Exploring the past informs the present

Making theatre history matter in the classroom and on the stage

BY SHAWNDA MOSS WITH BRADLEY MOSS

I slipped into the classroom where my student teacher had already begun his lesson for the day. As I sat down in the back, I noticed an odd pile of boxes on the small stage space at the front of the room. It was some sort of box-and-duct-tape contraption.

"Okay, we're going to go back to... let's say 460 B.C.,” said my student teacher. “Who will set the date and take us back?” Several eager hands went up. The chosen student went to the box contraption, punched in the year on a masking tape keyboard, and announced, “460 B.C.” Then the class was off to the theatre festival of Dionysus.

As I watched my student teacher guide the class through Greek theatre history, I noticed how engaged and involved the students were. At the close of class, most of them groaned when it was announced that they’d have to return to the year 2011. This

Aristotle’s Poetics C.335-323 BCE
outlines elements of tragedy.
was a successful lesson using a strategy that would be repeated throughout the theatre history unit this student teacher taught. The cardboard time machine took that class back to the Roman Coliseum, the Medieval pageant wagons, the Globe Theatre, the Comédie-Française, and more. It was a clever approach to teaching theatre history, one of numerous methods I myself have tried and have seen from student teachers I’ve advised over the years.

So why did this particular approach work so well? When I worked in the secondary classroom, I taught theatre history in a very academic and isolated manner. I experimented with elements of student ownership and tried to add performance assignments on top of the more traditional lecture format. Reflecting on my practices a decade ago, I realize now that my methodology had little impact on the students as performers, directors, or designers. And, most disappointingly, it didn’t engage them in higher-level thinking that led them to examine more closely the world they live in now. There is much to be gained from exploring theatre history in your classroom, but only if it is done in a way that prompts students to consider the contexts that drive artistic expressions.

As we all know, the goals of a well-rounded education for students have evolved in recent years. It is no longer sufficient to simply teach facts. Years ago, as a new teacher, facts were the entire foundation of my theatre history instruction. I taught it in my intermediate class, following a structure that allowed only a cursory surface exploration of history. For example, I might spend a day introducing Greek theatre, then put students into groups and assign each a specific time period to study. An assignment description handout and a couple research days later, the groups would do presentations on their time periods and perform staged readings of cuttings from representative plays. The students usually had a good time, learning basic theatre history facts and becoming familiar with great plays and playwrights from each period.

However, in my quest to give them ownership of this curriculum, I eventually realized that I was actually doing my students a disservice. What could have been an engaging experience delving into the concepts and impact of theatre history became a bullet-point exercise in researching and memorizing names, terms, and plays. Both the students and I had good intentions, but we weren’t fulfilling those intentions in the best way. Once I understood the limitations of this type of instruction, I began to explore other approaches to teaching theatre history. Some were more successful than others, but what I consistently tried to do was to focus on my students’ skill base and how aspects of theatre history related to their own lives. Together we studied how theatre history is important and has affected today’s theatre. We moved beyond memorizing information and instead immersed ourselves in the perspective and principles of theatre that have long-lasting influence and power.

There is no magic formula of what teaching style, activity, assignment, or assessment will make theatre history click with everyone. But it is possible to make theatre history relevant to the individual student by exploring the principles of the art throughout the centuries and why they still matter to contemporary theatre and culture. In a way, it’s theatre advocacy without all the rhetoric. Our kids need to know that theatre isn’t just about now, that it has a long and rich history and that it’s important to understand how that history influences the teaching and production of theatre in our modern world.

Why theatre history matters

If for no other reason, theatre history should be taught because it is one of the National Standards of Theatre Education, the foundation of most K-12 school theatre curricula taught in this country. The Kennedy Center’s ArtsEdge website introductory page to the National Standards states: “Theatre, the imagined and enacted world of human beings, is one of the primary ways children learn about life—about actions and consequences, about customs and beliefs, about others and themselves... The content of the drama will develop the students’ abilities to express their understanding of their immediate world.
and broaden their knowledge of other cultures.” (The entire K-12 theatre standards can be viewed and downloaded at http://schooltheatre.org/advocacy/resources.)

