“You are no longer creative when you give up”: technical theatre’s creative sleight of hand.

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The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts encompasses vocational education training programmes in technical theatre, otherwise known as production and design. Teaching and learning in the multiple strands of production and design centre on a complementary mix of instructional classes, imparting the principles, skills and disciplinary expertise, and hands-on workplace learning, whereby this cohort of students and lecturers manage and operate an extensive range of performance modes from straight theatre, musical theatre, dance and opera through to a spread of musical concerts. However, teachers and students, involved in the broad reach of technical theatre, covering arts administration, stage management, stage lighting, sound design and set and costume construction and design often find themselves in unsettling locations ‘behind-the-scenes’, isolated from the other performance disciplines and battling with perceptions that their practices are not creative. Their contributions are perceived as technical implementations of ‘someone else’s vision’. Such perceptions seem to dismiss the creative thinking required which operates often invisibly in the development and orchestration of the production, denying the complexity inherent in anything ‘technical’. In addressing the disparity between what is considered technical and what is considered creative, the paper draws on the

perceptions of a select number of current staff and seeks a way to meld the technical and the creative, the scientific and the artistic.

Introduction

In the recent UK Higher Education Academy report, *Mapping Technical Theatre Arts Training* (2012), Anna Farthing suggests that the term 'technical' is often used as a 'catch all' reference to a gamut of design and production orientated fields and that to do this is in an injustice to the "complex and sophisticated skills and understandings" that come with these positions (Farthing, p. 7). In our view, this underestimation of skills is something that arises often in the description of best practice by exceptional designers and production staff and the training of up and coming practitioners. The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) encompasses vocational education training programmes in technical theatre, otherwise known as production and design. In addressing the disparity between what is often in our experience considered technical and what is considered creative, this paper draws on the perceptions of three current staff (and their anecdotal experience in both industry and institution) in relation to what they see as impediments to viewing the technical, functional and pragmatic role of technical theatre as equal to a creative vision usually associated with performers and directorial and choreographic leadership. The participants were also asked to envisage solutions or strategies on how training might adapt to nurture perceptions of 'technical' artistry. Taking the Farthing report as departure point, we undertook a brief investigation with these three WAAPA staff to shed light on their experience and, based on their suggestions and thoughts, seek ways to meld the technical

and the creative, the scientific and the artistic. This paper outlines the background to the research problem, the methodology used and findings from our initial investigation.

Background

Teachers and students, involved in the broad reach of technical theatre at WAAPA, covering arts administration, stage management, stage lighting, sound design and set and costume construction and design often find themselves in unsettling locations 'behind-the-scenes', isolated from the other creative disciplines and battling with perceptions that their practices are purely functional and not creative. Dan Rebellato claims that the rise of the director and playwright in 1950s British theatre significantly shifted power relationships between the various roles within performance and its production, causing the separation of technical and creative functions allocated to theatre personnel (Rabellato, 1999). Technical practitioners' contributions are often perceived as the nuts and bolts implementations of 'someone else's vision'. This approach seems to dismiss the creative thinking required which can operate invisibly in the development and orchestration of the production, thus denying the complexity inherent in anything 'technical'. For the status of the disciplines involved and particularly for the integrity of the next generation in training, It is imperative that WAAPA staff reflect on this disparity and examine how, as a training institution, we might shift this perceptual problem through the behaviours of our staff and graduates.

Methodology

When approaching interviews with the Head of Costume (also known as Wardrobe) and of Lighting Design and the Line Manager of Production and Design (and lecturer of Stage Management), we prepared a series of open ended questions for an informal interview process.[1] This research design was chosen to encourage as much open conversation as possible without fear of reprisal, judgment or personal censorship. It is important to acknowledge that this paper has been prepared in the humanities tradition of analysis whereby social conditions includes the validity of perception, analogy and anecdotal information from key research sources, which in this case derived from the interviewees and the researchers' sense of the interdependence of industry and training institution. The methodology, therefore, concentrates on interpretation rather than upon strict adherence to a qualitative method of research and reporting. As indicated, this study is indicative of a more formal inquiry that participant would like to pursue given the necessary resources.

