – based on Roman subjects

No togata plays survive.

Two comic writers have survived.

Plautus – Terence Macius Plautus

130 plays are attributed to him

21 are said to be his definitely that have survived

*The Comedy of Asses, Pseudolus, The
 Menaechmi*

Admired for his dialogue, often sung, witty jokes

Best known for his farce

Terence – Publius Terentius Afer

Born in Carthage, brought in as a slave, educated and freed
 later in life.

Wrote six plays, all of which have survived

*Andia, Mother in Law, Self-Tormentor, Eunuch,
 Phormio, The Brothers*

Like Plautus, his plays worked off of Greek bases.

Usually taking two Greek plays and combining them
 into one new work.

Unlike Plautus, plays were more character studies, double
 plots showing contrasts in human nature.

Move towards the romantic comedies.

The chorus is eliminated from Greek New Comedy

Additional musical accompaniment

2/3 of Plautus, 1/2 of Terence's lines are accompanied, possibly even sung.

Action takes place in a street in town

Eavesdropping, plot twists on what is overheard.

Terence and Plautus continue to be influential up through the Renaissance
Hrosvitha, Renaissance comedies.

Tragedy

Some names are known from the early period

Quintus Ennius, Marcus Pacuvius, Lucius Accius

No plays survive from the earlier period

Fabula crepidata – adapted from Greek

Fabula praetexta – Roman subjects

Structurally the plays may not have differed from the Greeks

Bolder effects

Later in history, many plays stopped being performed in entirety

Plays may have been written that may not have been intended for performance

Scenes in banquets

Only Roman tragedies to have survived are from the Empire, most of these from Seneca

Seneca – Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Renowned as an orator

Exiled for political reasons

Tutored Nero, later became Nero's chief advisor

Ordered to commit suicide in 65

Link to Rommel

Nine of his plays survive

The Trojan Women, Medea, Oedipus, Phaedra, Thyestes, Hercules on Oeta, The Mad Hercules, The Phoenician Women, Agamemnon.

All adapted from Greek

It's unknown if his plays were intended to be performed.

Influence on Renaissance tragedians

Five act structure

Interest in morality, characters driven by a single, overarching goal

Scenes of violence, magic and death onstage

Soliloquies, asides, confidantes

Layout of the theatre

First permanent theatre built by Pompey in 55 BCE

Senate objected to a permanent theatre, so Pompey built a temple to Venus at the top of the house, plays performed in sight of the goddess, became a temple rather than a theatre.

Stories by Pliny the Elder

Three story theatre, marble, glass, and gilded wood.

Two theatres that rotated to join into an amphitheatre.

Basic shape of the auditorium

Cavea – seating area

Scaena – Stage house

These two sections were joined in a single architectural unit.

Vomitoria – roofed passages leading off (parados)

Orchestra – a half circle, used as a seating area, sometimes held performances as well.

Pulpitum – stage

Primary acting area

Raised five feet

20-40 feet deep and about 100-300 feet long

3-5 doors in the back, another to the wings (versurae)

angipartum – passageway behind the façade

Vela – an awning over the audience to protect from the sun.

Decorated (Nero). Cooling water

scaenae frons – the façade of the theatre.

Decorated with columns, statues

Covered by a roof

Dressing and work spaces in the wings

The scaenae frons acted as the primary scenic element

For comedy it represented a row of houses along a street

In tragedy it was a palace or temple

May not have been a lot of attempts to change the looks

Audience relied on the authors words

Prologue from Menaechmi

The doors were probably standardized

In comedy they were different houses

In tragedy the primary character would use the central door

Doors to the wings – one to the forum/city the other to the harbor/country

Periaktoi- three-sided scenic elements

Each side had its own scenes

Tragic – columns and palatial imagery

Comic – urban imagery

Satyrical – rural imagery

Probably couldn't have covered the entire stage, used to suggest.