The writers who created the National Standards of Theatre Education understood the cultural significance of theatre, but as classroom educators I’m not sure we always take every opportunity to view our art through this prism. I would argue that a way to refocus ourselves on the influence that theatre can have would be to examine how that impact has affected earlier societies and cultures through the work of writers, performers, and designers. While theatre history concepts can be found in most of the National Standards, number five clearly outlines how history is tied into creative choices of contemporary performance. It reads:

- Content Standard 5: Researching by evaluating and synthesizing cultural and historical information to support artistic choices.
- Proficient Standard: Identify and research cultural, historical, and symbolic clues in dramatic texts and evaluate the validity and practicality of the information to assist in making artistic choices for informal and formal productions.
- Advanced Standard: Research and describe appropriate historical production designs, techniques, and performances from various cultures to assist in making artistic choices for informal and formal theatre, film, television, or electronic media productions.

While the language of the standard is straightforward, it also suggests that aside from teaching the facts and terms of theatre history, teachers should also use higher-order thinking in instruction, assignments, and assessments.

Using these standards as a basis we can see that history education—like instruction dealing with performance, writing, and design—should be active, multi-dimensional, and rigorous. Practically speaking, theatre history needs to be taught because it informs students’ understanding of plays, performance and design styles, and therefore, provides the knowledge that will allow for creative choices to flow. I asked some of my former secondary education colleagues why they teach theatre history. Many of their answers mirror my own. For instance, theatre history helps students:

- Better understand who they are as human beings. Studying the motivations and reasons for decisions in the past can help us in our current lives.
- Improve their performance skills by providing insight into the “why” of theatre and acting—what conventions of the time were, why characters do what they do, and why the playwright needed to include certain elements, among other things.
- Understand current media and be better consumers of those media. Every period in history had its own media, and knowing how communication systems evolved allows contemporary students to fully explore theirs.

**Strategies for teaching**

The best part of theatre history is also its drawback: there’s just so much of it! It isn’t unusual for a teacher to get completely overwhelmed with all of the potential curriculum material. But this volume can be a blessing to an educator who has different courses and/or levels of experience to teach to. Theatre history and all its various periods, connections, facts, and contexts can be examined in many different ways, making it possible to have literally no repeat instruction.

So, like any other unit of curriculum, you need to decide what function theatre history will have in your program. The time machine activity worked because it was fun and engaging, and that is exactly what the teacher wanted from all of his instruction. He didn’t lose his focus in order to place this instruction in his classroom. Other teachers who have shared their successful strategies with me all seem to have avoided isolating theatre history instruction as a separate, stand-alone unit. Rather, they invariably have moved beyond the traditional means of teaching history and explored methods that have more impact and create more well-rounded theatre students. (On page 15, I list a series of period-specific exercises and activities that you can
try with your students.) Here are three examples:

One teacher devotes ten to fifteen minutes of every class to exploring elements of theatre history, thereby allowing her to tie the instruction to a myriad of educational objectives. With this approach, students make historical connections to whatever they happen to be studying.

Another teaches theatre history over his three drama courses. Each course focuses on one major portion of theatre history: Ancient Drama in Beginning Drama, Post-Medieval Drama in Intermediate Drama, and Modern Theatre (including Non-Western Theatre) in the Advanced Drama class. This over-arching framework allows the instructor to choose very specific texts for each course and shape his curriculum accordingly.

A third teacher defines all facets of instruction as theatre history units, and the advanced theatre class focuses on theatre history the entire year, alongside other theatre content curriculum. He uses theatre history as a lens through which all other theatre instruction is viewed.

Of course, what works for one teacher may not work for another. You need to find how to incorporate theatre history into your own curriculum in such a way that it will challenge and engage your students. To do that, you will have to define your goals and have a good sense of who your students are.

**Know your students first**

Knowing your students’ interests, personalities, and how they learn will help you shape your theatre history instruction style and curriculum. Here’s a breakdown of student learner styles and some suggestions on how to appeal to each type.

