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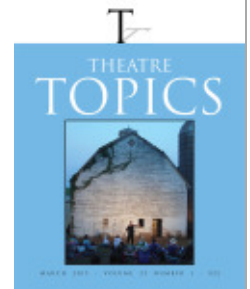
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Teaching Theatre in Precarious Times: Strategies for Survival in the Liberal Arts Curriculum

Sharon L. Green

Over the last several years, I have spearheaded the design of multidisciplinary symposia to coincide with and complement a specific play in the production season of the Theatre Department at Davidson College. This essay offers a critical examination of my work curating these symposia and the strategies I have devised to engage communities, both on campus and beyond, in intellectual and artistic explorations that depend on a theatrical production as inspiration and touchstone. My analysis considers the strategic goals of such work in the context of these economically “precarious times,” which have seen the dissolution of theatre departments and programs across the country, and a more general attack on the relevance of a liberal arts education.¹ I explore the pedagogic and collaborative strategies deployed and how they intersected with institutional priorities to strengthen the artistic work taking place in our rehearsal rooms and theatres. My essay is directed at others who are interested in similar work, and thus I intend to point out strategies that yielded the most successful and rich collaborations, as well as my own missteps and challenges, along the way.

Precipitated in part by a rearticulated, college-wide strategic plan, a changing student body, and a supportive institutional infrastructure, our department began, during the 2008–09 academic year, large-scale collaborations with colleagues from multiple departments and programs, resulting in a series of events around a targeted production. Each of those shows—Melinda Lopez’s *Sonia Flew*, Suzan-Lori Parks’s *In the Blood*, Velina Hasu Houston’s *Kokoro*, and Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire*—has resonated with a particular campus initiative, and all dovetail with two components of the college’s articulated strategic plan: increased emphasis on diversity and inclusion and interdisciplinary collaboration.² Most plays also intersected with a third long-standing priority to offer curricular exposure to international subjects, and thus the symposia were developed in concert with our college’s international studies program.³ We sought to more deeply engage potential spectators in the issues and aesthetics of our performances through event programming that would explore thematic elements of the play from different disciplinary perspectives. We also invited colleagues from across the college to be stakeholders with us in the success of our productions by generating joint programming on topics of interest to them. These symposia also coincided with a reinvigorated departmental effort and commitment to embrace the college’s commitment to diversity and serve the changing composition of the student body by critically examining our production choices. We made a commitment to revamp our play-selection process to pay greater attention to the range of cultural experiences and identities reflected in our season and to the playwrights included.

The broad, publicly articulated intent of the multidisciplinary symposia is to engage students and the community (here meant college community, as well as the larger community of our town, whose residents are regularly participants in our public events) in a thoughtful, interdisciplinary consideration of themes explored in these plays. Such in-depth exploration of the world of the play would enrich the audience’s understanding and appreciation of the performance and better inform the creative team’s artistic choices. The broad, but unarticulated (or at least un-publicized) intent of these symposia has been to demonstrate theatre’s continued vital contributions, as both an academic discipline and artistic pursuit, to the liberal arts curriculum, raise our departmental profile on campus,

and sell tickets to our shows. By connecting or linking our work with that of other departments and to the explicit goals of the college's working strategic plan, we intended to demonstrate—or, if you prefer, “perform”—our significance to the intellectual life of the college.

Part of my “sell” of these symposia to colleagues and the administration was that they would catalyze “community-wide conversations.” My scholarly and pedagogic work, with a focus on community-based performance and feminist criticism, always strives to integrate performance within such broad, relevant social and political conversations. I believe deeply and sincerely in the ability of performance to serve as a nexus for such constructive, collaborative dialogues. But in organizing these symposia, I was also building on the perception that there is inherent value, especially at an educational institution, in having the entire community come together to explore a series of questions through different disciplinary methods and modalities. Precedent for such community conversations exists in the “common reading” that many colleges employ for incoming students—a book that all are required to read and discuss. Our college has such a program, and each first-year student must be part of a book-discussion group during orientation. In part, I was tapping into something that already had perceived value (a community-wide conversation) to generate interest in something whose value perpetually needs to be proven (attending a theatre production). If we could create events that would permeate various aspects of student life and stretch across the many academic disciplines and co-curricular activities with which our students engage, then we could generate curiosity for our productions, bring new audiences into our theatre, and nurture future student and community audiences. To be honest, the strategic connection articulated here is one that I only recognized in hindsight while engaging in the critical reflection necessary for this essay. Looking back, I recognized that I also assumed an inherent value in the concept of *community conversation* and hoped that it would help accrue additional perceptual value for the work of our department. But a community conversation shares a certain fragility with performance; conversation also is ephemeral, and value accrued by association with it also diminishes once it is over. So, while I spent the bulk of 2012–13 academic year spearheading a very successful and much-talked-about multi-event, multidisciplinary symposium on Cuban culture and history to coincide with the production in spring 2013 of *Sonia Flew*, which I directed, this year “we” (and here I mean the Theatre Department and my departmental colleagues) start from scratch.