Possibly also sliding scenery (scaenae ductilis)

Two main curtains

Auleum – curtain in the front

Originally it would have been raised from the floor by two telescoping poles

Later it was lowered from the roof

Used to rapidly reveal or cover scenes

Siparium – probably came from mime performances

Along the back

Could serve as a backdrop in addition to the periaktoi

Masked backstage exits and entrances

Spectacle

Mass spectacles – dedication of Pompey's theatre brought 600 mules crossing it in one play

Scenic machinery – Coliseum and amphitheatres

Vitruvius – De Architectura

Main resource for the construction of Roman playhouses

Becomes influential again during the Italian Renaissance.

Second Roman Lecture: 9/15/05

Acting in Rome

Status of the actors in Roman society up to debate.

May have been slaves, of the lower classes.

Roscius and Aesopus

Both wound up having estates worth the equivalent of \$1 million

Roscius eventually was elevated to the nobility

Emperors may have forced nobles to have acted as a punishment

Under the Christian Church, actors had little to no rights. Excommunicated and denied the sacraments.

A long standing association of actors with the lower, dirtier elements of society (actors as prostitutes)

Actors associated in a troupe (*grex*)

Under the management of a *dominus*, usually the leading actor of the troupe

Festivals were state-run; the ruling magistrate would be in charge of setting up the entertainments through the *dominus*. Hired playwrights separately.

While they were paid by the state for the festival, the officials would often have to supplement the budget.

Potential of advancing their careers.

Agents may have been involved during the empire.

The dominus would arrange for the music, props and costumes

The play would have possibly been performed for the magistrate beforehand, to make sure that there was nothing 'objectionable'.

The troupe would be paid for the performance, as well as the possibility of extra prizes from audience members.

Watching

Admission was free, all social classes attended.

Special seats may have been reserved for nobles, but there wasn't terribly much reserved seating.

Capacity for Pompey's theatre was about 17500. Four permanent theatres in Rome itself (one got pulled down) other cities had theatres as well, permanent or temporary.

No intermissions, in between acts would be interlude pieces, short mimes, incidental entertainment.

The audience is free to come and go during the show, food sold right outside the theatre, other entertainments to go see.

First two performances of *Mother in Law* failed because the audience went to go see something else.

Sought the audience's good favor, might mean extra money for the performance.

Acting

Actors were male

Women weren't onstage except in Mime troupes, and then only as dancers, singers.

Like Greeks and Etruscans, the actors wore full head masks

Slow, stately movement and declamation for Tragedy

Comedic delivery more conversational, faster and more active.

Actors were held up by oratory teachers as models to follow for public speakers.

Gesture and voice brought down to its essentials and then magnified.

Actors had to be proficient in voice, singing, and movement

Mimes did not wear masks

May have been hired for their beauty or comic ugliness.

Small troupes that got bigger as mimes specialized in more entertainments.

Pantomime performers were based on bodily control and movement.

Final Roman Lecture: 9/20/05

Theatre starts to go into a decline soon in the Roman time.

Other entertainments that are competing for the public's attention

Theatre was not a civic and religious duty like it was in Greece, while the festivals were religious events (at least initially), there was more going on at them than just theatre as we know it.

Other entertainments that are happening in Rome

Chariot races

Possibly brought over by the Etruscans

Consisted - predictably enough - of horse drawn chariots racing around a track.

The Circus Maximus

Built in the 6th century B.C.E.

Enlarged during the Empire, renovated frequently after fires.

Could hold about 250,000

Before the building of the Amphitheaters, was also used for animal exhibitions and gladiatorial combats.

Four main teams in Rome

Blue, Red, White, and Green - for the colors of their uniforms and reins.

Hugely popular - sports teams today.

Teams were subsumed into two - blue and green.

Stables, training, equipment.

Race was about 5 1/4 miles, seven times around the track - one heat.

Originally 10-12 heats, increased under the Empire to a full day.

Teams were originally of 2-4 horses, would be increased to 10 later.

