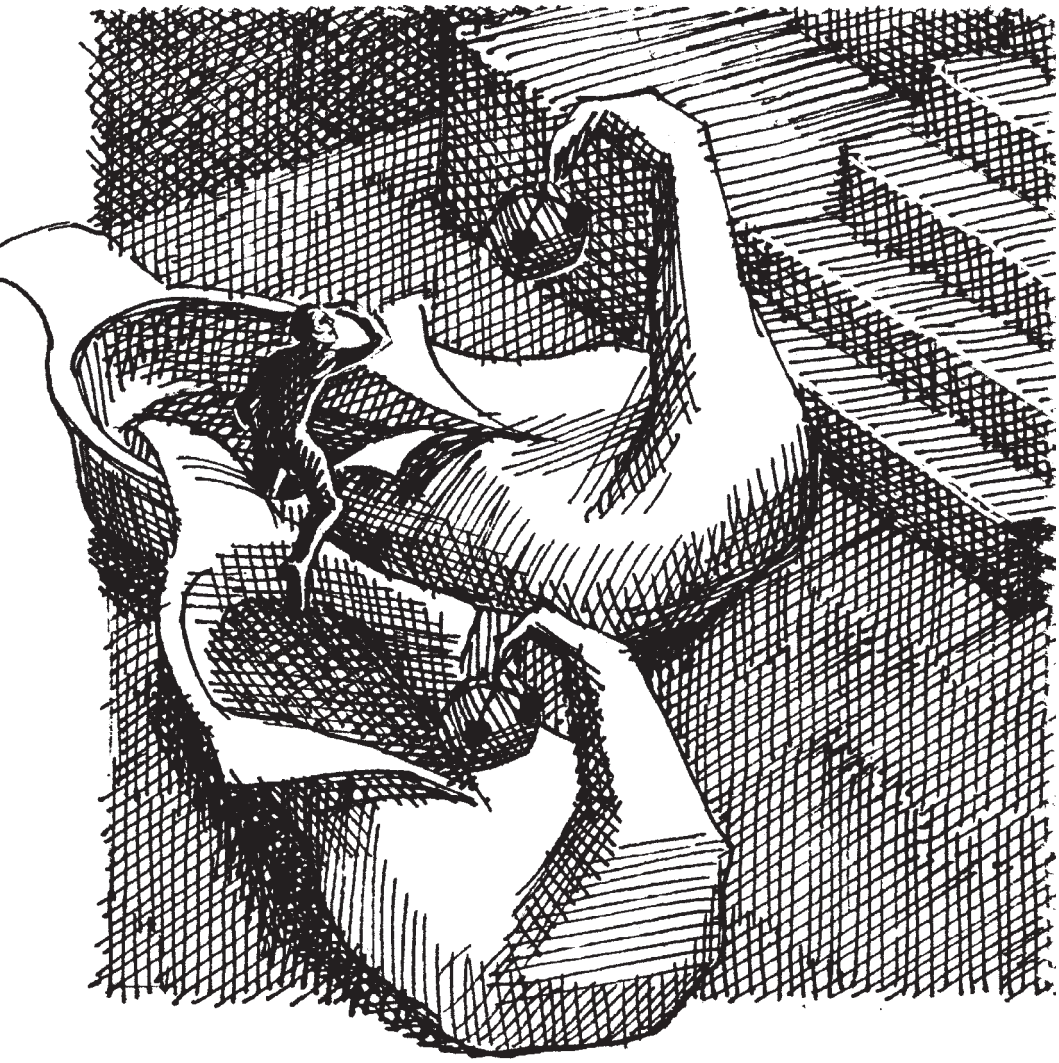
Values, standards, and goals

The many things that theatre teaches

BY BRUCE MILLER

In an era when education money seems to be evaporating and what funding there is seems more and more to go to toward standardizing the curriculum and raising test scores, it is not easy to keep arts programs vibrant and growing. Many of us in recent years have seen our funding cut back or, worse, our programming eliminated. We have been forced to do more with less, and it has not been unusual to find ourselves trying to justify our very existence to the administrations that watch over us.



