Is it beautiful?

Aesthetics in theatre education

BY JEFFREY LEPTAK-MOREAU

Aesthetics. The mere mention of the word is enough to send some arts teachers running for the door.

The Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary defines aesthetics as “the branch of philosophy dealing with such notions as the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the comic, etc., as applicable to the fine arts, with a view to establishing the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art, and the principles underlying or justifying such judgments.” Sounds good. But as we all know, coming up with a suitable twenty-first century definition that can serve not one, but all four arts disciplines in an educational setting, is a tall order. Certainly this is an easier task for some—visual arts teachers, for instance, have a long history with what is most commonly known as “philosophy of art.” On the other hand, for theatre educators, the idea of teaching aesthetics is relatively new and murky territory.

In the first place, the use of the term art is problematic for theatre teachers because sometimes it means specifically visual art and in other instances it means all of the visual and performing arts and literature. It does not help that throughout history some aestheticians opted for the narrower definition of aesthetics as the branch of philosophy dealing with such notions as the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the comic, etc., as applicable to the fine arts, with a view to establishing the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art, and the principles underlying or justifying such judgments. The patterns sorted into categories with a predictable range of answers. The patterns are difficult to distinguish from real life experiences such as the dramatic anguish prompted by a death in the family or the delight of viewing a rainbow bridging a river. You can prompt another spirited discussion among students about what is “real” in a script or on stage, but students will benefit from a view of aesthetics that includes more than aesthetic experience.

Another problem with aesthetics as a philosophy of the arts is that philosophy itself is a rather vague subject. When you were applying for teaching jobs and asked to explain your “philosophy of education,” did you really know what that question meant and did you have much confidence in your own answer?

So, for this article, we’re going to use aesthetic educator Louis Lankford’s definition. In Aesthetics: Issues and Inquiry, Lankford says aesthetics is “a group of concepts for understanding the nature of art. Aesthetic concepts address virtually all aspects of art, from process to product to response, and embrace both individual experiences and social phenomena.” Theatre, of course, fits fully under this umbrella for aesthetics.

The basics
At the core of aesthetics in theatre are basic elements to which we return time after time. Questions about these components and the relationships between them are at the heart of aesthetics. The questions suggested in the four funda-
ments listed here are just brief examples given to illustrate these core essentials in the aesthetics of theatre. It would be easy enough to ask many more questions as each area deserves individual book-length treatment.

1. The performance itself. The big question is “what is theatre?” which can be applied to individual examples in this manner: If you take a stand-up comedy act and put it on stage—think of productions like Rob Becker’s Defending the Caveman or Jackie Mason’s many forays onto Broadway—is that theatre? Are all comedy acts theatre? Many comedians such as Bill Cosby are essentially humorous storytellers. Is storytelling also theatre?

2. The makers. Playwrights, directors, actors, designers, and so on are all makers of theatre that warrant aesthetic attention. For example, how is what the play expresses related to the playwright? Can he write about something he has never experienced? How authentically can a man write about discrimination against women? To what extent can a director or designers impose their own vision over the playwright’s intentions?

3. The audience. Whether in the form of readers, listeners, or viewers, an audience embraces aesthetics. If you read a review of a play before seeing a performance, how does that affect your enjoyment? Your understanding? Can you understand the play but not enjoy it, or vice versa? Have you had some experience with the subject of the play that might cause you to respond differently from others in the audience, such as having visited the city where the play is set? If you read the novel Ragtime before you see the musical, is your response more valid than that of people with no other knowledge about the show?

4. The context of the theatrical experience. The culture and the society in which a theatrical event occurs always needs to be considered. What kinds of plays are most likely to get produced? What does not get produced and why? Who is making these decisions? Are certain segments of society overlooked because their concerns are not addressed on Broadway? Or any other stage? What role should “community standards” play?

Theatre concepts
A concept of theatre, used to distinguish theatre arts from other activities and to help determine what good theatre is, can sometimes be vague and easily challenged. A theatre theory created by a philosopher refines general concepts into specific characteristics of the art. Following are some of the major aesthetic theories discussed by philosophers of aesthetics, but most will sound familiar to you because you had these ideas yourself or heard others say them. You may not be a world-renowned scholar, but your thinking probably does concur sometimes with great aesthetic philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, or Suzanne Langer.

