

The Theater and the University: Two “Last” (and Lasting) Human Venues

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Address given as part at the 2014 Association for Theatre in Higher Education All-Conference Plenary on “Dream Activism and Pedagogies for a Changing America.”

“Idealism...may in itself be put down as the first ideal of the art theatre,” said Sheldon Cheney in 1917.¹ Our ephemeral art form is quintessentially defined by a near religious faith in the imperative of having visions. In Todd London’s recent collection, *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art*, one finds a magnificent gathering of over fifty credos and manifestos of the American theatre: 500 pages testifying to idealism as theatre’s inciting substance, its primary catalyst. “Every theater begins as an ideal,” says Todd London. “Every theater begins in dream form.”²

If every theater begins in dream form, can we say the same of universities? Does every university begin as an ideal? Of what stuff are its dreams made? As a parent of junior high school student, I recently received a solicitation from a high-end tutoring firm offering to coach my son in taking the SAT exam. This personalized letter advised, earnestly: “If you want to start preparing Aaron for these exams and eliminate the stress of this dreaded process, I encourage you to consider carefully the prep program you choose.” This letter, surely the first of what will be a cascade of direct marketing solicitations we will receive in the coming year, inaugurates my son’s journey to college as a “dreaded process.”

Of course not all dreams are ideals—some of them are nightmares, others are banal, strange, or simply forgotten. Not all dreams lead to actions, and indeed if they did, we wouldn’t get much sleep. But perhaps in theatre more than in other spheres of life (save the psychoanalyst’s couch), dreams are *expected* to become manifest. In our field, we expect dreams to become actions. As we think about our conference theme, “Dream Acts,” we

¹ Quoted in Todd London ed., *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art* (New York: Theatre Communications Group), p. vii.

² *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

might recall the words of the Gravedigger in *Hamlet* who says that every act “hath three branches—it is to act, to do, to perform.”³ What are the branches of our “dream acts”? They may be acts of a play; or acts done by a character; or acts of law; or performative acts that create through words: “I arrest you!” Or “I apologize.” If words *do* things, as J.L. Austin and Judith Butler have shown, can we also say that *dreams do act*?

We act out our dreams in theatre’s suspended space of “let’s pretend,” even if we know that our dreams may not come true. Our dreaming comes in cycles. Dreaming in the theatre is a practice that repeats: there is always another rehearsal, another play, another opening, another “take,” another chance to restore behaviors, or to renovate them. This is theatre’s redeeming paradox, what Alan Read calls the “banal miracle that is performance”; it is our Lazarus affect, which he defines as “the hopeful feeling that follows a theatrical effect that you know to be true.”⁴ The Lazarus affect reminds us, says Read, that theater, “the last human venue, unlike the irreparable world, has always been a place where you are given the chance to begin again, to recall how intimate an engagement could be and how truly political such reticent acts could become.”⁵ The theatre is always in danger of dying, and yet it always resurrects. Idealists make this happen. What if the university, like the theatre, is also a last human venue? Does it have a Lazarus affect? And if so, who activates this?

Just as the American theatre had its Hallie Flanagans and Luis Valdezs, the university has had its idealists, its Cardinal Newmans and John Deweys. Like theatre, universities are also based on cyclical re-enactments: each academic year, a new crop of students arrives, looking (to those of us who stay here for the long haul) somehow both younger and perpetually frozen in time. While the theatre is accustomed to dying and being reborn, for universities, dying is an unfamiliar and alarming experience. Of the public university in America, Michael Meranze said recently there is a

serious probability that the public university as we know it is dead. That isn't to say that it won't continue to function producing knowledge and graduates of various

³ Act V, scene 1.

⁴ Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: The Last Human Venue* (New York: Plagrove MacMillan, 2008), p. 279.