My personal and professional desire to curate these symposia—labor that is not compensated in any traditional way within the structure of our profession—resonates with Lauren Berlant's theory of “cruel optimism.” She notes that “the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (2; emphasis in original). I must admit: I have an optimistic attachment to the idea of a community conversation. I hope, perpetually, that these broad conversations, in conjunction with their companion productions, will function in a Brechtian way to catalyze the analysis of political structures. Moreover, I hope that with a theatrical production as its touchstone, such conversations will also change the way that people perceive performance's relevance to culture, politics, social transformation, and the intellectual life of a liberal arts institution.

My attachment may also qualify as one that is cruel, defined by Berlant as follows: “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). Several realities of the symposia and production-planning process factor into my consideration here. First is the ephemerality of performance itself: How can we expect to raise our profile on campus when the “thing” that supports such claims is always disappearing? At the same time, the labor required, both my own and the efforts I ask of others, draws us away from other more traditional scholarly work and is neither recorded nor preserved. We work within institutions at which products of permanence are the commodities for which we are rewarded, and yet we are investing our labor instead into disappearing acts. My indefatigable hope that these community conversations enrich the life of the college and community, as well as the pedagogic experiences that we offer students, keeps

me returning to their organization despite the fact that such labor is not a requirement of my job. Further, I have often had the nagging thought that while I invest labor into the disciplinary survival strategies detailed here, I am also drawing myself away from the artistic process that is the heart of our work—the production itself. My continued interest in curating these symposia must be a form of cruel optimism, and while this essay offers constructive ideas for those interested in similar work, I also warn that it can be time-consuming and addictive.

Background

Our department's reinvigorated effort to diversify our season occurred in the context of broad institutional shifts. First, the composition of the student body has shifted dramatically in the fifteen years I have taught at Davidson. In fall of 1999, my first semester teaching here, 9.6 percent of the incoming class identified themselves as members of racial- and ethnic-minority groups, 54.6 percent came from the southeastern United States, and 3.4 percent were considered international students.⁴ In the fall of 2013, 22.6 percent of the incoming class identified as members of racial- and ethnic-minority groups, 47 percent came from the southeast, and 6.9 percent were considered international students.⁵ Second, curricular changes, which have included the development of numerous new departments and programs, have provided opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations. During the previous several years, the college has added departments, majors, or minors in the following fields: Latin American studies, Africana studies, digital studies, environmental studies, East Asian studies, Middle East studies, and gender and sexuality studies. These commitments to new areas of intellectual inquiry and innovative pedagogy provided rich opportunities to collaborate with colleagues in new and mutually beneficial ways.

Implicit in our departmental efforts is both the intention to ensure that there are casting opportunities for students of all racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, and that the stories told as part of our season reflect the shifting demographics of the student body. But we were also presented with challenges, particularly as we considered plays that would require casting a more diverse—racially and ethnically—group of student actors than those that had auditioned for our shows in previous years. We needed a strategy that would allow us to embrace the institutional values of diversity and inclusivity to which we strive, yet would also take into account the reality that scholar Lisa Brenner points out: “the opportunities for non-Caucasian actors remain scarce” (89). I suggested we embrace a strategy that grows out of this hypothesis: namely, that if we invest in telling the stories of a broad range of cultures and traditions—both US-based minority cultures and those beyond our borders, even if they create casting challenges—students of all backgrounds will feel more welcome and embraced by our program. It may take a while, but gradually, over several years, the perception of our department as a place on campus that values and celebrates difference would take hold, and our audition pool would diversify as well. Further, if we used these productions as opportunities for collaborations that embraced other institutional priorities, such as interdisciplinarity or the development of new areas of intellectual inquiry, we might also be able to build new audiences, create rich learning opportunities for students and community members, and enhance the viewing experience for all.