This, of course, seems more than ironic to most of us because we know how important the work we do is. We see it on the vibrant flushed faces of our students—faces that in academic classes may be bland if not blank. We see it when we watch our students commit to literary material that in an academic class might leave them baffled or napping. And we see it in the way our students' behavior toward school and toward each other changes, over time, for the better. And we know that the reason for this is because of what they do with us during class time, and we know that what they do with us translates into their lives in general. The value of what we do is obvious, to us.

For several years, I taught in a private arts high school located close enough to Cambridge, Massachusetts, that educational researchers from Harvard's School of Education often used our programs as petri dishes for their studies. During my years there, it became eminently clear to me how important training in the arts is. It gave me great pleasure during my time as a secondary school drama teacher to speak about the value of an arts education, and I did so whenever I was asked to. I spoke to donors, researchers, fellow educators, to parents, to anyone who would listen.

Here are some of the things I would say.

What theatre students learn

Students who study theatre learn to develop their common sense, their will power, and their courage. They have to, because these qualities are essential to learning the craft of act-

ing, or stage management, or design. Theatre students also develop the muscles of their creativity. Again, they have to in order to do well.

Unlike most academic subjects, the arts require a student to extend beyond abstract thinking. But theatre students also develop their abilities to think logically, to analyze, to synthesize, and to make practical choices as well as artistic ones. Theatre students learn how to talk to people, how to listen to people, how to work with people collaboratively. They learn to use their time wisely or pay the consequences for not doing so. They learn to make the best choices in situations where there are no good choices. They learn to think and work independently. The creative and problem solving aspect of theatre training help our students learn who they are, and who they aren't. As a result, they learn to accept themselves or deal with themselves more effectively than students who have not studied in the arts.

Our students also learn how to step inside the shoes of someone other than themselves in ways that no other art form or academic subject provides for. They learn to empathize and sympathize. They learn to experience their feelings and to analyze them in ways that are not available in any other course of study. The collaborative nature of theatre forces students to learn how to accept others, or, at the least, how to deal with them effectively. Theatre students learn how to succeed, and how to fail. They learn how to watch others succeed and fail. They learn passion, and compassion. Most importantly, they learn to love something other than themselves, and they learn *how* to love something other than themselves.

In short, theatre students learn many things that an academic education alone will not teach them.

One of the most important qualities that theatre students acquire is the ability to work independently and to teach themselves what they need to learn. In many ways this is something more important than accumulated knowledge, because it means that each of our students will be learning for the rest of their lives. The ability to learn independently and the hunger to do so is a wonderfully important gift, one that even four years in college doesn't always bring.

Let's look a little more closely at the major points.

Learning to use common sense, will power, and courage. If we break theatre down into its most basic components, much of it does boil down to using common sense. What do I mean by common sense? Basically, it is the skill of applying what we have observed about human nature and the world around us to solve problems. As teachers that is probably how we should approach teaching theatre skills, if we don't already. As teachers of future designers, for instance, we require our students to use common sense when we ask them to focus on a problem and try to solve it within the budget and within the given space and equipment limitations. As teachers of acting we ask our students to find the conflict and play the objective in a way that will get them what they need. The choices that work best are the ones that are consistent with the way people behave. We all recognize believable yet interesting behavior when we see it. The process usually boils down to common sense, rather than artistic inspiration—if we choose to teach it that way. And I think we should. And when our students finally start relying on their common sense, the work they do is usually simpler, clearer, and stronger.

Where else but in a theatre classroom will the intensity of the power of empathy be so fully realized?

We teach our students will power when we ask them to stick with a difficult challenge when they don't get it at first. In the arts it sometimes takes a while for things to percolate. And of course sticking with it is an act of courage—particularly in the social climate of instant gratification where most of us live. Bottom line problem-solving is indeed about using common sense, but it is also an act of tremendous creativity. It's pretty hard to find a course in common sense, will power, courage, and creativity in any other part of the curriculum.

Logic, analysis, and synthesis. Any time a student is asked to pick up a script and make choices, on some level she is being asked to be a detective. Making an acting choice or a design choice requires making deductions based on the clues found in the script and then finding ways to assemble those choices physically on the stage. It is an act of, first, analysis, and then synthesis. If and when we teach theatre in that way, can there be any question that what we do is every bit as valid academically as what goes on in a literature class or even a geometry class? Unquestionably, when we teach in this way, there is thinking going on.