⁵ *Ibid.*

kinds, teaching as it does, etc. But it is winding down. It has become clear over the last decade that the public university is not fulfilling its fundamental social functions in terms of social mobility and mass education. Nor is it clear that it will be able to continue its research funding given the commitment to austerity in both state capitals and Washington D.C.⁶

How did this demise come about? The university is sometimes called the “city of intellect”⁷ and over the years (especially the last few decades), this city was gradually renovated, reconstructed, and transformed first into a series of disconnected and mutually competing suburbs, and then, when the commons of our community of scholars was sufficiently fractured or otherwise distracted, the city of intellect became in the last seven years, uncharacteristically, a space of rapid change.

While change and uncertainty have been founding principles of theatre since *forever*, universities are notoriously recalcitrant to change. In a famous 1964 book called *The Uses of the University*, Clark Kerr, the president of the University of California, quoted Heraclitus saying “nothing endures but change.” However, he also said that universities were an exception: “everything else changes, but the university mostly endures.”⁸ Kerr noted that of the eighty-five institutions in the Western world established by 1520 that still existed in recognizable forms by 1964, with similar functions and with unbroken histories, seventy of these were universities. The others were the Catholic church, national parliaments, and several Swiss canons. “Kings that rule, feudal lords with vassals, and guilds with monopolies are all gone,” said Kerr. However these seventy universities “are still in the same locations with some of the same buildings, with professors and students doing much the same things, and with governance carried on in much the same way.”⁹

⁶ Michael Meranze, “Towards a New Community of Scholars,” *Remaking the University* (blog), 14 June 2014, <http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2014/06/towards-new-community-of-scholars.html>. For a more thorough examination of the demise of America’s public universities, see Chris Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁷ See Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 64-95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*

If universities historically have been impervious to change, why was this so? Kerr offered several explanations. First universities at the time when he was writing had not been subjected to major technological transformation, the kind of radical change as that had otherwise happened in, say, industry, agriculture and transportation. But since Kerr's time, radical disruption has come also to the ivory tower: the digital revolution we are now experiencing is the most profound transformation of knowledge production since the invention of the printing press. We are today thoroughly disrupted by this. And thoroughly distracted as well.

Kerr also noted that American research universities in the 1960s had many sources of income—federal, state and private, with each of these greatly diversified. So, he said, “decline in one source could be, and usually was, offset by increase in another.”¹⁰ This is no longer true.

In 1964, Kerr could say that regardless of what was happening, “society needs the highest skills and the best knowledge, and, in the United States the research university is the chief source of both.”¹¹ No longer true. With today's global outsourcing, startup dotcoms funded by college dropouts, online publishing, and the DIY world of citizen researchers and entrepreneurs, universities feel the pressure on our hallowed gate-keeping traditions of quality control. In terms of the production and dissemination of knowledge, we no longer have a corner on the market. And as for society's metrics of what might be the “best” knowledge or “highest” skills, it is not clear anymore in what these terms signify in the age where “excellent” so often means merely “efficient.”

Finally Kerr noted that in the past, professors primarily controlled the university, and faculty turn out to be, despite their often progressive politics, quite organizationally conservative about their own affairs, “never more so,” said Kerr, “than when their own affairs are not going too well.”¹² Change was slow to come to the university. But change is now here. In terms of the demise of the professoriate's power, academic tenure, while not

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 118.

yet gone, is clearly on the decline.¹³ Gone now are the days when faculty controlled the university. They have been sidelined by a new class of managers, some of whom come from fields entirely outside of higher education, places like the World Bank and Homeland Security. Given how poorly most PhD programs prepare anyone to lead an academic department much less a large, complex organization like a university, or to advocate effectively for a public institution with lawmakers, this expansion of academic leadership to include outside expertise is not inherently a bad thing. It is however, a change—and one with consequences to the extent that universities now have leaders less steeped in academic values, more accustomed to market-driven decision making, and more comfortable with change in general than the professoriate traditionally tended to be.