Findings

We were not surprised when responses dealt with evenly shared views concerning impediments and solutions. Overwhelmingly, the participants conveyed a sense of pride in the synthesis of creativity and functionality across the technical theatre disciplines but, at the same time, they observed that their assurance was not necessarily met in the training environment or in the professional industry. In fact, either directly or implied, the participants felt that the overall cultural environment should in fact nourish the creativity of all roles and functions in the performance space but that perceptions, internally and

[1] The names of interviewees have been deliberately withheld.

externally, do tend to favour the separation of the two. Common themes that emerged in the discussions centred on degrees of negativity toward certain technical roles, or a lack of understanding of what that role encompassed which could lead to contributors feeling a sense of isolation and a lack of respect for their efforts. Interestingly enough, there was also discussion on how adaptability, flexibility and the capacity to engage and learn from every opportunity that presented itself were the qualities needed for best practice in design and technical operations. Common terms or words used were synthesis, collaboration, hierarchy, barriers, interpretative and, not surprisingly, a recognition of the polarity or binary between creativity and practical or technical which was either intentionally emphasised ('there comes a time when the creative needs to become functional') or unconscious.

All three spoke of a sense of isolation from the artistic process particularly in being "divorced" from other creatives at the beginning of a project. The Head of Costume spoke of how, at times, the costume maker and fitter will often be excluded from the other departments/disciplines' information flow through official channels. Curiously, the failure to be notified about changes or crucial production information is invariably rectified by the costume students' unique role in relation to the performers—in a sense the students themselves compensated for protocol limitations. This alternative communication channel is established when costume students meet performers (rather than choreographers and directors) on a regular basis to measure, fit and discuss practicalities and pertinence of certain costume features with their colleagues. In that sense, costume people creatively use their particular means of communication in order to stay in the loop.

Time is a factor, which one participant noted, that limits the skill development range of costume students: if they are pressured to keep to schedule, to getting the show up and running within time constraints, they can become disconnected and inflexible and, thereby, closed to the complexities of creative solutions. This observation ties in with a recent barrage of disagreement on the UK theatre education list wherein the two pedagogical positions, university liberal arts' scholarship and work-place learning (vocational education), were at loggerheads. Intimations that workplace learning stymies critical reflection circulated in the debate, pitching practicality against a deeper (and by implication more creative) means of learning. Julie Wilkinson (personal communication, February 4th, 2013) of Manchester Metropolitan University recently commented on the debate surrounding the 'employability' of British arts graduates:

> Isn't this division between vocational and academic itself functioning as an ideological tool, to attempt to reintroduce old class divisions between those who had access to knowledge and the ability to generalize, and could therefore run the world, and those who had to roll their sleeves up? ... [we] have been involved in a long and interesting process of testing epistemological distinctions; an incomplete experiment, but one which is capable of more than serving the Market. So that our students might bring into existence a world we haven't thought of yet

This debate resonates with Berkeley's overview of the development of theatre courses in the US from 1945 to 1980 in the schism between advocates of liberal education and practitioners' needs for refined and dedicated skills in the profession. Berkeley views the challenge to lie in the construction of "coherent theories and practices that are directly relevant to students of the time and in ways that actively contribute to the process of defining and legitimizing new formulations of liberal education" (Berkeley, 2008, 67). Such opposing perceptions also ground the observation of a recent WAAPA review in which the

organisation was asked to reflect on the balance between its role as a production house and its obligation as an educational institution. That tension is evident in the Costume Head's statement that "creativity is secondary to the practical side" even while she emphatically confirmed that "[costume students] ARE creative artists: they need to recognise it." Ultimately the challenge for WAAPA will be to support the vocational education training of its students and the needs of liberal education whilst simultaneously nurturing recognition for the technical departments as creative resources.