When Opportunity Knocks: *9 Parts of Desire*

As a director at an undergraduate institution, I was initially drawn to *9 Parts of Desire*, by Heather Raffo, because of the casting opportunities it provides. This play, which features nine characters (eight of whom are Iraqi and one Iraqi American; some live in Iraq, others do not—all originally played by Raffo herself), is comprised of a series of interwoven monologues that thwart Americans' attempts to stereotype Middle Eastern women. Given my scholarly and political interests, I was also drawn to this play because, as described on Raffo's website, “[t]his work delves into the many

conflicting aspects of what it means to be a woman in a country overshadowed by war.⁶ Yet, concern regarding the casting of *9 Parts of Desire* started even before the play was chosen for our season. As part of our department's play-selection process, faculty directors propose three plays, each with an artistic statement providing an overview of the director's vision and intentions. Discussion ensues, a vote is taken, and the director makes a final choice from the top two vote-getters, in consultation with the department chair. I let my colleagues know that if chosen, I would cast the show with nine women. Some colleagues were concerned about casting, given the gravity of the experiences depicted in the play and the fact that few students of Middle Eastern heritage had auditioned for us in recent years (or so it was assumed), meaning that we might end up with a mostly European-heritage cast telling the stories of Iraqi women. But these casting challenges, I argued, should not preclude us as a department and our mostly non-Middle Eastern students from creatively engaging with Raffo's play, particularly during a period when student and institutional interest in Middle Eastern politics and culture had been piqued. The casting concern itself, I argued, relies upon certain stereotype assumptions that I hoped the production would interrogate. Evidence to dispel these casting assumptions appears in the notes of the Dramatists Play Service edition of the play: "This show rejects stereotypes on many levels. Iraq is a great melting pot, and its women vary from fair and blonde to dark-skinned and black-haired" (66–67). Casting the play could also offer rich learning opportunities for students. In her analysis of race-conscious casting with undergraduate students in a production of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, scholar Melinda Wilson notes: "University theatre can play a pivotal role in sharpening student actors' and audiences' perceptions, so we can dismantle misunderstandings of history and social identity" (48). Such "dismantling" was integral to my broader pedagogical goals and my decision to propose *9 Parts* for our community. Further, Wilson asks: "Why not immerse students of multiple racial backgrounds in African American culture by casting them in a Wilson play?" (40). Indeed, I thought, why not immerse students of multiple cultural and racial backgrounds in the history, culture, and stories of Iraqi women?

Despite my convictions, the possibility of directing *9 Parts*, particularly when it was not the top vote-getter, made me, to say the least, nervous.⁷ My nerves were certainly in part a result of my choice to cast Raffo's one-woman play with nine actors, although not exclusively; I also worried that without a multiethnic cast, the production would reenact colonial patterns of cultural appropriation. Further, while it may be typical in university theatre for students to play characters of all ages, colleagues were concerned that the experiences depicted in some of Raffo's monologues required the gravitas of age. I was committed—aesthetically, pedagogically, politically—to having a diverse, multiethnic cast, and planned to be proactive in making this happen.⁸ I also decided to cast a faculty member in one of the nine roles with the hope that having one actor whose age was commensurate with the character that she played would contribute to the overall diversity of the cast. Typically, auditions for department shows are open to the entire campus community; theatre majors and minors, along with a fairly predictable pool of high-interest students, make up a substantial percentage of those who attend auditions, but this group is always accompanied by newcomers—first-year students new to our department and the college or upper-class students whose interest has been piqued by their enrollment in a theatre class. In the months leading up to auditions, while I took specific steps to encourage a diverse audition pool, I remained nervous because I had no idea who would actually show up.⁹

In the back of my mind, as I negotiated these challenges, was a sentiment articulated in Ellen Donkin's essay "Black Text, White Director: Issues of Race and Gender in Directing African-American Drama." Although I had read it many years ago, her description of the choice to direct a play by an African American playwright as a means to "actively intervene in the exclusionary cycle of canonical shows" has stayed with me and specifically motivated my choice to propose and direct *9 Parts of Desire* (79–80). Moreover, Donkin suggests that such work is "a transitional measure" whose ultimate goal is to "invest in a new generation of directors who may someday enter academic theatre" (80). Thus, my production of *9 Parts of Desire* could accomplish three critical pedagogical goals: increase the number of