**Performance-based learners**

Many theatre teachers build their classrooms around acting and performance units. Students who are accustomed to learning about theatre through performance are used to being steeped in texts that allow them to examine character, objectives, physicality, voice, and relationships. In these classrooms, history instruction can bring depth and complexity to performances. One teacher I have observed focuses on physicality in performance. To that end, he teaches about the Spanish Golden Age, specifically discussing fan language. Certainly this technique is not one likely to be part of most stage performances. But it does allow students to explore how fan language was used onstage, why and how people (particularly women) sometimes communicated with subtle gestures during this era, and the power of non-verbal communication and subtext in their own lives.

Another example of performance-based history would be a unit about voice rooted in Restoration comedy. In this instance, students examine audience, feminine representation, and reflections of the world around them by looking at the witty and elevated language of the period. The playwrights of this era balanced style with a growing desire for realism and explored new ways of handling language to appeal to their upper-class audiences. With this in mind, students can examine how the voice can be used to convey the dense language as well as how adjustments can be made to appeal to contemporary audiences through a focus on voice and diction.

**Higher-order thinkers**

We all have students who are left-brain critical thinkers. You can appeal to these students by examining how theatre history influenced art creation over time. Pose problems for them to solve, encourage them to compare and contrast, and make connections over the span of theatre history. If you have the time, you can also allow them to create original pieces using historical principles, themes, and ideas.

One instructor had his students build a timeline of important theatre events and ideas, using giant length of butcher paper that he stretched across the floor. Important texts, artists, inventions, and political and cultural events were written on sticky notes and posted on the timeline. Students were encouraged to bring knowledge from other history classes into this activity. Once the butcher paper was littered with individual notes, the students were told that no note could be isolated on the timeline. In other words, every note needed to have an arrow connecting it to something else on the timeline—an event or person that was in revolt against another, an individual who influenced someone else, or plays, people, or periods that had impact across decades or centuries.

The students had to justify their connection choices, immediately pushing them into higher-order thinking. The butcher paper, and the tangled web of arrows it displayed, served as decoration in the classroom throughout the entire school year and allowed the theatre students to see the various influences of
people, texts, and events on each other and how nothing occurs in a vacuum.

A broad range of history lessons can touch on higher-order thinking if they prompt students to consider questions such as: Why did scripts end up as they did? How did cultural, economic, and political events influence the actors and playwrights of the period? How do those elements influence writers, performers, designers, and theatre students and teachers today? Simply adding these reflections to any unit, no matter its focus, can bring theatre history into your pre-existing curriculum.

**Problem-solvers and collaborators**

Many teachers use the theatre classroom as a place to hone skills of problem-solving and collaboration. While there are many activities designed for this purpose, these educational objectives can also be achieved by exploring eras of theatre history. For example, teachers can lead students to develop a list of the purposes of drama, and then have them work in teams to explore which times or cultures drove those purposes and which writers, texts, or performances align with them. This activity can be viewed as a kind of treasure hunt and can expand students’ understanding of cultures and societies throughout the history of the world. The problem-solvers in your class may be the ones who take the lead in this exercise, cherishing the detail work required.

Teachers can also look at collaboration through the theatre history lens in performance-based works as well. An example would be to consider drama in the Middle Ages. A central objective of the Medieval theatre was to instruct audiences. Productions were built by clergy and various guilds—individuals who had little formal training in the performing arts but who knew the objectives of playmaking. Looking at the plays of this time period and studying how individuals worked together to fold entertainment into a didactic message may help students learn how to develop educational or social activist scripts of their own.

**Risk-takers**

Some of the most important people in theatre history were individuals who broke free from conventions of the day and created something new. But for every Ibsen and Pirandello there are many people who attempted and failed along the way. Theatre history instruction tells the story of the victors, but your students should understand that in order to succeed you must be willing to fall flat. In other words, you want them to understand the value of risk-taking in their own theatrical efforts. The innovators of the twenty-first century will not emerge from your class unless you encourage experimentation. Some students are natural risk-takers and will immediately be drawn to historical figures who went their own way. Other, more tentative students will likely follow their lead.

