

**Theatre Department Response to the External Review and
the University of Regina Report
Oct. 30, 2018**

The unit review and the externals' report regarding the Theatre Department were very positive and have motivated us to re-examine classes and programs. The result of this re-examination is a determination to return to offering the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (temporarily suspended in 2015) and to restructure the program, streamline the number of courses offered, ensuring the continuity of classes, and eliminating outdated courses. The new program will create a cohort amongst the students by front loading academic courses in the first year and tightly programming in the second, third and fourth year. This will allow students to build a team, working together towards a common and creative goal that will insure their success after graduation.

A major recommendation of the External Review is to create a unique degree, a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre, one that does not merely duplicate standard conservatory programs training actors and technicians to work in regional theatre companies and at festivals. The conservatory model does not accurately reflect the prospects of young theatre artists currently entering the Canadian theatre scene. A majority of our graduates will be faced with the need to create and market their own work, writing and staging original and self-produced shows in independent venues and Fringe festivals across the country.

Therefore, the aim of the Theatre Department is to develop a program to train young artists to create their own work so that they can sustain themselves in a competitive environment. In our proposed model, students will learn to devise innovative collective performances, in which each individual contributes to writing the script, developing the blueprint of the performance and, most importantly, realizing it in a professional and marketable way. The focus of their training will be to support exciting original work created and owned by the students.

Notwithstanding our new focus, traditional training will not be discarded. The program will continue to provide training in conventional theatre processes, focusing on playwriting, and workshopping new material using student actors, directors, designers, technicians and dramaturges who will take courses to develop and hone their craft. Actors will study the classics of the canon including modern and postmodern forms and learning the techniques of established teachers, such as, among others, Zeami, Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Hagen. Students interested in technical theatre and scenography will learn to build scenery and props, hang and focus lights, construct costumes, create sound plots and understand spatial design. That said, the Department's focus will shift towards developing new work rather than producing iterations of the classics.

Of course, it will be necessary to develop new courses and hire new faculty to accomplish these aims. The proposed scenario will allow us to make full use of the University's outstanding stage

facilities. The Main Stage, ShuBox Theatre, and RC 176 (a fully equipped studio) will provide venues for public performances of new works created by the students ideally supported by the necessary faculty, budget and resources to do so.

To be frank, based on the current much reduced number of faculty members, delivery of the proposed program will present challenges. At this point, the department comprises two professors (Pearce and Irwin), an associate professor (Bracht), a lecturer on a 2-year contract (Babayants) and one instructor (Hales). Campion College provides one professor (Groeneveld), who teaches most of the studies classes. The two professors are also Associate Deans, a situation that limits the number of courses they teach. Very recently, the Department was also impacted by the unexpected loss of a longstanding faculty member (Handerek), a position we hope to replace as soon as possible. Following the review, the department was given a 2-year lecturer position (Babayants), which has allowed us to continue teaching Handerek's courses for the short term. However, this position has not allowed the department to expand classes offered to include specialist subjects that have some real appeal in the current market. This is something we will need to do to ensure the success of the new program. In addition, the Department employs several sessional instructors to teach courses that would, in some cases, be better suited to tenured faculty to ensure continuity of training. Instead, we frequently employ sessionals to teach courses that are not core to the program, but attract large numbers of students, who come for one class and often remain. The aim is to continue using our sessional budget to provide these courses.

The staff of the Theatre Department consists of an administrative assistant who is shared with the Creative Technologies / Interdisciplinary program; a scenic carpenter and a wardrobe supervisor. The administrative assistant and scenic carpenter are full-year appointments, while the wardrobe supervisor is on an eight-month appointment. The scenic carpenter and the wardrobe supervisor construct the sets and the costumes for the department's productions while also supervising students working on projects in their respective shops and occasionally functioning as sessional instructors.

The limited faculty and staff restricts the number of projects / performances built and presented on our stages. The impact of this is that we are unable to showcase what is arguably the department's greatest strength and attraction to students, the University Theatre and the Shu-Box Theatre. These performance venues are amongst the finest in Western Canada, rivalling those of the University of Alberta, University of Victoria and UBC. Furthermore, the support spaces, the scene shop and the costume shop, are superior to most professional theatre shops in Canadian theatres. Obviously, we need to make better use of our facilities.

It is notable that both the External Review and the in-depth Report from the Arts Alliance of Saskatchewan address the fact that the Theatre Department historically produced two plays per

semester for the university population and the general public.¹ This schedule provided our audience the opportunity to see four productions per year – shows not normally presented by Regina’s professional theatre, community-based and amateur companies. The lack of faculty to direct, design and co-ordinate the technical requirements for productions have forced the Department to decrease the of number of productions to one per semester. Without a doubt, this move reduces our profile and presence in the community. Emphatically, the Department wants to present more productions but human resources are not sufficient to do so. It should be noted that Department productions are accredited classes, so each production means that human resources are not available to support other courses: we rob Peter to pay Paul. Since the majority of the students want desperately to be onstage or backstage, we must offer more productions to attract and satisfy students. However, our hands are tied in this regard.

The proposed new Bachelor of Fine Arts allows the incoming student to fulfill the majority of her required courses (outside the Department) in the first two semesters while providing one theatre course focused on work created by the students themselves. It culminates in blockbuster cabaret, allowing for maximum skills training with minimum technical support required. The course provides students with a taste of theatre and the chance to discover if they wish to continue in the program. The value to the student, should she choose to leave, is that the courses already taken are readily transferrable: the majority of the first-year courses are also required by other programs in the arts and humanities. The value to the student who chooses to continue in Theatre is that she has already begun to develop a cohort with whom she will work creatively for the rest of the program. One of the major strengths of the Department’s previous Bachelor of Fine Arts degree was that students were able to work, learn and grow together, forming a network that served them well after graduation as they professionalized. This compelling factor has been lost in our current program.