casting opportunities for female students of all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; demonstrate our department's commitment to telling stories beyond the canon; and engage students in a thoughtful consideration of "misunderstandings of history and social identity" as they specifically apply to Middle Eastern women (Wilson 48). My goals also resonate with a sentiment articulated more recently by director and scholar Daniel Banks: "As artists and as cultural workers it is our unique opportunity and responsibility to challenge society's blindspots, to notice the missing fullness of our society on our stages, and to trouble the notion that any family configuration would be "unrealistic," given the heterogeneity of our world" (14). A diverse production season that includes stories representative of all our students is, by extension, our pedagogic responsibility. Further, as Brenner notes, "[r]acial representation on the American stage is incongruous with the heterogeneity of the United States" (89). University theatre exists in a different reality than professional theatre, but one parallel to it; we have different goals, priorities, and, at times, privileges. While this incongruity remains stubbornly true in professional theatre, it simply cannot remain so within educational contexts if we are to be responsibly fulfilling the pedagogic mission of our institutions. Donkin notes that her experience in feminist practice prepared her for a collaborative, inquiry-focused approach to directing a play by an African American playwright, which strengthened that work. Similarly, my own experience in community-based performance and Freirean pedagogy served as the foundational impulse for the collaborative symposium planning described in this essay and its working methodology.¹⁰

As I considered whether or not to choose *9 Parts* for the following year, I received a call from the dean. He shared the news of his hire of Davidson's first full-time, tenure-track faculty member in Arabic and generously offered to put funds toward additional programming related to *9 Parts* if I chose to direct it.¹¹ This was precisely the sort of institutional and intellectual support that gets my collaborative juices flowing and made my decision a no-brainer. With the support of my new colleague in Arabic, Rebecca Joubin, I spearheaded the organization of a month-long series of events under the umbrella symposium title, "Voices of Middle Eastern Women: Women's Lives in Art and Culture."¹² I invited a large group of faculty and staff to an open brainstorming session; in retrospect, this generative conversation would prove to be the strength of the planning process. Out of this initial meeting a symposium of distinct though interconnected events, which would involve students and faculty from half-a-dozen different departments, was created. We conceived of events that would enhance and enrich audiences' understanding and appreciation of Raffo's play, but also ones that would, more generally, spark interest, enthusiasm, and curricular support for Arabic and Middle East studies. Scheduled over about a month, the events included an art exhibit and gallery talk; the live performance of Middle Eastern music (some original, some not) during the production and also featured at the art opening; a lecture on the representation of Middle Eastern women in painting by a visiting historian; a panel discussion featuring local scholars who had conducted field work in the Middle East; the production of *9 Parts of Desire*; and a post-show discussion with the cast and dramaturg.

The richness of the symposium did not lie exclusively with the events themselves, but also with the cross-pollination they encouraged. For example, actors in the production, who turned out indeed to be a multiethnic ensemble, attended the visiting historian's talk that discussed the West's exoticized notions of Middle Eastern femininity as apparent in nineteenth-century painting, and then took new ideas about physicality back to the rehearsal room.¹³ Another component of the symposium was an exhibit of paintings by Lebanese artist Helen Karam in the theatre's lobby. Opening night for that exhibit featured a gallery talk by Karam and a buffet of Middle Eastern food; her work remained on exhibit throughout the show's run. While on campus, Karam also visited rehearsals, offered one-on-one time with the actress playing one of the central characters (who is also an artist), and, as a parting gift, gave the students a few personal items to be used as props in the show. Karam's paintings—shared digitally before her arrival—influenced the production's design and my direction. Davidson professors with expertise in Arabic and Middle Eastern history participated in the symposium-brainstorming, but also had direct interaction that supported the students' character

and performance work, as well as my own directing choices. Joubin met individually with actors to coach them in their Arabic pronunciation, came to watch rehearsals, and advised our student dramaturg (who just happened to be a theatre major and an Arabic minor!). My colleague in the history department, Jonathan Berkey, a Middle East historian, came to rehearsals the first week as we did our table-work and gave a talk that allowed students to contextualize their characters' stories, and to better understand the behavioral limitations that their characters faced. Both Joubin and Berkey made themselves available to student actors' questions throughout the rehearsal process, which deepened the actors' characterizations and further demonstrated the fruits of our interdisciplinary collaboration. Further, the process integrated engagement with Middle Eastern culture and history into the actors' creative processes, bolstering the goals articulated above to "dismantle misunderstandings of history and social identity." As the production's director, colleagues invited me to their classes to present students who were required to attend the production with a "behind-the-scenes" peek at the artistic process, thus yielding a richer viewing experience.