Another participant's views on stage management places this tension in a more psychological context. She observed that if a stage manager student or indeed practitioner in the industry feels that their singular function is to control the show to begin and end on time and for cues to occur exactly as the cue sheet indicates then they are not engaged in the overall artistic process and instead become a "metronome of correct timing". A performance is like a living being, subject to impulses as much as to accident, so the stage manager's role has to embrace give and take, to anticipate the moment of a lighting change and to work in cohesion with the director's or choreographer's vision. Stage managers have to step in with solutions to small and, at times, major difficulties that may arise in rehearsal or performance. The role asks for sensitivity and support rather than one of control. Organisational balance, in this instance, bears the responsibility of personal adaptability.

When asked is there a point when you are no longer creative and purely functional, the lighting designer responded with "you are no longer creative when you give up". He did

note that, at a certain point, major changes in the operation of a show need to stop in order to breed trust between cast and crew but that this did not mean that technical operators or mechanists shouldn't be open to 'tweaking' the show, feeling and listening to the needs of live performance, night after night. The head of stage management also noted that "creativity never stops (if it does creativity is destroyed)" and so a good stage manager or lighting operator will know how to move with the show, feel and grow along with this living breathing beast.

It was noted that often issues surrounding Occupation Health and Safety come second to the celebration of the artistic vision imagining a trick, or a gimmick. Perhaps this stems from a perceived stardom, or what we have coined as a hierarchy of value, where significance is given wholly to the external appearances of performance rather than in the behind-the-scenes creativity personnel? The director commands greater status than the stage manager, yet without the stage manager the conceptual decisions taken by the director couldn't possibly be realised. Why is it that the mechanist and the marketing officer are not thanked along with the actor on opening night? Where does art meet science or even the common-sense of respect?

The Costume Head spoke at length about how creativity moves into functionality at a point wherein this-will-work and this-will-not-work and that for the most part in costume, at least, the role is interpretative; the interpretation of the vision of the director, choreographer and/or designer. However, with this identification of the role as interpretative also comes

the distinction of creativity in relation to pragmatism which possibly goes to the heart of what we might consider as a hierarchy of 'value' within the creative process – that the Australian cultural context of live performance values the director (conceptual creator) over the interpreter (the implementation of concept). This qualification of creativity was a continual theme amongst the three interviewed, which begs the question at what point does pragmatism become secondary to the creative contribution, or rather isn't on the job problem solving in fact creative decision making?

Training solutions

In terms of training, the Costume Head sets an exercise for first year costume students to understand the "creative judgement" process that is critical to the interpretation of design. She asks students to develop patterns in response to the design of a ballet bodice in order to demonstrate how people interpret things differently. This allows the students to understand that there really is no right and wrong answer to the task at hand which is to translate an image into the functional process of realising that garment. Their unique interpretation of the design is required of what is on paper and what they can gleam from the designer's instructions. The process involves listening and observation skills and the all-important activity of research. How did other costume-makers resolve the patterning of a bodice for dancers which allows for movement facility on the part of dancers without feeling uncomfortable or, at worst, leaving the dancer exposed on stage? In other words, the complete identification as a costume constructionist encompasses being creative with both the design concept and the implementation of a fully functional costume.

The need for cross-disciplinary learning in collaborative approaches to the artistic process was agreed by all as being valid and useful. The lighting designer spoke of a reciprocal relationship/collaborative process, where a 'good' director might suggest "I want something," with the emphasis on *something* leaving open the opportunity for a dialogue between director and designer, enabling the lighting designer to offer a possible solution or suggest a lighting state that might encapsulate the particular atmosphere the director is seeking. This collaborative approach breeds a sense of trust in working toward a shared vision. This interchange also means that all involved are not closed to discussion and to changes that inevitably occur as a production moves from concept to closing night. Perhaps part of the solution derives from the training: mixing with other disciplines and learning from their unique set of skills and from being a part of the evolution of the process. It is also interesting to note that on the job industry training is critical when it comes to learning how something functions in opposition to what a student might think is the most 'correct' way to run things. Learning how to be adaptable or, as the costume participant suggested, how not to antagonise fellow workers but, rather, how to read the signals for cooperative interpretation are vital. Such expertise might be something that can only really happen when one is thrown into the mix and has to learn how to adapt to different needs, situations and personalities.

