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### Theater as Liberal Arts Pedagogy

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They include endeavors to bring the curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular lives of students into harmony with one another. They include the design of courses that are team-taught and that engage students in collaborative ventures that habituate them into patterns of discernment and action that are virtuous.

The most important component of our Freshman Program in the honors college where I teach is, for example, the requirement that all of our entering students work together to write, produce, and perform their own musical production (see the accompanying description). More than any other feature of our first-year course of study, this “Freshman Production” instills within our students mutual trust, friendship, and humility, virtues that are indispensable to their learning together. One might achieve the same measure of success through service-learning requirements, through creatively designed collaborative research projects, and through a very large and varied number of programs that are based in residence halls and that require joint endeavor. I have often thought that an imaginatively managed intramural athletic program that included reflection as well as team play could accomplish many of the same objectives that we here at Valparaiso University realize through the performing arts. In any event, the key to advancing the model of pedagogy set forth above is the recognition of the many points of opportunity to do so within any community of higher learning.

We are still left with the formidable problem of overcoming some of the “bad habits” that young scholars acquire in graduate school. Our research universities do a wonderful job of instilling virtues like clarity (but not charity), honesty (but not humility), and self-discipline (but not friendship) within young men and women. We must find ways of strengthening the good habits even as we add to these another set of virtues and even as we mobilize the virtues of secular learning for the sake of larger goals. This is not so much a “culture war” as it is an inventive effort at retrieval and renewal. We must retrieve and remobilize the best of the Christian intellectual tradition of learning for the sake of renewing within young scholars the animating purposes and ideals that led most of them to seek graduate education in the first place.

Several projects are now well under way to accomplish these latter objectives. One of them, the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, focuses upon church-related institutions of higher learning and includes within its national network several Jesuit schools—Boston



## *Theater as Liberal Arts Pedagogy*

### *The Freshman Production at Valparaiso*

MARK R. SCHWEHN AND JOHN STEVEN PAUL

About twenty years ago, Christ College, the undergraduate honors college of Valparaiso University, decided to include an unusual requirement as part of its first year course of study. Over the course of ten weeks, the sixty-five entering students had to produce and perform their own musical theater production. Its theme would ideally be informed by the common readings that then provided the main intellectual substance of the course. All of its music had to be original. All of the students had to appear at least once on stage. This creative and collaborative activity was designed initially to complement the analytical and expository part of the course. But it soon exceeded those comparatively modest expectations. By now, the so-called “Freshman Production” has become what most students and faculty regard as the most important educational experience of the first semester.

### *An Imaginative Education for An Educated Imagination*

When the idea for the Production was first conceived, we had hoped to build and strengthen a sense of community through this endeavor, and we have thus far succeeded. Every year, sixty-five adolescent strangers learn to discover one another's gifts, to celebrate the diversity of those gifts, to rely upon one another, and to see that the excellence of the performance depends upon such diversity. This experience is educationally superior to many lectures and several books on the subject of the potentially constructive aspects of a diverse community. And the production reinforces in subtle but forceful ways the view behind the fact that we grade the first semester's work on a pass/fail basis—namely, that though conflict is correlative to healthy communities of learning, competition is inimical to them.

This kind of education through theater does indeed involve conflict, along with a great deal of very hard work, and no small

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amount of disappointment. The student writing committee invariably develops two or three splendid ideas. But it must adopt only one of them. Many students must therefore not only give up their preferred choice; they must work industriously for several weeks to advance what was once someone else's rival idea. This same process of intense argument governs the writing of the script itself, the composition of the music, the set design, the choreography—all the things that make the show. But at some point, after hours of negotiation and a good deal of anger and frustration, all (well, almost all) students become deeply invested in the overall quality of the production. They move, however painstakingly, from conflict to common purpose, back to conflict and eventually to the final performance of the production itself.