Charioteers were usually slaves, lower class.

Could get very rich with prize money

Other performances would be happening in the center of the stadium

Animal exhibitions

An empire the size of Rome

Brought animals from the farther corners of the Empire to display

Also to hunt, or watch hunts.

As time passes, the demand grows for more exotic animals.

Bears, Alligators, Lions, etc.

Venationes

Animal-human fights.

Gladiatorial Combats

Origin

Began as funeral games by the Etruscans.

In 246 B.C.E., the sons of Iunius Brutus Pera held the first gladiator combat in the cattle market in honor of their father's burial.

6 slaves fought to accompany their master to the afterlife.
By 150 B.C.E. they become an officially sanctioned part of state events.

In the first century AD that they really take off.

The numbers of fighters increase from the original 6 to 250, one report of 5000 fighting at a festival to honor a military victory.

As the games grew larger, the funerary elements of them decreased and they became more entertainment based.

Originally in the Fora, later, in Rome they were held in the Circus Maximus and then the Flavian Amphitheater (Coliseum)

Originally tree stories, increased to four.

Seated 50,000 people

The area underneath the amphitheater

Elevators that allowed the animals and combatants to be raised to the floor of the arena.

Elaborate scenic elements

The machinery used to move about these scenic elements.

Martial speaks of 'sliding cliffs and a moving woodland'

Theatrical elements would be added to the displays on the arena.

Orpheus played out, singing in a way the rocks moved towards him and animals came up to him. Eaten by a bear.

Scenery would be incorporated into the fights.

The summum choregium was created to serve the spectacles and a building built outside of the Coliseum to house the effects and scenery needed

so that it could be transported underground to the arena.

Who fought

Slaves mostly, lower classes.

Prisoners - by definition slaves.

Would serve as a form of execution

Occasionally the nobles would fight, as a sport.

Emperor Commodus would occasionally dress up as Hercules and fight animals.

Killed by a wrestler named Narcissus in the bath.

As time went on the public demanded novelty and the fighters came from further abroad - Britain, Africa, Asia.

Fighters were classified by the arms and armor that they wore.

Most famous were the Secutor and Retiarius (Sword and Net)

Sometimes they were mounted on chariots

Naumachia

Naval battles that would be held.

First of these held in 46 B.C.E. for Julius Caesar

Lake was dug for the occasion.

Sometimes the amphitheaters were flooded for the events

Renaissance drawing shows a possible reconstruction with nine ships in it.

Why

The life of the plebes

Low wages and very poor living conditions

The city's tendency to burn

Crowded

The military was often out expanding the empire or holding what was gained.

Taxes from the people to pay the troops.

The government works to ease the life of the plebes, to make them happier and take their minds off things.

"Bread and Circuses"

Free Grain

Increase in the number of festivals and holidays.

By the fourth century CE, there were 100 days for theatrical entertainments and another 75 to sports.

Second Medieval Lecture: 9/29/05

Secular Forms of Theatre

Off to the side, they start gaining prominence when the theatre moves out doors.

Oldest script we have dates from 1276/77

The Play of the Greenwood by Adam de la Halle; it is a tale about the people of Arras, where he's from, told satirically along with elements of folklore.

The Play of Robin and Marion (c. 1283) – the wooing of a shepherdess by a knight, and the objections of her lover, resolved conflict followed by dances and games.

Farce

Shows up the flaws of humanity within the society

The clever man is the hero, even if he is a sinner

His dupes deserved it, through their stupidity

One of the oldest *The Boy and the Blind Man* (1280)

A clever rogue deceives a blind man through ventriloquism, robs and beats him.

The pressure valve of society

Majority of farces are associated with France and Germany

Typically are short

In verse

Emphasize bodily functions and excretions

France

Sotties – political social and religious satires in which all of the characters are fools

Sermons joyeux – a burlesque of a sermon

Germany

Farce grows out of popular festivals, especially those preceding Lent
Shrovetide plays

Schembartlaufen – apprentice's revels around pre-Lent

Nuremberg, where most of the surviving German farces are from.