Based on attendance, on-campus buzz, and local and community coverage, the symposium and the production were wildly successful. The department was commended by the college president for creating the most meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration he had seen in his time at Davidson, and in the following years, numerous students mentioned the production as the reason they decided to audition for subsequent department productions. Cross-pollination across the various events included in the symposium generated truly interdisciplinary thinking, as professors from various departments visited other classrooms, rehearsal rooms, participated in post-show discussions, and more. And the show sold out! We actually added an additional performance at the request of the president to accommodate demand. Yet, I knew that my choice of plays was made in the absence of any expertise on my part in Arabic culture or knowledge of current issues in the field of Middle East studies. Many of the geographic and historical references in the play were foreign to me, and although I did significant research during the summer prior to directing, I was still immersing myself, along with the cast, in the lives and experiences of these Iraqi women at an introductory level. Because I want to continue engaging students and our campus community in a consideration of diverse cultures, I thought long and hard about other strategies for navigating my own lack of expertise for future productions and collaborative projects.

A Few Years Later, a Few Years Wiser: *Sonia Flew*

The interdisciplinary collaboration that resulted in both my direction of *Sonia Flew* and the concurrent symposium "CUBA: Memory, Migration, Art" during the spring of 2013 began more than two years before opening night. When our institution approved an interdisciplinary major in Latin American studies, I approached the director of that program to gauge her interest in a collaboration that would involve one of the productions of the Theatre Department's regular season and other thematically related events. Based on her positive feedback, I committed to directing a play that in some way engaged with Latin American politics or history. At my request, members of the Latin American studies faculty sent me some play titles to consider, and once I had narrowed it down, I discussed each with the Latin American studies department chair. *Sonia Flew*, by Melinda Lopez, engages with Cuban history and the legacy of the Pedro Pan (children whose parents sent them away or snuck them out of Cuba during 1960–62, shortly after Fidel Castro came to power). Once *Sonia Flew* was chosen, we narrowed down the focus of our symposium to Cuban history, politics, arts, and culture.¹⁴ Again, we invited about a dozen colleagues to a brainstorming and planning session. Over the next year, a core of about five faculty members continued to shape the events that would eventually form a month-long symposium. The focus on the titular issues—memory, migration, and art—emerged from the intersection of the play's themes and the ideas with which my colleagues said that scholars of Cuban politics, history, and art were currently engaged. This symposium was perhaps the richest of all, primarily because we had learned several lessons over the previous years.

The biggest lesson I learned, one that informed the planning process of “CUBA: Memory, Migration, Art,” is one about collaboration. This lesson stems from my own engagement with community-based performance and Theatre of the Oppressed practice. After several years of symposium planning—creating the companion symposium for *9 Parts of Desire*, but also for a production of Houston’s *Kokoro*, which I did not direct, the previous year—I was able to more effectively adapt and apply many of the foundational principles of those practices, particularly regarding community collaboration, to this symposium-planning process. In her book *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, Jan Cohen-Cruz notes: “Community-based performance relies on artists guiding the creation of original work or material adapted to, and with, people with a primary relationship to the content, not necessarily the craft” (2–3). Similarly, while my colleagues may not have been participants in the production that served as touchstone for these symposia, they were experts in the thematic content the plays explored. Further, Cohen-Cruz notes that one of the central principles of community-based performance is “reciprocity,” which “describes the desired relationship between community-based artists and participants as mutually nourishing” (93). She notes how such reciprocity manifests in the community-based art process: “In contrast to top-down experts who assume what will be of interest to people, this process draws on the skills of trained artist/facilitators to tease out what a range of people want to express and then helps them to do so” (94). Similarly, I learned that it was critical not to determine symposium events in advance and then ask others to “help” me produce them; rather, it was more effective to approach colleagues in the spirit of collaboration, informed by my experiences in community-based art-making and most important, as Cohen-Cruz notes, ready to listen to their ideas, which in this case were informed both by expertise in their fields and goals for their own disciplinary programs (*ibid.*). Reciprocity yields a sense of “joint ownership of work created,” which was critical to the success of our symposium; success here measured both in terms of audience attendance at the many events organized and the programmatic goals achieved (96). Joint ownership of the work we created—the many events planned as part of the symposium—helped to deeply embed the production and events in the curriculum and generate increased student involvement.

