

# THEATRE.EDU

**Bonnie Marranca**

No sooner had *PAJ* 103 been published, featuring “The Education of the Artist” section of articles decrying the tenuous professional rewards of MFAs in playwriting and acting, and theatre training tied to the “market” rather than enabling artistic experimentation, than *The Chronicle of Higher Education* appeared with “An Argument for Eliminating the Doctorate in Theater” (January 15, 2013). On a daily basis in this paper there are news stories about the challenge to universities from online courses, the denigration of liberal arts in a technocratic society, the precarious situation of scholarly publishing, rising tuition, and the scarcity of tenure positions. Readers are treated to a litany of current crises or a set of pieties about the value of liberal arts and humanities in the university, which increasingly mirrors corporate culture and a contracting environment for faculty empowerment.

I am not sure why we should single out for banishment the PhD in Theatre when almost any other subject area involved in the creation of culture and intellectual life is equally threatened by the new academic world order and the whims of the global marketplace. Spiraling administrative departments spend an inordinate amount of time assessing what increasingly appears to be overly educated, specialized faculty in many programs, and obsessing over learning outcomes. Still, there is a vast disconnect between the decreased intellectual rigor of undergraduate programs in Theatre, focused on plays and productions, and the jump to graduate school, which is moving away from dramatic literature, both levels still fixed in departmental tracks of playwriting, acting and directing. As construed today, the organization of theatre study and theatre training in the university and professional schools is largely outmoded in the 21st century.

As for the beleaguered PhD, it would be a good idea to rethink the agonizing period of research and writing of those dissertations that merely synthesize scholarship already in circulation. On several occasions I have lamented in the pages of *PAJ* the absence of histories of institutions, biographies, monographs, and documentation of artistic processes, which have mainly fallen by the wayside as doctoral students became mired in theoretical discourse, neglecting these much-needed studies. Instead of individuals working alone on dissertations that can take two or more years to complete only to face diminishing opportunities in a publishing industry that cannot sustain scholarly demands (yes, there are e-books as an alternative), why not organize clusters of students and scholars to work on shorter forms of research in emergent fields that focus on essays and other forms of writing and reportage? (Journals are becoming increasingly significant as research material.) It is important for theatre scholars to avoid redundant scholarship in favor of also cultivating serious journalism by contributing their efforts to research in public policy, urban planning, institutional critique, and community partnerships, besides commentary on art works and art practices.

It would also be worthwhile to provide graduate students with skills for working in archives, foundations, editing, translation, curating, and administration. (That would require reorganizing class time to allow for more flexible work and apprenticeships.) Added to foundational historical studies, important critical texts and investigation of art practices, students would have many more options and perspectives over their working lives. Furthermore, it would empower students to shape their own lives more independently, beyond the grip of institutional exigency. This shift is a necessity after years of preparing to teach in specialized departments in the face of decreasing tenure opportunities and probable departmental consolidation. (If “interdisciplinarity” is so important in university-speak, why are departments and faculty almost exclusively discipline-based in their hiring practices?)

By now for many years doctoral students—let’s take the example of those in New York—have been expected to develop a substantial publishing record, often competing for space in periodicals with faculty, well before they graduate. They attend conferences and specialize early in chosen fields and seek out current theatrical offerings to bolster their research interests. A desperate careerism and strategizing now characterizes the climate of graduate school and the early years of entering the profession, added to a psychology of fear that avoids risk and resistance to the systems in place. This situation leaves insufficient time for doing new research outside of classroom subjects and for actually experiencing multiple art forms, while forcing narrow specialization in those areas deemed worthy subjects and methodologies. Let me be clear: I am not advocating an abandonment of scholarship and intellectual rigor. I am proposing that intellectual energy and practical skills be redirected to sustainable forms of creative activity in expanded areas of social and cultural life and through multiple forms of research and writing.

Now is a time when one of the essential problems facing the arts, in my view, is the lack of knowledge of each other’s fields that those studying and curating performance, visual arts and dance demonstrate, true even in New York City museums and performance homes. In addition, we are still not training arts critics outside of their specialties, an oversight that impacts the evolution of critical vocabularies, when we should be moving toward a more fully integrated view across the arts. The collaborative, hybrid model is already more than a half-century old in the U.S., developed through numerous forms of artistic practice outside the mainstream. It has served as a point of departure for new ways of being in the world, highlighting the intrinsic intermedial, intertextual, and intercultural nature of human interaction. Today we understand this perspective as the basis of democratic pluralism—an ethics of performance, as it were. That is the heart of what we define as “contemporary arts,” and, before that, called the “avant-garde.” We need make no apologies or justifications for working in the arts. We are not the infantry of gentrification. From the very start *PAJ* took its instruction from Hannah Arendt, the philosopher of the public square, who wrote: “Art works clearly are superior to all other things; since they stay longer in the world than anything else, they are the worldliest of things.”

What we need is a new ecology in the theatre that honors the gift of worldliness, starting in the university, which is the breeding ground for thinkers and artists, and moving out to artistic spaces and companies of artists. What’s happened in university departments, not just Theatre, is that real-world action is sublimated in the essay in the discussion of texts and artworks that exaggerate their “subversive” cultural impact. The essay can be the beginning of a critique but not the end point. It is time again for sweeping changes and grand visions in professional theatre and arts education to break through the stifling institutionalization at every level. Where are the impassioned manifestos and writings of artists and artistic directors? Where are the critics outraged by the juvenilia in our theatres? Where are the audiences who refuse to be pandered to?