Hans Sachs

Shoemaker, master singer, traveled as a singer

Wrote 198 dramatic works, 64 he classified as Shrovetide

The Wandering Scholar and Exorcist – A student convinces a man to call up the devil, who is impersonated by an adulterous priest. Both parties pay the student.

Morality plays

Closes to the religious drama of the time in tone

Popularizing of sermons regarding the seven cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, justice, fortitude, faith, hope, and charity.), as well as the seven deadly sins (pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, sloth.).

Greater popularity of allegory in literature.

Increased concern over death and the afterlife.

Originally, these plays were lessons on how to live a virtuous life.

Everyman – in which Everyman is summoned by Death and has to find those that will accompany him, Kindred, Goods, and Fellowship desert him, only Good Deeds comes with.

The Castle of Perseverance – Which details Mankind's birth and death and the final judgment of his soul.

A long play (3600 lines) with 36 characters

As time goes on, the morality play is used to treat wholly secular subjects

Magnificence by John Skelton deals with the appropriate lifestyle of a ruler.

Condemnation of the Banquet by Nicolas de la Chesnaye which deals with mental and physical health as well as the dangers of overeating.

As the Protestant Reformation picks up steam, plays are written supporting each side and demonizing the other.

Pammachius – The struggle against the Antichrist ending with the glorification of Martin Luther.

The publication of Hrosvitha's plays in 1501

Influence of these plays on a movement of doctrinal plays

The introduction of classical subjects from reintroduced Greek and Roman texts.

Resulting in plays interested in philosophical subjects

Chambers of Rhetoric

From the Low Countries

Societies concerned with poetry, drama, and music.

Competitions between these societies

A question would be posed ('What is the greatest comfort to a dying man?') and the societies would form a play based on this question.

The plays would be on a stage similar to the Elizabethan stage.

In 1516 Spain occupies the Low Countries as the P.R. is picking up there.

Forbids the publication in 1539

Subjects become less controversial; eventually societies are replaced by professional companies.

Staging

Originally in the church itself

Two main parts of the set

Mansions

Structures used as scenery

Used to set the locale of the scene being played, as well as to house the props that might be needed.

The Lion's Den for Daniel, Furnace for
Nebuchadnezzar, the Last Supper.

Some of them had curtains for reveals.

Choir loft used to represent higher places (Heaven)

Flying machinery for the Star, Angels, dove for the
Annunciation.

Crypt for the lower parts (Hell)

Platea

Generalized acting area

The mansion would be used to set the scene, and things
would be played in the platea

Mansions arrayed about the platea

Costumes were usually church vestments with accessories attached

Props would be used to signify characters

Outside of the church

By the fourteenth century, production responsibilities had been moved out
of the hands of the church, although the scripts were still Ok'd there.

Confraternities on the continent

Guilds in England as well

In other places the whole town would be involved, a collection of
numerous towns

Sometimes admission was charged

Valenciennes in 1547

Staging outside of the church

Fixed or mobile

Fixed mostly on the continent

Mobile in parts of England, Spain, Italy, Belgium,

Netherlands

The pageant wagon is mostly seen as an English
staging

Traditionally thought that each play was
performed in a succession of locales.

Has been argued that rather it was more like a
parade initially, and then they would perform
the entire play with the wagons serving as
mansions.

The appearance of the pageant wagon

Originally believed to be two story structures,
dressing on the bottom, then the playing space
on the top

Problems with this theory

Two story structures that had
to fit through English streets
Add in the mansions
and there is a narrow
ledge nine feet from the
street

Other thought is that the wagon is a one story
structure made up of the tiring house and
mansions. Another cart would come up to act
on.

Possible to have the acting on one
wagon as well.