Instrumentalism emphasizes theatre as a tool to advance religious, social, or political points of view. The earliest plays in Greek theatre were meant to teach morals and many plays still do today. Any point of view is possible, so there could be a patriotic play supporting a war, and there might be a play designed to protest that same war. Many plays written for children and youth have a primary purpose of teaching values and behavior ranging from good etiquette to racial tolerance, but instrumentalism exists in adult professional theatre too. Twenty years ago, we had many plays on Broadway such as The Normal Heart, As Is, and Jeffrey that were meant to increase awareness of AIDS and its effects on society. Under the instrumental theory, theatre is judged by its success in changing people’s attitudes and actions. Efforts to censor theatre are usually a reaction to perceived instrumentalism in a production, to what some would consider a negative influence that the show might have.

Expressionism emphasizes the role of emotions in theatre. In this case, the theory became a prominent visual arts movement in Germany during the early twentieth century (although it’s important to remember that the theory predates the arts movement by hundreds of years). German Expressionism basically asserted that the intention is not to reproduce a subject accurately, but instead to portray it in such a way as to express the inner state of the artist. The theory, at least for theatre, maintains that the theatre artists feel certain emotions and then create a theatre performance to evoke similar emotions in the audience. For example, we might look at the difficult life of the young Tennessee Williams to find parallels in A Glass Menagerie, and ask ourselves if we feel the frustration and concern that he did as he sought his own identity and independence from his family. A variation of that theory focuses on the power of theatre to evoke strong emotions greater than anything the creators ever experienced. We then focus on the qualities in the performance itself which provoke emotions, such as a carefully arranged sequence of events in the plot or a special lighting effect at just the right moment. We would be less concerned with what Tennessee Williams felt and more interested in how he constructed powerful, unforgettable scenes or how the cast and crew brought those scenes to life. Either way, the play is judged by the intensity of emotions and their lingering effects.

Formalism emphasizes the composition and structural arrangement of elements in a performance. This theory also became prominent through a series of arts movements which emphasized composition over subject matter. Impressionism emphasized color and light, cubism emphasized line and shape, and then suddenly the art world was open to a wide variety of non-representational work such as Piet Mondrian’s Composition in White, Black, and Red. Like expressionism, the theory of formalism is far older than the arts movement. For example, the oldest concept of theatre in European tradition is Aristotle’s theory of tragedy with its six parts: plot, character, theme, diction, music, and spectacle. Aristotle believes that the proper combination of these formal elements would result in an effective, meaningful tragedy. You can also apply the formal elements of other visual and performing arts in creating theatre,
such as plot and character in writing, color and shape in design, time and space in movement, and so on. Under this theory, a performance is judged by its ability to sustain the attention of the audience through its composition of formal theatrical elements.

The institutional theory maintains that theatre is defined by the context in which the performance exists. For instance, if a performance happens in a theatre building, using members of the theatre labor unions, and gets reviewed by well-known theatre critics, then it must be theatre. Normally, nobody would consider a drum and bugle corps to be theatre, but when performed within the confines of a Broadway stage, Blast! became theatre and even won a Tony Award. However, that Tony was for “Special Theatrical Event,” which raises an aesthetic question about the difference between theatre and a “theatrical event.” Under the institutional theory, if the people creating the performance consider it to be theatre and a public knowledgeable about theatre accept it as such, then we have theatre (which would answer the earlier question about Defending the Caveman). However, institutional theory offers little basis for evaluating theatre without resorting to principles borrowed from other concepts of theatre; otherwise, all performances validated by theatre institutions would be equal in quality. Is Nathan Lane really a great comic actor, or does he just have a really good press agent? In institutional theory, it would be hard to say.

Critical theories are a group of interdisciplinary theories applied to aesthetic inquiry, such as Marxism, feminism, and any number of other -isms. Usually, a critical theory will examine theatre as representing some social or political concern with a particular interest in whether a theatrical work promotes or impedes some segment of society.

I once wrote a generally positive review of The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre, which limited its content to activities that fit a Eurocentric concept of theatre. Other reviewers rebuked the editors for not including a wide assortment of tribal customs, religious rituals, folk music, and dance. They thought the book denigrated and devalued the creative traditions of Africa and the entire African Diaspora. I actually share their concern, but for the purpose of that book review, I used an institutional theory of theatre, whereas others applied critical theory and thus reached a different judgment.