In retrospect, I would characterize the symposium as the product of a Freirean dialogue in which our intellectual exchange of ideas yielded something that none of us could have accomplished alone. My colleagues in Latin American studies were experts in the various content areas we hoped to explore in this symposium, and I had done significant background research and analysis of the play itself. I began our initial brainstorming session by offering my directorial perspective of the play’s central themes and my overarching artistic vision for the production. My colleagues then took these ideas and ran with them based on their own knowledge of the field of Latin American studies and Cuban history and culture. The following is an example of our intellectual collaboration: in act 1, Sonia is a mother of two teenagers, is married to a Jewish husband and living in post-9/11 Minneapolis. She is haunted by memories of her childhood in Cuba and eventual unwilling departure from her home; act 2 is set in that childhood home forty years earlier.¹⁵ Memories of her childhood home, which she has not fully shared with her family, and the resulting feelings of abandonment and fear feed the emotional reactions that propel the play’s action. I shared with my colleagues that a central focus of my staging would be to theatricalize and clarify the extent to which Sonia’s past haunts her and informs the present. I wanted to make clear to the audience how her involuntary solo departure from her home has shaped the kind of person and parent she has become, no matter how old those memories are or how deeply buried. My colleagues immediately pointed out, by offering multiple examples, that memories of “home”—exiles’ continued connection, whether voluntary or not, to their homeland and the resulting conflicted emotions—have informed much Cuban American culture. This connection to the play’s themes launched us toward the symposium’s eventual focus and title.

The final roster of public events included a guest lecture and a demo/class on rumba; a panel discussion among faculty/staff/students of Cuban heritage; a talk-back discussion on US–Cuban foreign policy featuring a faculty member considered to be a national expert in this area (facilitated

by a student dramaturg); a screening of the documentary film *El Arte Nuevo de Hacer Ruinas* about architecture in Havana, followed by a discussion with a scholar in the field; a Cuban dance party sponsored by a student organization; and the Theatre Department's production of *Sonia Flew*. We had hoped for an art exhibit in the on-campus gallery to coincide with the symposium, but staffing issues made this impossible (an exhibition of work by a Cuban artist occurred later in the semester). The department chair of Latin American studies also organized a lunch discussion series for internal participants only (faculty, staff, and students), featuring five guest talks by Davidson faculty members from various departments on their own research of Cuba-related topics.¹⁶

Just as significant to the symposium's pedagogic goals were the multiple intellectual and artistic conversations among faculty and students about the show's themes. These took place in multiple locations, including classrooms and the rehearsal room. A colleague in Latin American studies came to an early rehearsal and offered a lecture on Cuban history for the cast; in return, I visited several classes both before and after the performances to discuss different aspects of the production with students that were required to see the show. Because we had decided on the show and symposium themes sufficiently in advance, several classes were able to include its events as requirements and others included readings that intersected with its themes. For example, a course on memoir included Carlos Eire's *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, which chronicles his own childhood and eventual experience as one of the Pedro Pan.¹⁷ Participation of colleagues in history, art, Hispanic studies, psychology, sociology, music, dance, anthropology, and political science in the symposium's events made them stakeholders in its overarching goals, which in turn meant that they involved students. Further, my work of overseeing a student dramaturg (as an independent study) engaged the entire cast and crew more deeply in the historical events that informed the play's action, and this student engagement spread interest across campus.¹⁸ Much as we were able to do with the *9 Parts of Desire* symposium, "CUBA: Memory, Migration, Art" immersed the campus community in the history, culture, and stories of Cuba and Cubans. Coincidentally, half of my cast consisted of students fluent in Spanish (nonnative speakers), and this also offered a unique opportunity for them to make interesting connections between what they were learning in class and what was happening in the rehearsal room.

The show sold-out its entire run, and there was a wait-list each evening. Several courses required students to attend the production, which helped to embed it in a broader campus conversation. From my perspective, this project was successful because it accomplished multiple things simultaneously: it demonstrated the vitality of performance in the goals of liberal arts education; it brought in new audiences, including students who may not have otherwise seen a production, and demonstrated how performance might intersect with (even illuminate) other subjects that are interesting to them; it demonstrated to theatre students how greater knowledge of history, politics, and literature can strengthen their performance work; it elevated the conversations that we had during rehearsals and enriched actors' character research (for example, after watching the documentary film about Havana architecture, we had a long conversation about the type of apartment in which the characters would have lived, and how this living space informed other behaviors in the play); and it immersed our community in a conversation about Cuban history, culture, and politics, and the continuing impact that Cuba has on US culture and politics. Publicity for the symposium was far more extensive than that which the production alone would have garnered, so we obviously benefited there; but in a larger way we also benefited from the community's growing appreciation of our department as one deeply committed to interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and socially relevant theatre.