The carros of Spain

Fixed stages on the continent

In some places the old Roman amphitheatres were
used

Cornish Rounds

Earthen embankments that were similar in
appearance to old Viking forts

Sometimes in cemeteries

Typically a long rectangular platform set alongside a
building into the square

Playing space

Mansions and the platea

Pageant wagons carried a single mansion sometimes three
Many plays would be divided up into parts separated by
intermissions of 1-24 hours.

Mansions would be changed or altered

Usually the director would come onstage before each journey
and state what each mansion represented.

Heaven on one end, Hell on the other

Everything else in between

Heaven and Hell were likely the most complex and
permanent

Heaven

15-16 centuries

Raised above the rest of the stage,
supported by a 'paradise'

Large, lots of characters there

Concealed torches reflecting off of
gold to give the impression of inner
light

Flying machinery if affordable,
otherwise concealable stairs

Hell

Sometimes depicted as a fortified town
Four parts: Limbo for prophets, Limbo
of infants, Purgatory, and the Pit.
Entrance depicted as the head of a monster
Hellmouth
Fire, smoke, explosions, cries of the damned,
devils sallying forth to grab sinners into Hell.

Use of music

Singing from the angels and choirs

Music and fanfare

Special effects (secrets)

Flying

Pulleys and windlasses set against the buildings to
hoist people, concealed by painted clouds and sky
Angels, saints, fire breathing monsters

Trapdoors

Allowing for disappearances, substituting effigies for
live actors as needed.

Mechanisms underneath the stage

Loaves and fish, cursed fig tree

Use of water

Raining for Noah

Torture and executions

Effigies would be used

Filled with bones and entrails for a burning of
Barnabas

Criminals as well

Animals would be used

Sometimes live

Sometimes actors would impersonate

Transformation, light

The director

A pageant master/stage manager

Would sometimes be responsible for the actual production of
the play

Under contract for a number of years

Secured actors, arranged rehearsals, supplied the
manpower, handled the actual physical production of
the plays

Would probably handle cueing as well

May have been on stage at the time
 Could wind up being in high demand
 Jean Boucher was in demand as late as 1532 because
 of his work in 1508

The audience

Plays would be staged every one to ten years, some never got repeated
 (Valenciennes?)
 Publicity would be given out to the populace of the town, also to nearby towns.
 Actors would sometimes process in costume around town a few days before
 the show
 Work would sometimes be forbidden during the play hours
 Probably admitted free at most places
 Some places in England charged, as well as on the continent
 Places would be set up to view from along the streets
 Sometimes seating, when it was available (Roman Amphitheatres, Cornish
 Rounds)
 Often that had to be improvised
 Standing in the front, seating behind
 Starting and running times
 7AM to 11, hour lunch, again to 6PM
 Afternoon performances
 Uninterrupted 12 hour performances
 Sometimes Children, the elderly and pregnant women were forbidden entry
 A barrier to keep the audience back
Second Medieval Lecture: 10/4/05

Acting

The pageant master
 Size of the productions
 300 actors, complex special effects, large amounts of money, over
 several days
 The guilds in England would be in charge of the finances of the play
 A committee in charge of the plays held by confraternities
 In both cases they would hire someone to oversee the play
 The pageant master
 Secured actors, arranged rehearsals, took charge of the production,
 arranged for men to move the pageant wagons and act as crowd
 control.
 Jean Bouchet
 Staged a pageant at Poitiers in 1508, was still in demand in
 1532
 Laid out the responsibilities of a director

- Oversee erection of the stage and placement of the scenery and machines
- Find people to paint and build the scenery, construct audience seating
- Ensure all goods are delivered in the proper amount and quality
- Discipline the actors, set the rules and set up a system of fines
- May act in some roles himself
- Assign people to take money at the gate
- Address the audience at the beginning and after intermissions

- Some have argued that the director was onstage during the play
- Probably cueing

