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Fletcher—Explanation of Theatre History Course

Four choices define my approach to undergraduate theatre history courses (a two-sequence, 3000-level course required of all Theatre majors).

First, I use Wilson and Goldfarb's *Living Theatre: A History*. Now, I realize this isn't the cool history text for in-the-know scholars. It boasts neither the encyclopedic depth of Brockett and Hildy's *History of the Theatre* nor the destabilizing structure and multicultural focus of McConachie, Sorgenfrei, Williams, and Zarrilli's *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*. Indeed, Wilson and Goldfarb is relentlessly linear, mainly Anglo-European, and relatively simplistic.

Yet I continue to use it despite the appeal of other texts (or of no text). Why? I've found that, precisely because of its simplicity, I can lead my students more easily into adopting a critical stance toward its construction of history. Crucial to this task is a core assignment of my class, chapter study guides (the idea for which I borrowed from Megan Sanborn-Jones). For every chapter they read from Wilson and Goldfarb, my students have to complete a detailed questionnaire on the chapter. Some of the questions simply ask students about items I want them to absorb (e.g., Aristotle's definition of tragedy). But other questions let me push students to think about how W&G represent history, e.g., "What do you think of the use of Shakespeare as a constant comparison point in the chapter on the Spanish Golden Age? What effects does this comparison have on readers' understanding of 17th century Spanish drama?" The balance of straightforward information and meta-historical inquiry seems to work form my classes. I include here an example of one of these study guides.

Second, I craft my play assignments to highlight historiographic issues, tensions between different eras' conceptions of theatre and performance. What if any dramaturgical interventions would a present-day university production of *Octoroon* require, and why? Such specific assignments discourage academic dishonesty (i.e., it's hard to find anything online about what Hrosvitha might have thought about Sor Juana's representation of women) while appealing to my production-oriented student body. I include a few of these prompts here.

Third, I have students do group performance projects twice a semester. I split my class up into six groups of five or six students apiece and give them a prompt with three question/projects. Some of these questions ask students to compare/contrast performance conventions or representational philosophies from multiple times/places/eras (ex: adapt the class tensions of a Restoration play to a present-day context). Others challenge students to apply some of the meta-historical perspectives we study to a production of a scene (ex: stage a scene from one of the plays we've read imagined as a religious ritual, then as a non-ritualistic, mimetic piece of theatre). The groups each choose one of these questions and stage a short (10-minute) response, knowing that each group member must be ready to discuss the group's choices. I frame these projects not as tests of acting/directing skill but as a way to use performance as a mode of inquiry. Students have found these projects to be among the most rewarding parts of the semester, and I agree. I include here as attachments the prompts (with student names omitted) for two such projects, one from the first Theatre History course (Greeks to Neoclassicism) and one from the second (English Restoration to the present).

Finally—something I discovered just this semester in the July 23, 2010 edition of *Newsweek.* There, science columnist Sharon Bagley wrote a brief piece on a finding by psychologists at the University of British Columbia, who found that an inordinate number of studies about cognition and perception rely on university students—undergrads—to construct their baseline assumptions about what's normal or

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natural for humans. Since a great deal of research goes on at universities and since undergraduates present a natural (and cheap) source of test subjects, the results of these tests tend to reflect the undergraduates' norms. While at times this presents no problem, at other times the results convey a false sense of human baseline reactions. In other words, argue the researchers Bagley writes about, research-based assumptions about psychology often appear to be "human" when in fact they are (in the researchers' term) WEIRD: specific to people from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic contexts.

I shared this article's findings with my theatre history students this semester, and I've found it inordinately useful as a kind of defamiliarization tool to help them think about the perspectival limits of present-day US (i.e., WEIRD) assumptions about what performance is and does. I invoke the WEIRD concept, for example, when I have them read a text that I anticipate they'll find odd or unusual (e.g., a Noh drama or play by Hrosvitha). I'm able to challenge them to consider whether it's the *text* that's weird or whether the strangeness comes from their own WEIRD assumptions. Students have picked up this usage and (to my delight) regularly use it to remind themselves and their classmates about the historical and cultural specificity of any one notion of what "theatre" is. I include the article's URL: http://www.newsweek.com/2010/07/23/what-s-really-human.html