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Teaching Philosophy

One of the unique aspects of teaching theatre is that it combines the theoretical with the practical. The students must be able not only to interpret and develop insightful analyses of a variety of theatrical literature, but they must then translate those abstract ideas into concrete visual imagery. Students can draw on skills they have learned in other disciplines to construct their analysis but they must have a strong foundation in theatrical aesthetic principles in order to turn those ideas into functional design concepts.

In my beginning classes I stress the importance of the elements of design. I try to make it clear that by following the basic design principles, anyone can generate aesthetically appropriate compositions. In order to create dynamic and stimulating ideas, however, one must explore how far these principles can be stretched. To achieve this understanding I have devised a series of exercises that explore each element individually and then lead the students to a project that begins to put the elements together as a whole. As the students progress through the upper level classes, they rely less on consciously manipulating individual elements and more on the intuitive response to the overall design. Their foundational knowledge of design principles gives them the ability to articulate their design ideas and to justify their individual choices.

A good course of study takes careful planning and preparation. Although a carefully outlined set of goals is important, often it is the unexpected opportunities that provide the most excitement and enrichment. I start with a well thought out, detailed syllabus, but I try to maintain the kind of flexibility that will encourage individual students to explore on their own and to follow paths that may lead to unexpected conclusions. Above all I think it is important to develop a student's confidence in his or her ideas and to give them the tools to more clearly communicate what they have conceived. In particular, I stress that the design is only one aspect of the collective process of several different artists. The more clearly the student can articulate and justify their individual choices, the more integrated their ideas will be in the final product.

The classroom environment is also a collaborative process not only between the student and teacher but also among the students themselves. It is important for the students to understand that the interpretation of artistic ideas is often subjective. Open discussion during the evaluation allows the students to formulate constructive criticism in a relatively safe environment. Most opinions deserve merit although some concrete basis for evaluation must be established. Although I consider myself to be the leader and guide, I find that I often reevaluate my opinions after hearing the students' reactions. Critical discussion also teaches the student to recognize what

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obstacles stood in the way of their success and to understand what their final level of achievement really is. A significant component of my teaching method is the lengthy written evaluations that I provide in response to my students' work once the verbal critique has taken place.

Because theatre can often be viewed as "art on a deadline," one of the essential abilities the students must demonstrate is the art of making choices. I require the students to do comprehensive research for their projects. This research not only gives them more options from which to choose their final design ideas, but it also provides extensive material to help them validate their choices to the rest of the class or ultimately the production team.

Having a student's work presented in a realized production is one of the final steps in their undergraduate education. The practical concerns of communicating with a production team and dealing with the inherent problems in any produced show cannot be replicated in the classroom environment. Consequently I encourage all designers to participate in all aspects of mounting our productions so that they will have had hands on experience before being given responsibilities for their own productions. As often as possible, students are given the opportunity to design one of the season's productions.

The final portfolio is the ultimate assessment of a student's work. Students are encouraged early in their academic career to value their work and to present it in an organized professional manner. The portfolio includes a variety of increasingly complex class projects and an array of realized productions. The expectation is for the students to emerge with a portfolio that can be used as part of their graduate school materials or to gain an entry level position within the industry.