Today we see the educational ideals of yore dismissed as romantic nostalgia, marginalized by a new dispensation with a rhetoric of cool pragmatism, rational efficiency, and confident inevitability—with the nearest thing to passion expressed in a language of crises and austerity. An audit culture of accountability creates metrics and benchmarks that can be readily measured—never mind if these have little bearing on actual learning or discovery. Universities have a new language: students are our customers, their tuition payments our revenue stream, their time-to-degree (sometimes called “throughput”) a metric of success. Everyone is interested in accountability. But *responsibility*? Not so much. Today we have “value propositions,” but little reflection on values. Organizational makeovers of universities by firms like Mitt Romney’s Bain & Company bring change regimes that go by monikers like “operational excellence.” Notably, the purveyors of these multi-million dollar consulting endeavors are unable to define “excellence” beyond vapid phrases like “we simplify!” As Bill Reading foresaw do presciently in his 1996 book *The University in Ruins*, “excellence” in the new university is a free-floating signifier that modifies nothing at all. It is the very slipperiness of this term that activates “excellence” as a potent performative.¹⁴ Everyone wants excellence, implicitly. Yet dare we ask: Excellent

¹³ Robin Wilson, “Tenure, RIP: What the Vanishing Status Means for the Future of Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 January 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/Tenure-RIP/66114/>.

¹⁴ Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). On the adoption of the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, see:

at what? How will we know when we are excellent? Will the university be excellent when our organizational models are flat, lean, and clustered (to use the bizarre nomenclature that accompanies these endeavors)? Or will we be excellent when our operations actually serve the university's academic mission? To pose such questions is to demand a deeper reflection on that academic mission—what is sometimes called the “academic side of the house” (a phrase that always confuses me. At a university, what other sides of the house are there?)

In sum: During these “teen years” of the 21st century, when so many of the university's founding ideals and undergirding infrastructures have been, or are being, rapidly eroded around us, what is notable is that the university has become a place with no dreams at all. The inhabitants of today's city of intellect—its students, faculty and staff—may wander in a state of shallow wakefulness, never plumbing the depths of consciousness where dreams actually happen. Depleted of both sleep and the restorative night visions of the unconscious, we may find ourselves simply numb, caught in a cycle of constant interruption, disruption, casualization, and endless flexibility.

I am at risk here of inducing in my audience two states that are both certainly among the greatest pitfalls of lefty, liberal academic criticism: seething rage or intellectually self-satisfied resignation. I intend neither. Instead I want to rally us.

It is true that there are many reasons to be discouraged at this moment in higher education: escalating student debt, privatization, instrumental managerial logics, the casualization of academic labor, and the disenfranchisement students of color just at a time

<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>. On the Operational Excellence Management System, see “Achieving Operational Excellence in Higher Education: National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education,” Bain & Company, 23 July 2010, http://www.ncci-cu.org/downloads/Bain_NCCI_Presentation.pdf, a text that rather surprisingly begins with Aristotle. Performance studies scholars may be intrigued to see that John S. Oakland's book *Total Quality Management and Operational Excellence: Text with Cases* (New York: Routledge 2003) has an entire section on “performance.” Indeed given the extent to which “high performance culture” is a key concept of the new management paradigms remaking universities throughout the world, the field is ripe for substantive engagement by performance studies scholars, who would surely be following in the wake of Jon McKenzie's pioneering book *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

when they have become a majority poised to inherit the promise of social mobility and human enrichment that higher education offers.

Yet I believe there are also presently reasons to be encouraged especially among those of us in theatre in higher education. Here is why: People without dreams still yearn for them, even if they no longer remember what dreams are. While theater has a long history of dying and being reborn again and again, this condition is a new experience for the academy. There is much that theatre can contribute to this moment in the precarious life of the city of intellect.

If the university has for centuries been an institution impervious to change, it has also been place that was not historically accessible or hospitable to people of color, women, people with disabilities or sexualities other than heterosexual. However, the current state of disruption is also an opportunity for changes of other sorts. What changes do we want to see happen? We must imagine, name, design and implement them. How might we transform our dreams into acts?