Strategies

For those interested in similar work on their own campuses, I have distilled the strategies I would deploy again when planning such a series of events. I offer these as suggestions particularly for those interested in embedding their artistic practice in other curricular priorities and programs:

- Identify other stakeholders with expertise that intersects with the particular play you intend to produce. Allow these experts to make decisions regarding topics to be explored, as they likely know more about the constituencies that you hope will attend the events.
- Invite these stakeholders to be true collaborators early in the process. This may include inviting their feedback on the play selection itself, as well as the focus and design of symposium events. Ideally, others would share logistical responsibility with you as well, such as fundraising, travel planning, marketing, and so on.
- Connect your work to other institutional priorities. For us, these included diversity, international education, interdisciplinarity, and civic engagement. Staff members in various offices and programs across campus, including our Center for Civic Engagement and international studies program, have been key allies in this work.
- Start early so that faculty across the curriculum have time to think of ways that your programming can be integrated into their courses; if possible, offer colleagues any needed resources to integrate the events into their coursework. This may include a lesson plan for teaching the play or a study guide akin to dramaturgical notes. Several years ago, our department produced Brecht's *Galileo*, and faculty members from multiple departments (for example, biology, mathematics, German) included the play on their syllabi. To brainstorm pedagogical approaches to the play, its themes and content, I invited faculty to a meeting before the semester began. I suggest that something akin to this could work for other plays as well.
- Make yourself, as an expert on the play, available to colleagues for guest visits to their classes, or ask them how you, the rehearsal process, and the production team can work with them to make seeing the production a richer experience for their students. (They may have ideas that you had not come up with.)
- If colleagues have expertise that could support your actors' research, invite them to rehearsal when appropriate. A colleague in Latin American studies gave a talk on Cuban history during our first week of rehearsal for *Sonia Flew*; this information helped actors to better understand their characters and served as the basis for their further research.
- Get smart people in a room together and brainstorm. Invite colleagues (faculty and staff) with expertise that in some way connects with the themes you want to explore. Think broadly. When we were preparing to design a series of events to complement our production of *Kokoro*, we invited faculty members who teach courses in Asian studies and also colleagues in the departments of anthropology and sociology who study cultures of motherhood, since different cultural understandings of appropriate mothering are a significant part of the play's action.
- Choose a range of modalities for the events in a series. Rather than schedule a bunch of lectures, I have found that tapping other structures, in addition to the standard scholarly lecture, has been quite successful. These have included art exhibits in the theatre lobby, art and dance workshops, panel discussions featuring members of our community with connections to the themes being explored, film screenings followed by discussions led by experts, informal student discussions with scholars and artists, and a themed meal arranged by the chef at the student cafeteria. Food is a critical link to culture and memory, and at the same time a motivator for student attendance at events.
- Invite student organizations to be stakeholders in the events. Where appropriate, this can generate far more buzz than an event exclusively organized by an academic department and add an additional perspective to the conversation. With the symposia for both *9 Parts of Desire* and *Sonia Flew*, student organizations were key to the events' success.

- Think local: tap as many local resources as possible, including your colleagues and members of your broader local community. When I put out a broad call for participation in the Cuba-focused symposium, I was quite surprised to discover the number of members of our community who had some connection to Cuba.

Strategies for Survival in the Liberal Arts Curriculum

The efforts described in this essay had two primary goals: to better reflect the diversifying student body in our production-season selections, and to emphasize the continued importance of theatre and theatre studies to the liberal arts curriculum. Were these efforts successful? Could any singular strategy shift the thinking about theatre's peripheral relevance in an ever-more vocationally focused educational environment? Ultimately, what I have learned is that the challenges discussed in this essay are not problems to be "solved," but rather ones with which we will need to continually grapple. The fruits of these strategies for maintaining theatre's relevance within the liberal arts curriculum are ephemeral, as performance itself always is. We are only as important/relevant/critical as the next project on our agenda. Certainly, I have been able to glean some positive, lasting impact from our efforts: colleagues from other departments have sought collaborations with us that have yielded (and will continue to yield) rich interdisciplinary thinking and engaged with significant social, political, and artistic ideas.¹⁹ Including mandatory attendance at our productions for multiple classes has yielded a deeper appreciation for the work of the student actors, many of whom found themselves suddenly serving as "experts" in other classes where a production in which they participated is being discussed. Yet, each school year brings a new group of students to our campus, and the terrain of campus culture is continually shifting, often in unpredictable ways. Further, as global and national politics shift educational priorities and student interests, the strategies discussed here may need to be replaced by others. In precarious times, the arts have a way of seeming superfluous, even frivolous to some, and thus will always, as disciplines in a liberal arts context, be precarious themselves. I recently returned from a faculty-development trip to Russia, where several of my colleagues visited the Museum of the Defense and Siege of Leningrad. Astonishingly, while that city was under siege during 1941–44 and dire circumstances persisted, art-making continued: actors rehearsed for plays, and special rations were secured for musicians to play music that was broadcast throughout the city. The conclusion made by the museum's audio-guide captured the essence of all of my symposium-planning intent: "People need art to remain human."