Frame your instruction in terms of rule-breakers. Have students follow the model of individuals like Thespis in making non-traditional choices in performance or design. Explore eras when practitioners made breaks from convention and build your units of instruction focusing on those individuals or play texts. A teacher can even create a revolution. As a teacher, I introduced the anti-realist theatre movement by having all the students create ensemble pieces following a strict set of rules. Then, after presenting their pieces to the rest of the class, the students are told to rework their presentations, breaking all of the rules previously imposed upon them.

As a beginning teacher, I followed a format to teaching theatre history much like I had experienced in my college courses. As I noted at the outset of this article, I eventually realized that there was a better way to bring history to life for my students. I know now that effective theatre history teaching is not just about making students memorize stuff—it’s about exploring and experiencing the principles, the people, and events of theatre throughout time. Bullet points and classifications have their use, but they’re not nearly enough. Theatre history, like all good instruction, is complex, interconnected, relevant, and integral to the foundation of all theatre practice. Give it a home in your theatre curriculum, and you’ll find that there’s likely a moment of history in every lesson you teach.

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From the Greeks to the Absurdist: ideas and activities

It’s not hard to find texts and websites on your own that offer comprehensive overviews of theatre history. What we’ve included here are some writing, acting, and design activities and assignments in various historical periods that you might adapt for use in your classroom.

Greek
Writing: Have pairs of students create a contemporary story with a conflict that is resolved by a modern *deus ex machina*.

Acting: Take students out onto the football or baseball field and have them perform and fill the space using a cutting from a Greek tragedy that includes a reading with the chorus.

Design: Have students design and build expressive, larger-than-life masks that include a mouth design allowing for voice magnification.

Roman
Writing: Write a scene in which the characters are dominated by one passion that eventually leads to their downfall.

Acting: Teach student partnerships using a short stage combat scene.

Design: Using a generic set, have students explore how elements such as sound and actor positioning can be used to create different environments.

Medieval
Writing: Have students create a didactic piece wherein the characters represent certain traits or ideas.

Acting: Using the morality play *Everyman*, assign class members a character (Fellowship, Beauty, Knowledge). Have each class member create a physicality with specific gesture and facial expressions that demonstrate that character.

Design: Create groups of students in the class with each one representing a medieval guild that is responsible for a design aspect of a specific production. Have each guild come up with design ideas for that play.

Renaissance
Writing: Conduct writing exercises that allow students to compose prose and verse scripts.

Acting: Play with the commedia dell’arte stock characters’ movements and gestures and compare them to contemporary broad physical comedy.

Design: Lead the students through a perspective drawing of a street scene or generic location that could be used as a backdrop for several different scenes.

Neoclassical
Writing: Have students develop a five-minute script that must conform to a specific time, place, and action framework.

Acting: Divide students into groups to create dramatic retellings of fairytales that deliberately break every one of the neoclassical rules established by the Comédie-Française.

Design: Have students design costumes for characters that clearly define age, class, and emotional predisposition.

Restoration
Writing: Have students write a contemporary comedy of manners.

Acting: Lead students in voice and diction exercises that focus on verbal wit and comedy.

Modern theatre history movements or “-isms”
Symbolism: Lead the students through a series of tableaux exercises that involve emotions.

Realism: Take students through a few Uta Hagen exercises such as “Three Entrances,” “Immediacy,” and “Two-Minutes.”

Absurdist: Have students enter a space and, without a sense of performing, simply react to what they see and hear.

Existentialism: Write a scene exploring how fate overrides personal choice and accountability in a character.

Expressionism: Have students create a non-realistic, distorted set design that communicates mental state rather than physical location.

Theatre of the Oppressed: Together have the class decide on a school issue such as bullying, gossiping, or cheating. Have the class create a dramatic performance around that issue that could be performed in the school cafeteria during lunchtime.

—B.M. and S.M.