In the second, third and fourth years of the proposed program, students focus on their craft, acquiring the basic skills required by the theatre industry however or wherever they enter it. Acting students will explore classical training methods, newer approaches to theatre and skills corresponding to diverse media platforms. Voice and movement classes will be prioritized in the program as core classes for acting students. These classes were lost with the change to the Bachelor of Arts degree, which was necessitated by shrinking faculty resources and budgets, and as other classes were deemed more important. The loss made for a significantly diminished program and it will need to be addressed in the new program. Technical and scenography students will concentrate on learning their craft in a scheduled progression to insure they have the basic skills that allow them to handle more complicated senior level classes. The program will become lockstep to keep the classes working together: this continuity is missing from the present program as students are

¹Paul Gingrich, Fine Arts and Arts Education Resources at Saskatchewan Universities. Saskatchewan Arts Alliance (2015) http://artsalliance.sk.ca/rsu_docs/fine-arts-and-arts-education-resources-at-saskatchewan-universities-2015.pdf (checked 28 / 10 / 2018).

allowed to pick and choose their classes with little attention paid to cohort building. To reiterate, the aim of the proposed program is to ensure that students have mastered certain skills, in a collaborative environment, building a team that can take creative chances, developing innovative new works that cycles through such diverse forms as experimental, devised, and site-specific performance, musicals and theatre for young audiences (TYA).

It is worth elaborating for a moment on the development of scripts and productions aimed at young audiences. A large number of students in Saskatchewan had their first exposure to theatre sitting on a gym floor watching the Globe Theatre's school tour. The company toured small shows throughout the province, consisting of four actors, a stage manager and a reel to reel tape machine. The shows were chosen to engage younger as well as senior students. Plays were entertaining but always issues-based and they spoke passionately to young people. The Department wants to return to those roots to become the Canadian Centre for Theatre for Young Audiences. Research has uncovered no such dedicated program in the country and there is a need for it. When the Globe School Tour was operating, many of our graduates cut their teeth working on it, frequently earning a membership in Canadian Actor's Equity Association, a card that recognized them as professionals and opened doors for further work. With the departure of the Globe Theatre's original artistic director, Ken Kramer in 1990, the program became a low priority and was soon dropped entirely.

A successful Theatre for Young Audiences program, centered in the Theatre Department will feed into a professional company that tours to schools. The company will comprise fourth year students and graduates of the program. All children are natural performers and play is the essence of theatre: they are avid audiences. A TYA program will reach out to these children helping them to learn and grow as creative individuals. Theatre can also reach out to young people who are variously abled or are new comers to the province. The prospect of being at the forefront of an artistic movement that is so desperately needed is exciting and is why we want to revitalize this initiative.

There is no doubt that Faculty research will increase with a focus on the creation of new work. Theatre for Young Audiences, by its nature, requires research into multiple areas such as accessibility and sustainability, cultural and social issues, physical and psychological challenges faced by young adults, and the difficulty of growing up in a fast-changing world. We have built strong ties with the Faculty of Social Work, Kinesiology and with First Nations University of Canada through Dr. Jesse Archibald-Barber who has done tremendous work with Indigenous youths through theatre practice. Addressing reconciliation in the province by way of Theatre for Young Audiences, will provides many opportunities to include Indigenous and settler cultures through performance that speak to the next generation.

In conclusion, we would like to draw attention to two proposals made by the External Committee that cause concern. Firstly, is the suggestion to use the proscenium stage of University Theatre less

and the experimental black box theatre, the Shu-Box, more. The report's recommendation that the University Theatre be used more as rental road house and less as a teaching space runs counter to effective training of Theatre students. Indeed, in the last few years, due to severely stretched budgets and resources, the department has under-used the larger theatre, with all its teaching capabilities, choosing instead to focus on smaller productions in the Shu-Box. This has been interpreted, justifiably, as a diminishment of our training program. Students want to work on the more professional stage and rightly feel that, without that option, their level of training is compromised. Secondly, the External Committee's suggestion that students interact more with community and professional groups to increase training options causes concern. While we do seek accredited placements for interested students, we do not condone students working for free. Such practice is one-sided, benefitting the community group more than the student. The practice does not enhance the student's training as the demands of working for a professional company may be greater than the student's skill level. Having said that, we support the practice of renting out the University's theatre spaces to professional and community groups who then offer paid employment to senior students who possess the proper skills for the job.

As indicated, moving forward with the proposed new program will be a severe challenge under the present conditions. The facility and its capital resources are more than adequate for what we propose, but the faculty and support staff are too few in number. To teach the new program, one that will well serve the students' needs as well as the needs of the community, we require two new permanent positions. That is to say, we ask that the current 2-year contract position be made permanent and for a position to replace the Handerek position. Furthermore, there are two pending retirements of senior faculty members occurring before the proposed program will take effect (Irwin and Hales). With these retirements and no replacements, in the next few years, there will remain only one faculty member teaching set and costume design and no one to teach the technical theatre elements of lighting, sound, technical direction and stage management. It is imperative that these members be replaced to ensure that the student's education is not jeopardized and that the community be served with adequately trained artists. We suggest that the retirements be viewed as an opportunity to bring onboard younger educators who will bring innovative approaches to the art form, revitalizing the program and moving it forward into an ever-changing world of live and mediatized performance.