The participants continually stressed the complementarity of the parts to the whole, of the vital input of each cog in the machine. One comment even suggested that, in the final analysis, audiences demand a variety of performers to appear on stage whereas members of

the costume department can have a job for life. The researchers received the impression that the strength of a production's vision of equity does prevail across the production and design department---these lecturers will not allow the students to imagine anything less than the understanding of the crucial role they play in the collaborative and creative act that is theatre.

However, the balance between creativity and technical precision is also necessary which, on the other side, is perhaps sometimes missing in the more audible voices of creative persona? Innovative creations rely as much on directorial know-how or technical expertise as on imaginative experiments in the unknown. According to the lighting designer, directors who rely solely on their "best capacity to imagine" can operate in the dark, as it were. So if there are creative decisions that are heavily reliant on the technical infrastructure then there needs to be a synthesis between the creative and the functional. The set designer, the lighting designer and the production manager along with the mechanist and the lighting engineer need to be in the rehearsal room earlier or at a greater frequency than they might normally be. The most effective and full creative experience depends on a mutual respect for the various roles. If the designer is in the workshop modelling a particular option only to discover when that feature is placed in production it won't work means a waste of resources. Common-sense suggests that the creative decision-makers need to collaborate from the beginning and continually brainstorm together to gain the best possible results.

The effectiveness of long-term collaboration, specifically in an educational environment, is encapsulated in Chen, Pulinkala and Robinson's (2010) description of the practice they call 'polyphonic dynamics.' Essentially, polyphonics refers to a production process of many voices where "the co-creators commit fully to a juggling act of sorts: one that honors the interchangeability of all theatrical signs" (127). This approach can be used to "cultivate inventiveness, initiation, collective responsibility, ownership of creative product, flexibility, relinquishing disciplinary control, and confidence" (127). The authors acknowledge that the process:

> [can] be more time-consuming and stressful than the traditional production approach; its success depends upon careful planning, flexibility with deadlines, positive relationships between theatre artists/educators (including a trust that undetermined creative solutions will emerge—albeit it later in the process), and more intensive group participation in the production and rehearsal processes. Should these conditions be in place, however, the educational benefits outweigh the challenges. (Chen et al, 2010, 127)

This practice-based research appears to resolve or, at least, accommodate the tension noted above between vocational work-place training and the critical creativity of liberal education indicative of the Wardrobe Head's concern with the limits production demands place on the development of students' holistic skills. However Chen et al appear to have the luxury of concentrating all efforts on one production at a time, in contrast with the multiple and, therefore, more complex production schedule framing WAAPA's operations.

Concomitantly, the polyphonic approach points to best practice within the industry, more closely associated with European theatre-making than with its counterparts in the US and

Australia. It is a "cultural failing" in Australian performance both in industry and in the training models that this long-term collaborative process doesn't happen in the majority of cases. Perhaps this situation arises because of financial restraints or time restrictions that prevent technicians from contributing to the creative process and safe production decision-making early in the process? Or perhaps, more relevant a question, is what can we learn from blending art with science, of exchanges between the conceptual with the functional to conclude that, ultimately, both are creative practices interdependently reliant on technical know-how. One would think that such collaborations could enable a trickle effect to ensue, meaning that our training institutions such as WAAPA might lead the way in supporting technical practitioners' convincing claims to creative status and perhaps lend support to a cultural shift in the industry at large. In conclusion, we finish with a tribute to the role of theatre technicians by designer Beeb Salzaar:

> To paraphrase Blanche DuBois, I have always depended on the kindness of techies ... Any designer who doesn't listen to a technician's suggestions is foolish ... The designer's job has now become like a conductor getting everyone to go in the same aesthetic direction (2012, p. 9).

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