

In the spring of 2006, my husband, my son, and I found ourselves in Atlanta, Georgia. I was doing a guest directing stint at the Alliance Theater, my husband was the composer/sound designer, and our son was on spring break. Once the show closed, we thought we would take a little mini-vacation to visit Savannah. We were immediately enchanted by the city and its beautifully restored historic buildings.

As we wandered around town, we discovered that the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) had almost singlehandedly been responsible for the renovation and preservation of Savannah's beautiful historic district. We immediately thought, "Do they need anyone to teach directing and sound design?" Well, as fate would have it, after we returned to our home in Seattle, we learned that the school was, in fact, seeking two professors: one to teach directing and one to teach sound design.

We had a disastrous first phone conversation with an unknown HR representative who woke us up at 6 a.m. (not realizing the time difference) and wondered about our lack of

"terminal degrees." I have always found that term particularly ominous-sounding. We both thought that was the end of that, but our résumés somehow made it through to various department chairs, and after a couple of visits, we got the jobs.

I had no idea if I would like teaching and absolutely no idea if I could tolerate becoming an "academic." Apart from some guest lecture slots here and there, I had never written a syllabus before, much less taught four classes a semester, which was my initial assignment. Now, seven years later, I can say that I have mastered the art of syllabus writing and, along with two of my colleagues, have rewritten both the undergraduate and graduate curriculum.

I have found I learn as much from my students about the art of theatre as they learn from me. I am constantly challenged to reexamine the things I know, and to see the art form through fresh, eager eyes. Furthermore, as the artistic director of the department, I get to plan a season for an audience mostly under the age of 28 and work on projects that would be difficult to produce for commercial theatres.

A few years ago, I decided to produce an adaptation of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. As a way to capture Bradbury's media-saturated world and, at the same time, to illuminate his critique of the media, I decided to utilize various departments of the school, such as film, motion media, and animation (relying on the talents of over 250 students) to create a multimedia production. The result was a project that I could never have tackled at either of the two LORT theatres where I was artistic director; it took too much time to develop and it would have been far beyond the budgets of either theatre. It truly challenged me as an artist.

Since many SDC Members and Associates work in academic theatre [see sidebar with results from the recent academic survey], and many more will probably find themselves doing so over the course of their careers, I reached out to a few of my colleagues working in higher education to discuss the unique challenges of directing in an academic setting, both the difficulties and the rewards of working with students, and how ultimately it has furthered our work as artists.

exploring our craft

DIRECTING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY SHARON OTT



**RISA BRAININ**

is the Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she is the Artistic Director of LAUNCH PAD, an

artist residency and performance program for new plays.

**KATE BUCKLEY**

is an associate professor at the University of Tennessee, where she also directs at the Clarence Brown Theatre, the LORT theatre associated

with the university. She has previously been an adjunct professor at DePaul and Northwestern Universities.

**JOHN DILLON**

served as the director of the theatre program at Sarah Lawrence College from 2004 to 2010 and regularly serves as a guest artist at the University of

North Carolina School of the Arts and Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts.

**GREG LEAMING**

is the Associate Artistic Director of Asolo Repertory Theatre, where he is a faculty member of the Florida State University/Asolo Repertory

Conservatory acting training program. He previously served as the head of the directing program at Southern Methodist University.

**MARK WING-DAVEY**

is the Chair of Graduate Acting at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. He previously taught for 15 years at the Central School of Speech and Drama in

London and from 1988–1990 served as the Artistic Director of the Acting Course.

Sharon | How do you approach rehearsals as a director while also balancing the educational needs of your students?

Greg | In rehearsal, my job is absolutely twofold: on top of the standard responsibilities of a director, I must work in a teaching capacity at the same time.

Kate | When I see an opportunity for a lesson during scene work, I halt rehearsal to have a “Teaching Moment.” Students gather and we discuss something relevant to their work in the classroom and then we go back to rehearsal as usual.

Sharon | What sorts of things do you teach during rehearsals?

Greg | I find myself teaching rehearsal etiquette almost as much as I am directing. At FSU, the second year of training is where we explore what is expected of an actor in the professional rehearsal room and the actor's relationship with the director. I am the one who helps them differentiate an acting teacher from a director—what they need to do in terms of technique on their own time so they don't take up rehearsal time. That might be one of the most important lessons they can learn.

Sharon | How else do you instill a sense of professionalism in student actors?

Risa | My theory is if you treat students like professionals, they will act like professionals. I intentionally don't work any differently with students than I do with professionals. I have high expectations for everyone involved in a production and my sense is that the students appreciate being held to a professional standard.

Kate | I want my students to have an experience like the ones they will encounter in the real world. I treat student-based productions the same way I treat professional productions. The difference is when I'm working with students, I spend more time preparing, I'm more patient, and I try to be very clear at all times.

Risa | If there are any differences, I would say that I can be harder and a bit more honest with them because we are in it for the long haul and they are dedicated to training.

Mark | I guess I would say that I treat the professionals as if they were students and the students as if they were professionals.

