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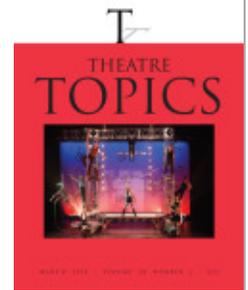
2017 ATHE Presidential Address

Harvey Young

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# 2017 ATHE Presidential Address

*Harvey Young*

When I joined the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) in summer 1999, eighteen years ago, and attended my first conference in Toronto, I knew very little about ATHE. It was one of several academic associations to which I had been directed by faculty. I returned to ATHE over the next few years, not because I had a clear sense of what the association does, but because I liked the people. ATHE members are passionate about theatre, devoted to pedagogy, and eager to share new skills and research with one another. ATHE friends helped me to appreciate the scope and mission of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. When smart, driven, charismatic educators like J. Ellen Gainor, Daniel Banks, David Kaye, and of course Patricia Ybarra (to name just a few) invite you to join them in serving the discipline of theatre, you leap at the opportunity.

I was reintroduced to our association through service. I learned about ATHE's mission to advocate for theatre in higher education. I witnessed how ATHE's twenty-three focus groups exist as wellsprings of support and mentorship for members. I watched the governing council and focus-group representatives devise guidelines on how to tenure artists and spotlight the challenges faced by contingent faculty. Part of me wants to encourage all new and continuing ATHE members to walk the path that I traveled: ease into service; discover for yourself, and at your own pace, how central an association like ATHE is to what we, as theatre educators and practitioners, do.

However, we need to race, not walk, toward initiatives that champion the arts and humanities on college and university campuses. The overall number of college theatre programs has been on the decline over the past decade. Every year, a handful of schools announces plans to suspend admission to their theatre major or outlines significant cuts that threaten the integrity of their performing arts units.

To put this in perspective: over the past twelve months, nine colleges and universities have made decisions that significantly compromise theatre education and training on their campuses. Northern Essex Community College in Massachusetts, SUNY/Stony Brook in New York, Eastern Kentucky University, Faulker Christian University in Alabama, St. Catherine's University in Minnesota, and Central Arizona College have announced plans to close their theatre programs (Barker; Burylo; Eider; Fisher; LaBella; Olson). Regents University in Virginia and the University of Missouri–Kansas City are facing budget cuts that many faculty believe will weaken their programs (Fossa; Spencer). Harvard, the wealthiest university in the world, has elected to suspend rather than invest in its graduate actor-training program (Gay).

The decision to defund, suspend, or close theatre programs is not made overnight. College administrators, borrowing a page from politicians, often solicit public comment. They hint at their intentions. They announce the formation of an exploratory committee to consider the viability of the arts on campus and then monitor the extent of opposition. The louder the outcry, the less likely the cuts will be implemented. Unfortunately, the outcry has not been consistently loud or forceful.

We need to do a better job speaking on behalf of theatre on college campuses. We cannot be outraged at the calls to shutter the National Endowment for the Humanities and be comparatively

silent about the decision to cut funding or suspend admission at the university across town or in the neighboring state (Sopan). We need to be prepared to answer questions. Why should a college prioritize spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, and often millions of dollars, every year to support theatre rather than investing in another initiative? If we do not speak up, our silence will be taken as consent to closure.

I offer a couple suggestions. These are things to say to administrators who shrug when you tell them that the arts are important, that great societies are remembered for their cultural innovations, and that studies suggest that exposure to the arts increases empathy.

