

# EDUCATING ARTISTS

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This issue of *PAJ* 103 highlights our ongoing interest in arts education in a special section entitled “The Education of the Artist.” In recent years considerable attention has focused on rethinking the arts and the university, which have always had an uneasy relationship, while the number of arts training programs has grown decade by decade. In particular, discussion in the visual arts has produced several publications that address art history, the curriculum and studio classes. In the theatre, too, books, articles and blog posts have focused on the status of the playwright, graduate degrees, programs and the curriculum.

Over the last thirty or forty years the basic framework of undergraduate theatre programs—that is, the mix of theatre history, dramatic literature, and productions—has changed little, except to have evolved more and more into acting programs and reduced scholarly focus. On the graduate level, the MFA emphasis on practical training and workshops has recycled the same educational models. One sharp distinction between visual arts training and theatre training is that art departments embody a critique of institutions, curation and exhibitions while theatre study offers no grounding in institutional critique that would examine theatre production, festivals, cultural policy, funding and institutional structures. There is no comparable body of literature in theatre with the range of the art world’s attention to institutional critique. This tendency also produces a type of theatre criticism that is unsophisticated in the politics of culture.

For *PAJ*’s theatre training focus, the German composer, director, and professor Heiner Goebbels presents his “nine theses” on educating performing artists, pointing to the outmoded specialization in traditional training and text, and preparation of students merely to fill the rigid demands of established institutions, as detrimental for opening up new directions in the 21st century. He writes: “In acting training, you rarely find formal ‘external’ techniques taught that go beyond ‘empathy.’ . . . And ignorance of the accomplishments of avant-garde theatre of the twentieth century continues deliberately to set us back.” For Hillary Miller, in her “Advice to Applicants,” MFA Playwriting programs present a vision woefully ignorant of the business and legal implications of theatre-making and short on strong intellectual foundations. Since graduate theatre degrees are no guarantee of a living wage in one’s profession,

she reiterates the Theatre Development Fund's recent report that one third of all playwrights earn less than \$25,000 per year. It is widely evident that artists are the backbone of arts programs nationwide, luring students to expensive schools that deny them a living wage, benefits or any track to promotion, and so the facts grow more dismal: 12% of them earn over \$30,000 yearly; 25% of teaching artists earn only \$10,000–\$20,000 per year. Yet, 42% of them hold Masters Degrees. Universities pride themselves on being the home of progressive social thought, but they have ignored the ethical implications of educating too many arts students who can never earn a decent living in the profession.

New York City is overflowing with colleges and universities offering undergraduate and graduate programs in theatre—close to twenty, according to Peter Zazzali, who in his article surveying actor training, questions “the practical and educational rationale of these programs.” Add to that the hundreds of NYC private acting schools and independent teachers, and the inevitable conclusion is that the field is supersaturated, notwithstanding the fact that the median salary for members of Actors Equity is below \$7500 per year.

For decades we have lived with the same problems but now that the high cost of tuition has become a national issue in the 2012 election, and resources are dwindling, attention has turned to practical and ethical concerns. Students need to take more responsibility for their education and not accept without question what it is they are signing up for. The curriculums and exploitative adjunct system are long overdue for an overhaul. Theatre training is largely based on a model that would prepare students for Broadway or the equally commercial and conventional off-Broadway or regional theatre, as well as for television. This educational strategy makes them unsuited for new modes of writing, or performing with media that destabilizes the idea of the “live” and bypasses psychological conflict as the basis of drama, besides ignoring the impact of visual arts and dance in influential theatre practices here and in Europe. Most training provides no artistic vision for theatre in the twenty-first century. The fact that theatre is pandering more and more to audiences, and increasingly mimicking television and interactive media, only emphasizes its problematic situation. The questioning of theatre as spectacle further complicates the issues that are now unfolding.

In my view, theatre study should be expanded to train students in producing, curating and archiving. On the level of curriculum theatre can no longer afford to graduate students who lack basic knowledge of important ideas and artworks in dance, video, music and visual art. Today it is questionable whether discipline-based study is preferable to interdisciplinary arts, but that is a much larger challenge to academic convention and more difficult to transform in the university structure.

One of the central issues of our time in performance is the intermingling of theatre, art and dance, as the contemporary arts themselves demonstrate, and the museum's turn toward performance confirms. We are now faced with parallel cultures in which large numbers of theatre students remain ignorant of the contemporary processes in

their transformed art form—stuck in decades-old models of training and practice, fostered by all delivery systems in the profession, that have obsessed over “craft” while neglecting conceptual range and artistic daring. Only a small percentage of artists outside the mainstream engage in the research/experimentation that moves theatre toward a future.

In 1995, *PAJ* 50/51 comprised an entire theme issue, “The Arts & the University.” At that time in an essay entitled “Theatre and the University at the End of the Twentieth Century, I wrote:

Theatre departments give no significant attention to the visual arts, or to dance history, or to music-theatre and opera (in which so many Western theatre directors have worked in the last two decades. (...) Neither is there any attempt to organize knowledge in the art world crossovers such as body art, installations, and video. Yet, the art world has become increasingly theatrical, and many artists are working in multimedia forms that combine image-text-music-movement, here and abroad.

Nearly two-decades later those remarks still describe theatre training. Even more so, in the intervening time, *PAJ* has been forcefully articulating the relationship of theatre and the visual arts in a more comprehensive view of performance. That is why we changed the name from *Performing Arts Journal* to *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* in 1998 (*PAJ* 58) and also began publishing the Art+Performance series of books. From the perspective of 2012, I would venture to say one of the biggest failures of arts education has been the lack of foresight in art departments to integrate theatre history (and dance) with the history of visual art performance, a loss which accounts for the art world’s uninformed critical and historical understanding of performance ideas and processes; likewise, theatre departments’ (especially those offering the MFA) inability to open up to textual practices, art forms, and media identified with the visual arts. These crossovers have been apparent since the seventies and have come full-blown into the realm of “performance,” even as they remain separate histories. To bring them together for a larger view of performance, text, image, and design would be of enormous benefit in influencing new approaches to educating and training artists.