Social interpersonal skills. Theatre is collaborative. We all know that. But tell me where in the entire curriculum there exists a better venue for learning the social and collaborative skills so necessary for a student's success in life than in the process of making theatre? Certainly, group work is sometimes a part of the literature or science project, but our own experience as former students and as parents tells us that more often than not, group work in the academic classroom boils down to a few motivated

students doing the work and sharing their good grades with their slacker classmates. That's not true in a meaningful theatrical collaboration. The success or failure of the group depends on contributions from each participant. Everyone onstage and off must hold up his or her piece or the whole thing collapses. Our students truly learn to work together, or they learn about failure.

And learning to handle failure is another good lesson in the preparation for life. Time and again, the work our students do is publicly displayed. It succeeds or fails and the successes and failures are clearly identified with the individuals who created it. Our students learn how to handle both kinds of outcomes. If their egos take them too high, they get shot down. If their failures take them too low, they learn, over time, to pick themselves up, and do better the next time.

Empathy and compassion. Every time a friend succeeds or fails in the public space of theatre, our students learn about empathy and compassion. And sometimes through the collaborative process our students learn to extend themselves beyond those who they claim as their friends. This can only be good for the individual and for society as a whole.

Every time a student picks up a new script and is asked to think and feel as a particular character in a play might, whether it is to make a choice—as a designer or as an actor—he or she is getting training in socialization skills and in walking in someone else's shoes. What better time is there to learn such things than in middle school and high school, the cruelest years in a kid's life? Where else but in a theatre classroom will the intensity of the power of empathy be so fully realized?

Learning to learn independently. Everyone in theatre has his or her own job to do, and much of the work, while part of a larger whole, is done independently. Designers collaborate with directors and fellow designers on concept, but much of the time before all aspects of the production must come together, individuals are working alone. The designer researches in libraries or online, selects from the results of her investigations, and creates concepts and makes choices before bringing her ideas to her collaborators. Students in theatre must learn how to do that. Actors do their homework, researching time and place and customs and analyzing their scripts, all independently before setting foot in the rehearsal studio.

If we do our jobs right as teachers, that is what we are teaching our students to do. They are learning to work independently, they are teaching themselves, they are learning how to learn on their own. Giving them knowledge directly has value, but giving them the ability to acquire knowledge on their own has value for a lifetime.

What the data says

These are examples of the kinds of things that we, as theatre teachers, have always recognized. The study of theatre does indeed contribute to the development of our students. But in recent years, research has begun to validate what we have been observing for years. *Champions of Change*, a compilation of seven major studies published in 1999 that examined the role of arts education on the intellectual and behavioral lives of children, substantiated many of the observations I noted earlier. The report clearly shows that children participating in arts programs demonstrate improvement in problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, self-confidence and self-discipline, independence, commitment to task and excellence, work ethic, and responsibility, as well as demonstrating an increase in cognitive, creative, and critical skills.

In the same studies, theatre training was cited in particular for contributing to the gains in reading proficiency, self-concept, and motivation, and higher levels of empathy and tolerance. Thus what we have known all along is being validated scientifically, which of course is wonderful news. But if we were to simply accept this data at face value, we would be doing our students and ourselves a disservice. Doing so would presume that what each of us chooses to teach in the classroom, and how we do it, automatically leads to these desirable results. Obviously, that is naïve as well as a bit egotistical. There are many factors that affect the outcomes of the teaching we do. The way we conduct our classes and rehearsals, the values we project to our students through deliberate choices in curriculum, the time we spend on each topic, what we choose to emphasize or ignore in our classrooms, how we model to our students through our own behavior—each of these factors and many others can be tremendously influential. That means it is critically important that everything we do in our classrooms is carefully and consistently thought through and well executed.

Setting standards and teaching values

Let's take a look at how we handle values, for instance. This is an issue particularly close to me because I have a daughter who is in a magnet theatre program. Having been around theatre her whole life, she brings some of her father's values her to her own classroom training. These values sometimes conflict with the values of her classmates. I try to stay out of this as much as possible, but I do pick up a lot simply by listening. Some of what I hear is consistent with what I know about my own college conservatory students and their values.