The creators of the Freshman Production had at least hoped for this much. But they had not anticipated the way in which the experience of making a play together would make students better readers and writers. Surely liberal learning involves the effort seriously to entertain ideas and images that seem initially strange, sometimes altogether obscure, and often threatening. And this process in turn involves approaching texts and other materials with an attitude that is at once humble and suspicious. We now notice that our students, once they themselves must invent characters who are "consistent," connect endings to beginnings, and carry forward thematic emphases through an entire two-hour performance, become much more intrigued by questions that invite them to discover the structure and overall intention governing a text written by Plato or Jane Austen. In brief, their own experience of making something makes them at once more respectful and more critical of the works of literature, philosophy, history, and theology that they are reading concurrently with their work on the production.

Nor had we anticipated the extent to which the Production, in the aftermath of each annual performance, would shape the atmosphere and the conversation among the entire honors college community as well as among a large part of the University community beyond it. These musical dramas have very different themes and tones from year to year. Recent themes have included love and friendship, the deterioration of the family, the prospect of eco-catastrophe, the culture wars, the increasing threat of random violence, the problem of exclusion and community, urban decay, terrorism, and the dilemma of religious pluralism. Thus, for most of the month of November, the mood of the College is totally transformed by the energy and imagination of the entering students. Our rather pedestrian Refectory, a modest all-purpose room, becomes a brave new world complete with elaborate backdrops, sound systems, lights, multi-tiered stages, murals, and an improvised orchestra pit. Students linger for hours about the Commons, the Reading Room, and other available spaces in Mueller Hall, the Christ College Building, with copies of Machiavelli's *The Prince* (a typical week's reading) in one hand and copies of the script for the production in the other. Some are obviously in costume, and others may or may not be.

The honors college has about 175 sophomores, juniors, and seniors, almost all of whom were once in their own Fresh-



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man Production, and almost all of whom attend one of the four performances staged by the first-year class each year. They have staged over the years shows with such titles as "Peanuts, Popcorn, and the Peloponnesian War," "Pursuit of Happiness," "Six Feet Under, or A Grave Matter," "One Hero to Go," "Something to Believe," "The Price is Life," and "Auditions for God." After the premier performance of any Production, comparisons and contrasts are instantly in the air, some of them invidious, others trivial, many of them sophomoric (literally and figuratively), all of them suggesting fundamental questions about the intricate connections between a community and its art (from ancient Athens to the present), between the several creators and the final work, between the larger culture and a given, very localized, highly perishable, but intensely felt element of it. The civil but intense pursuit of these questions is surely a vital part of the experience of a liberal education.

The communal response to the Freshman Production has been so various, continuous, and intense that we have had to institutionalize it to some extent. Three years ago, we reserved the hour for our weekly college symposium the Thursday evening after the Production for a critical response from a panel of sophomores followed by a rejoinder by a panel of freshmen. These panel presentations, which soon open up to the entire assembled collegiate community, are always filled with conflict, enthusiasm, and (occasionally) great insight into the kinds of things that matter most to today's students. So, for better or for worse, and in sometimes raucous exchanges, the community grows to know itself better, to see what the deepest concerns and impulses that move its members look like and feel like and sound like. Learning to keep your head and your temper in the midst of this kind of public self-examination, to be at once charitable and critical, civil and contentious, is an essential part of a liberal education.

Theater finally initiates young people into intellectual life, especially to those two frequently opposed dimensions of the life of the mind that the late Richard Hofstadter called piety and playfulness. Part of liberal learning, a larger part of it than we have customarily recognized, involves the training of the affections and the education of the imagination. Students tend to lose themselves in the collective venture of making theater, thereby sometimes achieving a balance between the spirit of playfulness and the demand for serious coherence and integrity. These are hard matters to express with precision. As Aristotle would have said, harmony here involves a mean relative to the individual, a mean that can only be found through experience and settled through practice in the midst of a supportive community. To feel the right way in the right circumstance for the right reason in the right manner: these are delicate but crucially important moments in the process of becoming fully human and humane.

### *Arts of Inquiry and Arts as Inquiry*

Though we should not claim too little for theater as liberal arts pedagogy, we should not claim too much for it either. The Production has been a formative practice in the life of this particular community in large part because of other features of both the College and the University that were already in place

when the program was conceived. First, at Valparaiso University, the teaching of the performing arts has always been understood, especially by the Director of the University Theater, primarily as a vehicle for liberal learning, secondarily as an occasion for professional preparation and recruitment. From the very beginning, the Theater Director has supervised the Freshman Production.