Actors

- Large number of characters
 - Individual mystery plays contain 5-10 characters
 - 24-48 plays in the whole cycle
 - While each guild only handled one play, many plays
 - Cycle in Bourges in 1536 had 494 roles divided amongst 300 actors
- Actors were drawn from volunteers in the local population
 - No actor was to appear in more than two plays
 - Not restricted by guild
 - The mayor cast the plays in Suerre 1496
 - Heralds asked for volunteers in Paris, 1540
 - Lucerne, 1583, requests were made from the pulpit
- Mostly from lower, working classes
 - Men and boys mostly, occasionally girls and women as well
- Doubling was common in the roles
- Would be allowed time to decide to act
 - Were bound by oath to complete their duties
- Rehearsals were sparse
 - Mons had 48 rehearsals for a 4 day cycle in 1501
 - Individual English plays were usually rehearsed four or five times
- Process (1583 Lucerne)
 - General meeting held with the cast
 - Script was divided into twelve units for rehearsal process
 - Actors were encouraged to get together privately as well as the usual rehearsals
 - Extra rehearsals for problematic scenes
 - Changes in the script
 - Preparation of props

The sponsoring agency would provide food for the rehearsals
 Someone would be hired to take over any work that the actor had to miss
 Voice seemed to have been valued most of all
 Speech based on everyday patters, formalized in rhyming verse
 Again there is no emphasis on anything resembling character as we know it
 Clear cut emotions
 Dangers of acting
 Actor playing Judas in Metz (1437) nearly died being hung
 Actors playing devils would catch on fire
 Devils and gunpowder
 Satan's costume in Seurre (1496) catches fire
 By the 1500's, actors are being employed as coaches
 As time goes on, rise of the professional actor

Final Medieval Lecture: 10/6/05

Popular entertainments

Feast of Fools

Several of the Church days – especially during Christmastime – were assigned to minor clergy

The subdeacon's revelries – Feast of Fools

Inversion of status that allowed the lesser clergy to ridicule their superiors with no real fear of reparations

Rang bells out of tune, used strange objects as censers, odd costumes, sang out of tune

Presided by a 'bishop fool', revelry associated with the festival.

Feast of the Boy Bishop

For choir boys

More sedate than the Fool's Feast, similar inversion of status

Carnivals

Mardi Gras / Fasching / Carnival right before Lent

Battle between Lent and Carnival

Large, fat man playing Carnival and his army fighting a skinny man / or woman as Lent

Two texts of these battles survive

Italian one involves Carnival and his cook being burned in a parody of the martyrs of a mystery play

French one ends with a peace treaty rather than an execution as Carnival and his army eat a dish of turnips offered by Lent

Set up similar to the setup of plays (Mansion, platea) but with Bacchus in the place of God

Robin Hood Plays

Weather in England made outdoor Shrovetide plays less practical

Rather than Carnival was the Robin Hood figure

Reign began on May Day

Plays would be used for fund raisers as well

Kingston upon Thames

Four young bachelors were cast as Robin, Little John, Tuck, and Maid Marian

Eight days of the Whitsun fair

Badges sold for a penny, allowing those that purchased to be symbolic members of the gang

Archery display

Tournaments

Set up as a means of training knights

Rules were later set up to reduce the amount of deaths

Dramatic elements began to be put in

Knights fought to capture allegorical 'castles', like the Castle of Love

Various points around the field would have mansions representing scenic elements

Mummings and Disguisings

Beginnings in pagan ceremonies such as the sword and Morris dance

Later moved to be courtly entertainments

Dances and entertainments done in disguise

Masked and costumed revelers on the streets during Christmas time and before Lent

Some would go from house to house with plays and songs

Suppressed in England because of their ties to criminal activities

Leading to the courtly entertainments of Masques and Intermezzi

Might be arranged in court for any special occasion

Scenic elements that would be wheeled into the hall

Usually intended as allegorical compliments of the honored person

Cat killings

Dance fever

VITA

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