What follows are some observations I've made that I think reflect the prevailing value systems in some arts education programs, from middle school through graduate-level actor training. I'll let you decide whether you can see some aspects of your

own program in this picture, and whether these are the values we should be teaching.

1. As part of the admission process into our conservatory acting program at the University of Miami, each candidate must write an essay about what he or she wants as a result of spending four years in our program. At least half of the essays I read center on the goal of becoming a star.

2. At a meeting of middle school Thespian parents that I attend, each parent is asked to tell why his or her child has selected a drama magnet program. Parents proudly talk about the magnificence of their children's talents, their uncontrollable energy, and their need for showing off. They *also* talk of their children's desire to become stars. No one, not even the teachers conducting the meeting, speaks about learning the craft of acting.

3. During the stretch of time that precedes auditions for the big middle school production that is coming up, many actors in the magnet program say they're not interested in the lead role. Their reason? Too much memorization involved in the role.

4. Throughout the rehearsal period for that same play, many students fail to memorize their lines by set deadlines and some far beyond. Students are resentful at the pressure to do so. During the rehearsal process, student discipline continues to be a problem.

5. A student cries, and then begins to act out in the classroom when another student gets more praise than she did for a classroom performance. Neither the behavior nor the issue is addressed.

6. Programs and posters for an upcoming performance refer to cast members in the production with the word "starring." These same posters are placed all over the school.

Staying focused on the work

In spite of the fact that the middle school and high school years are some of the most difficult of childhood, we should not shy away from teaching values to students who may not want to hear about them. The values inherent in arts education and the teaching of them are too important to ignore. In fact I believe establishing those values in our students is every bit as important as the teaching of the art and craft itself. It seems to me that students who are committed to their theatre training must also be committed to the hard work involved in producing good art. And that requires learning to love the subject through a development of discipline and patience, and through a willingness to practice. It requires a commitment to mastery and to hard work.

These are the kinds of values that lead to a successful and rewarding life as well. When we allow our students to focus on stardom rather than on the work, when we allow our students to embrace values that are inconsistent with the goals and philosophy of our discipline, we are not only fostering false hopes—we are allowing our students to nurture a misconception about why they are studying art in the first place. In a culture where stardom has become royalty and hard work the occupation of suckers, allowing our classrooms and rehearsal halls to become places where such ideas are cultivated is anathema to me. Theatre can and should be the soil for just the opposite kind of thinking. Collaboration, support, empathy, creativity, hard work, success!

In the secondary school situation, we teach two kinds of students—those who take theatre as an elective and those who are supposed to be committed to the subject because they have chosen to study theatre as a core part of their curriculum. For the first kind of student, theatre may be something they are just passing through. Some of them will get hooked and of course those students must be nurtured. And of course, as we've seen, their experience with theatre should provide them with life skills that will continue to provide benefits. But for students who have chosen to study theatre seriously, besides these life skills, a core understanding of the value systems of theatre is essential. So is a commitment to that value system.

Working toward mastery

I often wonder why my own students respond to the work of their peers far less critically than they would to a movie, a TV show, or a professional stage play. My incoming freshmen will applaud work that is totally unbelievable and dull, yet an instant later they will be trashing a television star they have seen on the WB. In part, I believe it is because they have not been pushed to accept as part of their theatrical culture a professional standard, or they have not learned that receiving criticism is part of the artistic journey. I believe we must teach our students the difference between what is good and what is not, and if we do that with sensitivity, it is never too early to start.

Of course we must encourage our students' creativity, but everything they do is not good, and when it is not, students must be told why, and be given direction on how to fix it. Simply accepting anything our students do because they invested in it is not really helping them improve, or helping them toward excellence, or giving them skills they will need as adults. I believe we are sometimes far less critical in the theatre than our peers in other arts disciplines. I think what we accept in theatre as good, compared to what is being done in the dance department or the music department, substantiates this.