Second, all of our first-year honor students take one course each term that occupies eight semester credit hours in their program of study. That course, "Text and Contexts: Traditions of Human Thought," consists of five hours each week in small seminars discussing a wide variety of texts, two hours at the end of each week in a large plenary session listening critically to a lecture on the week's text and responding to it, and an additional hour per week (actual time spent on this project expands considerably as the performance approaches) for the drama workshop. This huge course, which by itself fulfills general education requirements in English, history, philosophy, and theology, gives us ample curricular space in which to work out the production. Third, the enrollment is small and the working spaces are intimate. Fourth, the Lutheran character of Valparaiso University means that we attract significant numbers of students and faculty who at some level understand liturgy and worship and who therefore are disposed to regard a combination of play and piety as at least vaguely familiar and even congenial.

This distinctive configuration of practices at Valparaiso's honors college, however, should not deter others from adapting the Production, in whole or in part, within very different contexts. Some version of it might work very well during an intensive orientation period, during the short term in a 4-1-4 academic calendar, or as a residence hall project. Any such theater project should arise naturally from and be carefully shaped to the special strengths and purposes of the group that undertakes it. And, of course, it should be seen as a way of enlarging the pedagogical repertoire of liberal education, as something far short of a panacea but considerably more than just another "teaching device."

To tell the whole truth, the importance of theater as pedagogy in the life of Christ College is something that we discovered only with twenty-twenty hindsight. We by now have had twenty-five years of history to contemplate retrospectively. In sum, we have a tradition, whereas initially we had only a grab bag of ideas some of which quickly perished and others of which endured. Students have taught the faculty again and again that the pleasures of friendship and the pursuit of wisdom are bound up deeply with one another. And the production has taught us that disciplined activities that engage the imagination as well as the intellect, the body as well as the soul, and the affections as well as the reason, are critical to liberal education by any name anywhere.

*This is a condensed and slightly revised version of an article first published in Liberal Education 81.2 (Spring 1995). Used with permission.*

## Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts

The Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, established in 1991, addresses two critical problems faced by church-related institutions of higher learning in the United States. First, though many church-related colleges and universities are seeking to recover or refortify a sense of purpose and identity, there has been no sustained national conversation expressly designed to renew and deepen a sense of corporate vocation among these schools. Second, settings for the formation of younger scholars who wish to pursue their vocational commitments at church-related colleges and universities scarcely exist in the United States.

The Lilly Fellows Program consists of two distinct but integrated programmatic initiatives. First, it has established and will steadily expand a national network of church-related institutions of higher learning and sustain among them a discussion of Christian understandings of the nature of the academic vocation. The network represents a diversity of denominational traditions, institutional types, and geographical locations. Representatives from the network institutions meet annually for a national conference. Additionally, several workshops and mini-conferences are scheduled annually on the campuses of the network institutions. A biannual newsletter reports network activities, provides listings of young scholars interested in teaching at church-related institutions, and includes reports from conferences and workshops.

Second, the Lilly Fellows Program offers young scholars in the humanities and the arts a chance to renew and deepen their sense of vocation, and to enrich their postdoctoral intellectual and spiritual life within a Christian community of learning. Each academic year Postdoctoral Fellows are appointed for two-year periods, selected from candidates interested in considering the relationship between Christianity and the academic vocation. The Fellows are prepared, through a variety of teaching experiences, through participation in a weekly colloquium, and through regular association with mentors, to seek permanent employment within church-related institutions of higher learning.

The Program also sponsors one Senior Fellow, selected from nominees from the network schools, to spend the year on the Valparaiso University campus, working closely with the Lilly Fellows Program. The Senior Fellow engages in research and writing, is a resource person for the Postdoctoral Fellows, participates in a year-long colloquium, and contributes to the annual conference the following fall.

For more information about the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, contact: Arlin G. Meyer, Program Director, Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383. Telephone: (219) 464-5317/5770 or FAX: (219) 464-5159.

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