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Notes

1. See, for example, Patricia Cohen's "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth," and "Arts Programs in Academia Are Forced to Nip Here, Adjust There." I borrow the phrase "precarious times" from the title of the seminar at the American Society for Theatre Research Conference at which I first presented this work in November 2013. That seminar, "The Common Good: Articulating Theatre and Performance in Precarious Times," was organized by Michelle Martin-Baron and Kate Duffy. I am grateful to all the seminar participants for their thoughtful responses to an earlier version of this essay.
2. This essay focuses on *9 Parts of Desire* and *Sonia Flew* because these are the two productions that I directed and thus know more intimately.
3. My gratitude to Chris Alexander, director of the Dean Rusk International Studies Program, for his intellectual and logistical support of this work. Indeed, part of the reason that all of the work discussed in this essay was possible is because of his vehement support and willingness to engage in the intellectual conversations that resulted in the symposia's design.
4. Davidson College Factfile, 2008–09. Davidson College Department of Institutional Research, available at <www.davidson.edu>.
5. Davidson College Factfile, 2013–14. Davidson College Department of Institutional Research, available at <www.davidson.edu>. Starting in 2001–02, the response to a question asking students to identify their ethnicity was made optional.
6. See Raffo's website, available at <www.heatherraffo.com/projects/nine-parts-of-desire>.
7. I want to thank and acknowledge my colleague Dalia Basiouny, whose scholarly work and friendship gave me the courage to go forward with this project.
8. While I am committed to such diversity in casting regardless of the particular play, I understood that in this particular case the stakes were higher.
9. These steps included sending personal e-mails to specific students encouraging them to audition; meeting with the leadership of various student organizations serving minority students, discussing the show and concurrent symposium planning and encouraging them to announce the auditions to their membership, as well as to participate in event planning; and asking colleagues in multiple departments to announce auditions to their students.
10. Here, I am specifically referring to Paulo Freire's idea that dialogue is a critical component of both learning and knowing. Freire famously embraced a problem-posing style of learning, which he differentiated from the dominant, top-down, or "banking system" of education that maintains systems of oppression. For a more in-depth analysis of Freire's theoretical ideas and influence, see, for example, Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, eds., *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (1993).
11. Here, I want to acknowledge Clark Ross, then Dean of the Faculty, for his support and encouragement.
12. I am grateful to Rebecca Joubin for her willingness to jump right in and work on this collaboration during her first semester at Davidson. Her expertise was critical to the project's success.
13. Of the nine actors in the production, one was a faculty member of European heritage, and of the eight student actors, four identified as students of color.

14. In the earliest conversations we had regarding this collaboration, we thought we would create a symposium that more broadly explored Latin American arts, culture, and politics.

15. In act 1, Sonia was played by an African American student, and by a student of European heritage in act 2. In the opening scene, both Sonias appear onstage simultaneously and speak a line together (this was my invention and a way to make clear to the audience that both actors are playing the same character). The script credits this line to “Sonia,” but does not indicate which Sonia, so I opted to have both actors deliver it together.

16. I am indebted to Jane Mangan, chair of Latin American studies, for her expertise, collegiality, and enthusiastic, collaborative spirit. The success of this project was in large part a result of her willingness to engage in conversations when the idea was just a glimmer in my imagination and the intellectual rigor with which she followed through on all of our brainstorming.

17. Eire also joined my colleague Russell Crandall and me on an episode of *Charlotte Talks* (a morning program on a local NPR affiliate) titled “Cuban-American Relations and Pedro Pan.” A podcast of that show is available at <<http://wfae.org/post/cuban-american-relations-and-operation-pedro-pan>>.

18. I am indebted to Christine Noah for her excellent dramaturgical work on this show.

19. Indeed, on the heels of this collaboration, I again received a telephone call from the dean regarding the opportunity to hire a postdoctoral fellow with funding from the Mellon Foundation. Such funding was available to hire a postdoctoral fellow for a two-year period, and based on the work we had already done, the dean thought our department would be a good fit as host. Samer Al-Saber joined our faculty as a postdoctoral fellow, and his production of Hassan Abdulrazzak’s play *The Prophet*, set in Egypt in 2011, was similarly accompanied by a multidisciplinary symposium, titled “Staging Revolution.”

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