Standards are important. They must be taught and maintained. Excellence must be encouraged, and promoted. Mastery is not easy. It requires

strength and discipline and persistence. When we don't demand the highest standard possible, however, I believe we are failing in our responsibility. What message are we sending when every improv is good simply because it is spontaneous? What message are we sending when we have no criticism to offer up in scene work? Or when we let our students ignore the given circumstances and simply deliver the lines? What message are we sending when everyone is an A student?

Process and skills development

What specifics should we be teaching our students and why? I believe that craft is learned best by teaching the basics. The tangible basics. And the basics for me start with the script. Being able to read with comprehension, first of all, is not a useful sidebar to an actor's skills. It should be an essential part of the craft. I believe we must make that a clear expectation of our students, and if necessary, we must spend the time helping our students attain a reasonable proficiency. For me it is not okay that students in drama class can "star" in an improvisation or exercise, but cannot read a script, or read at all. If we make it seem anything less than essential to be able to do so, we are modeling the wrong values. But worse, we are failing to use our own classroom influence to push a student toward mastery of a skill essential for his or her success in life. We must use our positive influence with our students as effectively as we can.

In drama class it should not be enough just to be able to read a script superficially. An actor has to be able to read a script aloud, with nuance, with power, with commitment. In the profession, being able to read is not something that can be worked out after the audition. Actors must be able to bring a good reading to the table. If he or she cannot, then the role will go to someone else. This is a reality. Our students must know that and accept it as a fact of their lives. If we do not address that standard of the profession, if we tolerate our students' inability to do so, then we are not doing them a service.

Our students should be able to read the script in the way actors must. They must be able to analyze it and use the analysis effectively. They must be able to convert it into its simple story elements in order to tell the story—simply, clearly, and compellingly. That means finding the basic conflict and using the given circumstances found in the script accurately and effectively. That means finding objectives to play and playing them with all the life and death possible. That means listening with all their senses and being able to react in the moment.

Kids can learn to do this, if we demand from them the discipline required. In fact, many kids, because they lack the social inhibitions of full adulthood, can do it more easily than adults can. But they won't do it unless we expect it of them. If we suggest to our students that we value acting in a vacuum, that is what they will give us. If we make them think that doing it the same way every time is good, no matter what has changed on stage, then that is what they will give us. If we make them think we value accurate choreography at the expense of clearly defined action and reaction, then that is what they will give us.

We all recognize how safe it feels to have directed each of our actors until they can perform with the precision of a marching band. The choreography is beautiful, the timing as accurate as a Swiss watch, and the energy and tempo exciting. But the acting is little more than a machine we have created, and sacrificing learning about truthful acting for mechanical precision only makes for all kinds of habits that will have to be broken later.

When parents tell me about the fabulous middle school or high school program their children came from, invariably their touchstone for fabulous is the money spent on costumes and production values. It looks wonderful. It was like a Broadway production. You should see the tape, they tell me. And sometimes I do. Those productions often do look great. But the work on stage does not always match the production values. For me the glitz is tangential and irrelevant. I want to see actors telling the story, and all the glitz and pizzazz in the world does not compensate for the story that is badly told, or for the acting that is non-existent. Would we praise a student chamber ensemble in beautiful tuxedos if they couldn't play? Would we praise the dance program with great lights and lovely tutus if the young women in those costumes were not performing well? I think not. But don't we often choose to ignore what we are seeing on stage in our own theatrical productions? I think sometimes we do.

The standards we establish for our students are up to us. The values we communicate and model to our students are up to us. Most of us clearly share the values, standards, and goals that I described above. Most of us commit to them on a daily basis in our work.

All of us face pressures that keep us from realizing our desires to accomplish our most important missions. These obstacles include administrative limits, expectations of parents, our own students' attitudes, and our own fears about looking bad or about failing. But administrators can be persuaded, and parents can be re-educated about what we do in the classroom and in production. Our students will see the difference in what they can produce in themselves and with each other if we demand it of them. And we, by recommitting to the things we know are most important in theatre and in preparing our students for life, will ultimately derive more satisfaction from helping to change our students for the better. The statistics show us that arts training already does this, that we are doing it ev-

ery day. But I believe that we can do what we do even better than we already do it. The question is: are we ready to take on the challenge? I believe we are. I believe we can. I believe we should.

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