Kate | I'm also very aware of their academic responsibilities. So I try to be efficient and attempt to release them earlier than the allotted time. Between their production and academic work, our students are working, on average, a 15-hour day, six days a week.

Sharon | In a university you are often rehearsing for three to four hours a day over six to eight weeks or more, instead of the typically shorter, more concentrated schedule for professional productions. Does this influence the way you work?

John | I relish the longer rehearsal period because it gives me lots of time to brood over the show. If, two or three weeks into the process, I want to change the approach or the way I'm using rehearsals, there still may be time. And since there's little at stake at the box office, that change isn't met with widespread panic. I also try to be extremely flexible in rehearsal. You'd think these young folks would have lots of stamina, but in my experience, they get sick a lot. So that means I always need a backup plan if a student is out without much warning—it also means I keep a small bottle of Purell® in my pocket too, so I can do a bit of inconspicuous de-germing!

Sharon | Are there any specific ways in which you try to build ensembles with student actors?

Mark | In any production I direct, I'm always most interested in the group work, the work of the cohort, so to speak. I always start—and this doesn't change whether I'm working with student actors or professionals—with exercises to help the cast develop a group sense of the world they will create, what I call the “emotional gymnastics” that I find in the world of each play. I emphasize the work, or the craft, regardless of who I'm working with.

John | This spring, I was directing the premiere of Amlin Gray's brilliant adaptation of Evgeny Shvarts' Soviet-era satire *The Dragon* at North Carolina School of the Arts. I wanted the students to feel more viscerally what it was like to live in a society where propaganda and the cult of personality was such a significant part of life—and I didn't want to send them on a field trip to North Korea! So, I broke the cast of 27 down into four groups, choosing the groups based on relationships within the play. Each collective was assigned the task of creating a unique celebration of our “Beloved Leader,” who was being played by the new Dean of the School of Drama, **Carl Forsman**. He judged the proceedings, choosing a winning and losing group—the losing group was exiled to a gulag of my creation. They worked when they weren't in scenes, but they had to struggle with one more obstacle: I told them that one student among the 27 was a spy. The spy would pretend to be a loyal member of one group but was actually sharing all their secret plans with another group. This created a taste of the paranoia that Shvarts chronicled in his play and things got pretty intense when everyone was polled on who the spy was. Actually, there was no spy; they created a spy in their heads from the paranoia of the system I'd set up for them.

Sharon | Are there any particular challenges you've faced in working with student actors? What do you do to overcome them?

John | Roles that require accents or age can block a student creatively. It becomes solely about trying to meet the technical skill needed to master the dialect or to pretend to be older than they are. It can be horrifying to this old geezer when a young thespian wonders if they should use a cane or maybe a walker to act 60. So, I try to avoid as many technical requirements as much as possible. I try to keep the connection between an actor and their character as simple and as clear as possible.

Greg | Students often have to be pushed to collaborate, to bring their own ideas and identity to the work. They are often not quite capable of personalizing on a deep level, which is something I push them to do in the academic

room as well. They need to bring their entire personality and history into the work. They are sometimes too eager to please the director and put that ahead of their own acting work. They need to chart the path rather than rely on someone to show them the path.

Mark | In my work now with graduate students at NYU, sometimes they are incredibly pure, but at other times they can have this strange "eye on the prize" syndrome. Especially in their final year, sometimes they won't put the stakes of the play absolutely at the center of what they're doing. They're worried about agents and think, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't do that" for whatever reason.

Sharon | What about the advantages? What do you enjoy about working with students?

Greg | I'm actually thrilled by the ways students will run with any idea you throw at them, and take it as far as you want. There is rarely any hesitation, any fear of failure. So the creative energy in the room on any given night can be mind-boggling!

Mark | Students have this incredible ability to find the essence of a play, and deliver it untrammelled by ego. They may not always have the skill level, the stamina, or the general high level of artistry as the professional actor, and

while it's certainly true that I've seen many academic productions where students really got off on the wrong track, I have to say I've seen two or three student productions that are better by far than any professional production I've seen of the same play.

Sharon | Do you feel you have more freedom in the work that you do in an academic setting?

Greg | I've been able to work on material that might have less commercial appeal but offers the students—and me—a chance to deal with brilliant, complex work. I've done Schiller's *The Robbers*, which I can't imagine many theatres in America taking a stab at. We did *The Duchess of Malfi*, finding a contemporary approach for young actors, which was truly a great challenge. One rarely gets the chance to engage with such big, messy, complex plays in a commercial environment these days.

John | I'm much more likely to be asked what I want to stage by a school than I am by a professional theatre. I persuaded both North Carolina School of the Arts and UNC Chapel Hill to jointly commission Anthony Clarvoe to write an adaptation of *The Ramayana*, a Hindu myth that I've had a longtime fascination with. Clarvoe greatly enjoyed writing a piece for the large cast we had available—and at the end of the process he was able to restructure the piece for a smaller ensemble, making it more suitable for professional theatres.

Sharon | What role do you see universities playing in developing new plays?

