
LEGACY LETTER

Senior Seminar 2016

GOAL:

To start a conversation within the theatre department, between the faculty, staff, and students, by addressing concerns and providing options for a constructive way for students to contribute to the conversation within the department for a progressive environment.

SENIOR SEMINAR ABSTRACT:

The Senior Seminar for the class of 2016–*In the Margin*–has focused on diversity. We have unnecessarily been exposed to marginalization within the classroom and within the culture of the department. We do not want it to continue and we cannot change the past, but we can change what is to come. We have heard from alumni and guest artists that the quality of the department has been depleting and it pains us to hear it. The department has become lax in terms of academic rigor, which has resulted in a decline in the quality of student work.

We will focus on gender and sexuality, ethnicity and culture, and mental health. We hope to propose some solutions that will address our concerns. We will open up each topic with some quotes and circumstances from interactions with department faculty and staff that we have been discouraged by during our time at California State University, Stanislaus.

GENDER & SEXUALITY:

- ❖ “I know what it’s like to be gay, because I played a gay male once in a show.”
- ❖ “In the real world, men never play women and women never play men.”
- ❖ Refusal to use correct names and pronouns after students express a preference that best aligns with their identity.

“Sexual Harassment also includes acts of verbal, nonverbal or physical aggression, intimidation or hostility based on Gender or sex-stereotyping, even if those acts do not involve conduct of a sexual nature.” (Title IX)

Theatre has evolved, along with society. Gender norms are being broken all the time. Gender is a social construction and should not be a limitation when it comes to shows. For example, The Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia cast a black woman as Hamlet. The show was sold out almost every showing. There is also a local example, Merced College’s *Julius Caesar*,

which was an all female cast. Originally *all* the roles in Shakespeare were played by men. Saying that men will never play women and women will never play men is simply a false statement because they already have and do.

Gender is not contingent upon biological sex or sexuality, nor is it binary. Culture has evolved and now recognizes that gender is a spectrum. There are many non-binary individuals that identify as both male and female, neither male nor female, or any and everything in between and outside. Characters do not have to be portrayed as any gender. Characters are just people. People are just people. All genders should be allowed equal opportunity and respect.

In our department, non-heterosexual and genderqueer people are rarely represented in course material. If they are, it has been as the butt of a joke. In the course of our time we have not experienced any LGBT+ shows, aside from the gender fluid *Scapin!* and the exposure to the gay director and playwright Sean Abley. Our only source of discussing LGBT+ plays was a small section in theatre history where we were introduced to plays such as *Doubt* and the queer Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, to name a few. We would like to expand on this topic, but we are unable to because, like we said, there has been almost no visibility.

To be frank, the lack of visibility within the Stanislaus State theatre department is surprising. The theatre community is known for being supportive of the health and human rights of LGBT+ people. This is especially true in Broadway because it is a vital supporter of LGBT+ rights and needs. Below are just two examples of way they support the community.

“Broadway Sings for Pride has held their annual winter concerts and Gay Pride concerts which raised thousands for the Hetrick-Martin Institute and The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center of New York City.”
[Broadway Sings for Pride (About us)]

“Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS is one of the nation’s leading industry-based, nonprofit AIDS fundraising and grant-making organizations. By drawing upon the talents, resources and generosity of the American theatre community, since 1988 BC/EFA has raised more than \$285 million for essential services for people with AIDS and other critical illnesses across the United States.” [Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS (About Us)]

Why is it that the Stan State theatre department has neglected to acknowledge the theatre community’s contribution to the social reform aimed at improving the lives of LGBT+ people? Especially when so many students within the theatre department identify themselves as being part of the LGBT+ community. It is time to shed the heteronormative ideals that loom over the department and reevaluate what is important to be exposed to in the realm of theatre.

ETHNICITY & CULTURE:

- ❖ “Out of all the African-American students I’ve taught, you by far understand the language [of Shakespeare] better than anyone.”
- ❖ “Wipe that smile off your face, it must be an Asian thing.”
- ❖ “Wipe that smile off your face, it must be an African-American thing.”
- ❖ “Get in touch with your Latin Lover.”
- ❖ “I want to see the fiery Latina side of you.”
- ❖ “All this other stuff [theatre from different countries/cultures] is great, but Anglo-Saxon American theatre is where it’s at.”
- ❖ “I want to see you get angry. You’re Latino, right? Show us that Latin anger.”

Someone’s level of education, physical actions, or temperament should not be tied to an ethnicity or culture. We have come to university to pursue higher education and to receive the training needed to become professional artists. We expect to receive the same training and opportunity as our heterosexual-cis-white peers. However, when the shows we do call for minority actors, but are cast in such a way that denies us the opportunities that are *literally* made for us, it subjugates us to having to witness essential parts of our identity being misrepresented and belittled.