### **Assertion 1**

While it is true that many theatre majors will not be practicing artists decades after graduation, this does not mean that the study of theatre is not worthwhile. Theatre majors, in addition to becoming arts professionals, also become lawyers, consultants, scientists, and physicians. Their entrée into these professions was enabled, in part, by the embrace of theatre studies methods by other disciplines:

- Scientific communities are abuzz about the possibilities of “pop-up” research clusters: the process of gathering a group of previously unaffiliated researchers to work together for a short duration on a single project (Scheiber). It is new and exciting—*collaboration*—and something that theatre has modeled from the very beginning.
- Business schools occasionally hire theatre professionals to teach storytelling, with the idea that the ability to tell a story is a crucial industry skill: pitching ideas to investors.
- Law schools sometimes prepare students for trial work by offering workshops on the performance of sincerity, with the understanding that juries will side with the lawyer who seems most trustworthy.
- Medical schools partner with theatre programs on a variety of initiatives to improve the patient/doctor dynamic, including teaching doctors to be better listeners and creating models for shared decision-making.

More examples can be given. In short, a robust theatre-training program benefits the entire college and university; it promotes innovation within and beyond STEM disciplines.

### **Assertion 2**

Theatre programs are good for the health of a college or university. Live performance, whether theatre or athletics, fosters and bolsters community; it creates opportunities for strangers to come together, to share a space and feel included as part of a larger whole. Theatre plays an outsize role in fostering school pride. It has been reported that one in twelve college students has a suicide plan (Bohner). Theatre can help students feel less isolated, less siloed, less alone; it can change a person’s perspective on life.

We need to be able to talk about the value of the fine and performing arts not only aesthetically, but also practically. We need to demonstrate that the performing arts comprise the backbone of any good college or university, and therefore cannot and should not be dismissed as an appendage.

Despite the tone of contemporary political discourse and the slow decline in the number of theatre programs, I am optimistic about the future of theatre studies. The case of SUNY/Albany in New York reminds us that even closed programs can be resurrected with persistent, engaged advocacy (Adler).

The best indication of a bright future is the sheer number of high school students who express an interest in studying the arts in college. According to CollegeBoard, the organization that oversees the PSAT and the SAT, the number of students interested in studying engineering and business management only slightly exceeds the number interested in the fine and performing arts. CollegeBoard's surveys reveal that considerably more students are interested in studying the visual and performing arts in college than biological/biomedical sciences. To focus solely on theatre, every year for the past decade, approximately 20,000 high schoolers have identified theatre as their intended major. Theatre is very much in demand.

Unfortunately, the story of theatre—its wide appeal, its role in boosting school spirit and creating community, its transformative role in STEM areas—has not been consistently told. I invite you to join other ATHE members in being vocal about the importance of the arts. To amplify our voices ATHE will launch a series of new initiatives. These initiatives, grouped under the themes of *engagement*, *mentorship*, *access*, and *inspiration*, are outlined in the association's new strategic plan. The plan will be our North Star, our guiding light. As outlined in the plan,

- we will directly engage university leaders and elected officials to discuss and promote the value of the performing arts, in addition to cultivating alliances with other associations with shared interests;
- we will support innovation in both practice and pedagogy by sponsoring more workshops, webinars, and creating opportunities for collaboration; and
- we will make the association more accessible, not only by actively promoting a variety of inclusion initiatives, but also by developing a series of smaller, ATHE-sponsored regional symposia and workshops to reach members where they live. The hope is that this effort will help sustain professional networks, inspire pedagogical and artistic innovation, and bolster regional arts advocacy.

In closing, and as a signal of our long-term commitment to engagement, mentorship, access, inspiration, and of course advocacy for theatre in higher education, ATHE's governing council thought that it would be helpful to identify future conference locations multiple years in advance. Obviously, if we know where we are going, then it will be easier to chart the journey. Focus groups can plan collaborations years in advance. Sponsorships, to underwrite receptions and lower costs, will be easier to attract. ATHE will be able to identify and partner with local arts organizations and colleges. In short, we can plan for the future—and that is what we will continue to do in Boston in 2018, Orlando in 2019, and Detroit in 2020.

Thank You.

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*Harvey Young* is president of ATHE and dean of Boston University's College of Fine Arts. He delivered his inaugural presidential address in August 2017 at the association's annual conference in Las Vegas.

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