We live in an era when the phrases like “high performance culture” are often on the lips of university administrators.¹⁵ How might we appropriate—or rather re-appropriate—this language of performance? Rather than opposing market logics, can we redeploy them, reshaping “high performance” for our own ends?

In the face of the onslaught of virtual learning platforms, MOOCs, and online education, universities are at this moment rather desperately trying to re-invent themselves. Now that the chimera of online education as a massive revenue rescue is evaporating, people are reconsidering how new technological capacities enable us to rethink the lived experience of the bricks-and-mortar, face-to-face educational experience. Theater knows this territory well. We’ve been wrestling with such questions about liveness and presence since the arrival of moving pictures.

¹⁵ See Bain & Company’s website on “Performance Culture”:
<http://www.bain.com/consulting-services/organization/performance-culture.aspx>.

As a discipline, theatre has some rather distinctive “value propositions” for the future of the university.¹⁶ In our rehearsals, our classrooms, our embodied practice, our strange conflicted struggle between theory and practice, our fusion of critical thinking skills with critical *making* skills, our combination of analysis and criticism with kinesthetic knowledge and communication collective invention, and collaborative creation, might our field have the ability to bring forward within the university a new repertoire for performing its institutional self? What does the term “high performance culture” mean to us? Perhaps it is our ability to dream and act at the same time, our ability to combine idealism with realism—skills that otherwise seems to elude the neoliberalized academy.

One narrative of a changing America says that we have passed from the post-war industrial age, to the information age of the 1960s, followed by the service economy, and then the digital age. Some say that today we have entered an “experience economy,” and that this being is followed in short order by the “transformation economy.” This is the argument of B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore in *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business is a Stage*.¹⁷ Rather than gnash our collective teeth about how business theorists are appropriating our theater language, why not instead position our discipline as the university’s leading “experience stagers” for the 21st century? No field understands “experience” and “transformation” like we do. This is our Trojan horse. Can we brand our distinctive transformational experience of the theatre as desirable and necessary for the university’s future?¹⁸ I can anticipate colleagues such as Susan Bennett

¹⁶ For ideas about how to articulate the “value proposition” of our discipline’s distinctive pedagogies to the academy at this time, see Nancy Kindelan, *Artistic Literacy: Theatre Studies and Contemporary Liberal Education* (New York: Palgrave, 2012). On the imperative of our field constructing counter-narratives to university corporatism, see Roy Connolly, “Have You Ever Considered a Career in Total Revolution? Drama and the Corporate Reform of UK Higher Education,” *Studies in Theatre & Performance* 33:2 (2013): 225-243.

¹⁷ B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business is a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999; updated edition published 2011).

¹⁸ For further reflections on the tactical and critical potential of theatre in this late-capitalist moment of the contemporary academy, see chapter 7 of Alan Read’s *Theatre in the Expanded Field: Seven Approaches to Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 173-201.

whispering at this point that I have clearly drunk the neoliberal Kool-Aid.¹⁹ And I may have: I live in California; we're having a drought: one can't be too picky about one's liquids.

Theatre in higher education has always been so marginal to the university. We are always on the edge of the campus, in buildings that are seismically poor and the last to be renovated. With fiscal fluctuations, ours are the first budgets to be cut and the last to be restored. However, I believe at this moment theatre's dreams and actions have the potential to make a decisive impact on the university, to shape it, like theater, as the another "last human venue": a place, in the words of Alan Read, "where you are given the chance to begin again, to recall how intimate an engagement could be and how truly political such reticent acts could become."

My colleagues: *Dreams do act*. Let us scheme about what dreams and actions may come.

¹⁹ Susan Bennett, "What are you Reading?" *Theatre Survey*. 53(1): April 2012, pp 123-126.