So often in our theatre, non Anglo-American shows are completely disregarded. Educational theatre should expose us to many types of theatre. Stanislaus State’s student body is composed of many theatrically-rich cultures, so it only makes sense that we should be given the opportunity to extensively explore and present theatre of all cultures, rather than just in passing.

Below we will provide specific examples of productions and detail how they represent the insensitivity to ethnic and cultural diversity within the department.

CLOUD TECTONICS (FALL 2013):

Cloud Tectonics, by José Rivera, called for students who are bilingual in Spanish and English to perform the text. Despite bilingual students being present and capable, three non-Spanish-speaking students were cast. The bilingual students were then audaciously asked to coach the cast students with pronunciation and interpretation of the text. In performance, it was evident the cast members who attempted to speak Spanish were not native speakers. Hispanic students unaffiliated with the department still comment on how *Cloud Tectonics* has left a bad impression of the theatre department because the Spanish language was so needlessly butchered.

A FLEA IN HER EAR (FALL 2014):

A Flea in Her Ear, adapted by David Ives, calls for a couple who have dialogue in Spanish. Instead of casting both parts with students who were fluent in speaking and reading Spanish, the female role went to a non-Stanislaus-State student who could not speak the language. She needed assistance from the Spanish speaking students that were denied the role. Once

again, the Spanish language was so needlessly butchered because of poor casting decisions.

Additionally, a character of middle-eastern descent was played by a Caucasian male. In order to try to make the actor look middle eastern, he was **brownfaced**, which should *never* be acceptable.

I AND YOU (FALL 2014):

In our production of *I and You*, by Lauren Gunderson, two Caucasian actors were cast despite the script calling for a black actor and a white actress. The playwright even explicitly states that, if the original casting cannot be honored, the only casting “essentiality is that the characters not be the *same* race” [Lauren Gunderson, *I and You* (2014)]. Most insulting to the students of color was that they put a darker foundation on the male character to compensate for the lack of appropriate casting. To add insult to injury, the **brownfaced** actor was not affiliated with the theatre department and was cast instead of students of color who were prepared and qualified to play the parts.

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA (SPRING 2016):

The majority of minority actors in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* were cast as “banditos,” which comes across as prejudice and harmful to Latino students. Even if it was by coincidence, this casting choice should have been addressed by the department to clarify that there were no foul intentions

Ethnicity aside, the ensemble has been characterized as Mexican because of the following reasons: they are called the incorrect Spanish word “banditos” (which should be *bandidos*, if translated correctly), which insinuates that they are Hispanic; the stereotypically-Mexican characterizations of “El Jefe” that are being allowed in the performance; when and where the play is set; and the Folklorico dancing, which is a Mexican tradition. Put simply, the ensemble is portraying Mexican-Americans because of the stylistic choices that have been put into place. Even if the ensemble was not predominantly composed of Chicano students, the cultural markers imposed on the ensemble would designate their characters as Mexican.

If *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is indeed set in the midwest during the 1800’s, there are some parallels between the play’s plot points and Mexican-American history. For example, Mexican-Americans were being overrun and displaced from the Midwest by invading Americans who felt entitled to land and power by the manifest destiny ideology. It was a racially charged time where the invading Americans were lynching and systematically oppressing Mexican-Americans and indigenous populations. This dark history is mirrored in the play’s plot because the “banditos” are outcasted and prejudicially labeled as outlaws. The systematic oppression is then personified by a white male, the character Valentine, who eventually becomes the leader of

their gang, adding to the imagery that *minorities cannot hold positions of power or be seen as anything more than people that need to be controlled.*

Unfortunately, in today's context (Spring 2016), the casting of the show reinforces the traumatic, scarring, and prejudice rhetoric vocalized by the presidential candidate Donald Trump.

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems. They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime[. . .].” [Donald Trump, *Presidential Announcement Speech* (June 2015)]

By casting the students of color as outlaws and as servants, Trump's message has been unintentionally staged for the audience to interpret. One may argue that the pardoning of the “banditos” at the end of the play negates any need to justify the casting and stylistic decisions; however, that does not absolve the department from the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes throughout the show's process.

Furthermore, the added Latin-American cultural aspects of the show are tokenizing the Latino students' identity and culture by using tradition and language out of its original context. For example, stylizing the leads as Spanish, rather than Mexican, further reinforces the false notion of caucasian supremacy because it privileges European Hispanics over Latin-American Hispanics. Also, different aspects from different Latino and Hispanic cultures are being merged and generalized. Channeling aspects of multiple cultures into one representation essentializes those cultures in a way that contributes to their marginalization and fails to acknowledge their complexity and value.