Risa | My theory has been that there is a missing step between readings/workshops and world premieres that universities can absolutely provide. I call it a "preview production"—fully produced with professional designers and a mix of student and professional actors. After talking to many playwrights over the years, I found that they were frustrated with feeling they were stuck in a cycle of readings and workshops without ever seeing their plays fully realized. They were also frustrated that once they had a premiere, they had a difficult time getting a second production to continue their work. So when I first came to the UCSB, I decided to dedicate my one slot a year to producing new or

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GREG LEAMING



nearly new work with the playwright in residence. I ran my idea by dramaturge Liz Engelman, who put me in touch with Sarah Ruhl and we worked on *Melancholy Play*. The second year, I invited John Walch to continue to work on *The Dinosaur Within* after its premiere. By the third year, we were producing completely new works and have continued to mount one fully produced new play each year, which has now grown into an entire program based on providing that missing step, called LAUNCH PAD. Since 2005, we've worked with eight writers: Sarah Ruhl, John Walch, Barbara Lebow, Sheri Wilner, Beau Willimon, Lila Rose Kaplan, **James Still**, and Alison Tatlock.

Sharon | How does that work impact the students?

Risa | My students absolutely love working with the playwrights. They love the chance to create a role and they understand that we're all working to help the playwright develop the play. Since this is so much of what they'll be doing when they get out of school, I think it is crucial to their education to learn how to do it well. For me, it's been a constant joy to bring playwrights to campus and to see them flourish in a safe environment.

LAUNCH PAD has definitely expanded my world as an artist. While I had done a good amount of new work during my career, I was pretty steeped in the classics at the time I took this job. It has been so rewarding to be able to work with living playwrights on a more regular basis.

Mark | While I was working at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, we collaborated with Caryl Churchill. We took a group of students to Romania to amass images and information and to work on exercises together, all of which led to Caryl's play *Mad Forest*. In some fundamental way, I owe my career in America to this work. After *Mad Forest* was produced in London, Joe Papp rang me up to ask if we'd like to bring our production to the Public. And, while the students decided to not continue with the show—they had been working on it for a long while at this time—it did get produced at the New York Theatre Workshop with professional actors. This production bounced me into my life in America.

Sharon | How do you balance your full-time teaching position with your career outside the university?

Kate | Teaching is richly rewarding, but I'm very grateful that the University of Tennessee has a requirement that serious creative activity must continue outside of the school. The opportunity to travel, to see other theatres, to meet other directors, to work with new actors and designers, to see other work, to hear about other ideas—it all keeps my creative life and my teaching life balanced and exciting. It allows me to return to my students with firsthand reports about the ever-changing practicalities of how to "make it" in the profession.

But, it's not all sunshine and roses. When you're freelancing, you have those days when you drag yourself back to the hotel completely exhausted, after back-to-back 10-out-of-12s, while in pre-production for another show in another town, you drop your bags, can't get internet service, and you ask yourself, "What the hell am I doing with my life?" Now add teaching into the mix—I'm exhausted for nine months of the year.

Sharon | What have you learned as an artist from working with your students?

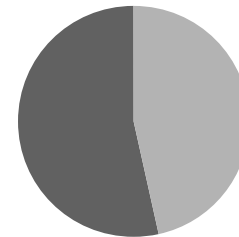
Greg | I've become a much more collaborative artist. Because it's my job to teach the students how to take ownership, I often have to give up ownership. It's also taught me to embrace and make use of the vocabulary of an actor on a greater level—it's taught me how to speak to actors more carefully.

The biggest thing it's taught me, though, is to find the deeply personal connection to any piece I'm working on. If I need to convince the students to bring their entire being to the work, I have to do the same thing; I have to teach by example. And because of this, I've found myself becoming more involved with my work on a far less cerebral level, and approaching it on a much more emotional level. I think I work a *lot* harder when I work with students, and as a result the work is that much more gratifying.

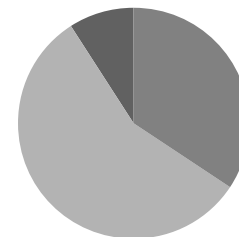
60-SECOND ACADEMIC SURVEY RESULTS

SDC recently circulated a survey to gather some statistics about our Members working in education. Over 700 of our Members replied.

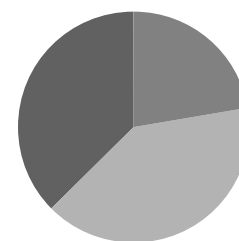
MEMBERS IN EDUCATION



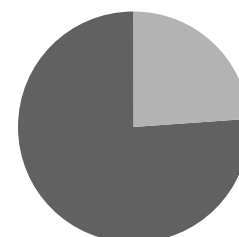
TEACHING LEVEL



TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT



DIR/CHOR ASSIGNMENTS



TITLE PAGE Sharon Ott in rehearsal with students PHOTO c/o SCAD

OPPOSITE TOP TO BOTTOM

Kate Buckley in UT Green Room | Table work for LAUNCH PAD preview production of James Still's *Appoggiatura* PHOTO Nayna Ramey | John Dillon + students PHOTO Donald Dietz
 Greg Leaming in rehearsal | Mark Wing-Davey in rehearsal for the *Henry Box Brown Play*
 PHOTO Ella Bromblin

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