This does not exhaust the list of key concepts in aesthetics, but we can see that aesthetic concepts and questions such as these are at the heart of both theatre making and the audience experience. Theatre teachers do not have to add aesthetics to the curriculum, because if teachers try to address the full complexity of theatre as an art form, the aesthetic issues are already there lurking in the dark. Incorporating aesthetics into theatre curriculum planning and assessment will bring these issues out into the light, where they can be addressed directly in order to improve our theatre artistry and our understanding of theatre.

Children and philosophy
Some people might scoff at the idea of studying philosophy with children and adolescents, but since 1969, the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State University has generated considerable discussion of philosophy with children and not just the gifted or talented few, for as Moore adds, “The art of philosophy...” Aesthetics is important for all students and not just the gifted or talented, for as Moore adds, “The art in question is the art of living.” The skills gained from studying aesthetics are also in high demand among employers. The National Association of Colleges and Employers and the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (U.S. Department of Labor) both conducted surveys showing that critical thinking skills, analytical skills, and attention to detail rank high among the most highly-sought personal skills and qualities. The foundational concepts of aesthetics are most applicable in the arts class, but the basic skills acquired will be useful throughout life in any occupation or avocation.

Psychoanalyst Ellen Handler Spitz discovered some unexpected benefits of aesthetic education in a program for gifted and talented students that apply in any school theatre program. The students she studied showed a range of “psychological vulnerabilities” that

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will sound familiar, including social isolation due to feeling different from other students, excessive competitiveness, sometimes with bitterness towards others who do well, prematurely narrowed focus of interest sometimes encouraged by an enthusiastic family, and over-achievement due to a sense of self-worth tied too closely to performance. Spitz indicates these characteristics are due to an imbalance and lack of integration among intellectual, emotional, and social spheres. All young people experience some degree of difficulty, but you can see how these problems might be more acute among the highly emotional, extra-large egos that we often find in theatre classes. To help the students develop a healthier, holistic, more flexible sense of themselves and others, Spitz and colleagues developed a unit of aesthetic education focused on the theme of “identity” which improved students’ self-esteem and respect for their peers. In the collaborative art of theatre, only one person can get the part, but ensemble and teamwork remain essential for success. Aesthetics helps students take a broader view of themselves and others so that they aren’t all about “me, me, me” to their own detriment.

Philosophy can be taught in science, literature, or history, but Michael Parson, co-editor of Aesthetics and Education, says that if your aim is to help students with art, rather than philosophy, then aesthetics should be taught in the context of the arts class. Marilyn Stewart, a professor at Kutztown University, argues that aesthetic inquiry helps students in the arts organize their creative experience conceptually into coherent frameworks through sorting, categorizing, discovering relationships, and discerning differences. Moreover, aesthetics helps connect class concepts to the world outside. You aren’t likely to make a film with computer-generated images at school, but if your students saw the last two Lord of the Rings films or The Polar Express, you can talk about what acting will mean in a future that may be dominated by increasingly sophisticated CGI. Marcia Muelder Eaton, a past president of the American Society for Aesthetics, said that “the admonition to include aesthetics in the art curricula is a direct result of the belief that one crucial element of artistic activity is thinking about it.”

You might think of aesthetics as one more burdensome topic to be addressed in a theatre curriculum that is already top-heavy with acting, play analysis, theatre history, directing, technical theatre, and more. However, creating and reflecting upon their own theatre activities, and considering historical, cultural, and critical issues associated with their own art and that of others should be a natural part of any theatre program. Out of such activities, philosophical issues will regularly emerge in class—they almost certainly already have, even if you did not realize it—and you will be a more effective theatre teacher if you can address them in an aesthetic framework.

Although it is true that aesthetics is inherent in the study of theatre, it will not suffice to say “oh, we already do that.” To be truly effective in improving student achievement and to be politically astute in proving the importance of theatre in the school, aesthetics needs to be explicitly built into curriculum and assessment. The students need to know that they are learning key concepts in aesthetics and practicing aesthetic inquiry. The teachers need to be able to show results from their instruction, and parents and administrators need to see evidence of aesthetic development in practice. Then people will understand that theatre education is not a frill activity, not about playing around, having fun, and being “artsy,” but is an important part of developing intellectually astute students ready to take their place in an ever-widening world.

But are you ready to teach aesthetics in your theatre class yet? This article offers a rationale for aesthetics in theatre education; in the next issue of Teaching Theatre we will look at how young people learn aesthetics and examine some practical strategies for teaching them in theatre classes.

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