MENTAL HEALTH AND CONTRIBUTING ISSUES:

- ❖ “I know your uncle passed, but it's been two weeks and you're still sad, I don't understand.”
- ❖ “You'll never be cast as a leading man if you don't get into shape. Even if you can act the part.”
- ❖ The director of a show blamed the stage manager's mother's passing as the reason that a technical rehearsal went badly.
- ❖ A student's niece passed away, they were told by a professor to get over it and come to class.
- ❖ A student ended up in a mental institution after showing signs of distress that were not reported by the faculty and staff.
- ❖ During an acting class, students were required to look in a mirror and were forced to identify their “imperfections.”

- ❖ A catchphrase a faculty member uses when a student is having difficulties is as follows: “Figure it the fuck out.”
- ❖ During a warm up, students were doing a hip exercise. The professor made a reference towards a student, suggesting the hip movements were how she made a baby.

The mental health of students in this department has often been overlooked and completely disregarded. Students need to take care of their mental health which, at times, means missing a class or two. People need time to mentally heal just as people need time to physically heal. If someone has a broken leg, they would not be forced to participate in a walking portion of a movement class, but if someone loses a member of their family they are expected to “deal with it” and come to class.

We have been constantly exposed to type casting. It is acknowledged that not everyone looks the same because we all have different body types, but when a person is cast in a show primarily because their body fits the “director’s vision,” rather than their ability to appropriately and successfully portray a character, it diminishes the quality of the performance and makes it harder to relate to the performer. The result of type casting within **academic** theatre has caused students outside of the hypersexualized body form to question their worth and push themselves into unhealthy practices in an attempt to embody the “director’s vision.”

In an attempt to receive training of equal value to a student who embodies the stereotypical ingénue, students have had to work toward creating their own shows. Having to devise, write, and produce a show is much more work than doing a season show that is supported by the department. All students should have had **opportunities** to portray leading characters while directed by a faculty member in a scripted show. We have seldom had the job of just being the performers. We’ve had to design, manage, write, build, and perform—all during the same show. We appreciate that we have become more well-rounded artist as a result of these responsibilities, but it has caused a great strain on many students and has resulted in fewer performance opportunities for that demographic.

A stress causing factor in the department is that there is a double standard between what is expected from the committed students and what is expected from the rest of the majors, minors, and concentrations. We acknowledge that the department is small, but that does not mean that the same students should be expected to not only run all of the shows, but train all of the incoming members of the department. For example, when an inexperienced board operator, master electrician, wardrobe assistant, house manager, and *especially* a green stage manager are placed in said positions, it should not be an experienced student’s job to train the novice student. A faculty member should be instructing students and ensuring the department is up to date with new theatre technology. Our job is to learn, not to teach. Yes, theatre is a collaborative process, but working with students who are inexperienced and unable to contribute makes collaborating a much more difficult, frustrating, and stressful process. That is not to say that only the experienced students should be working shows; our point is that the newer students need to be trained so the others are not so thinly spread.

At times, students have searched for opportunities outside the department because shows are often cast with guest artists and community members that take away opportunities within the department for students to have larger roles. The result has been that students have received backlash for merely looking to get the experience that cannot be obtained within the department. The issue here is we should be gaining experience from the department because we are paying to be trained. We are not paying tuition for the department to hire people to exclude us from our education.

We realize guest artists are important to our education, but there have been some that have been more damaging than beneficial. For example: Paul Romero, who performed in *Twelfth Night* (Spring 2014), demonstrated how to command the stage well, but also gave a shining example of how to undermine the director, stage manager, other actors, and the crew. Another example is guest artist Curtis Nelson, who played in *The Fantasticks* (Spring 2016). He gave directorial notes to actors, prompted actors to change blocking and lines during the run of the show, and talked to students as though they were beneath him. Furthermore, he would attempt to try and upstage the entire cast, and would pay no attention to the needs and safety (i.e. the stage combat) of his fellow cast members. The guest designer, Kristine Doiel, was aggressive towards students and staff to the point that students did not feel comfortable approaching her. Students should feel safe and comfortable around guest artists in order for them to benefit from this exposure.

There are many reasons as to why the role of the guest artist needs to be defined. The most concerning is sexual harassment. There have been some unfortunate circumstances that have not been disclosed because the victims did not feel safe reporting them and feared negative repercussions for themselves or the department. Most instances included verbal harassment, which ranged from inappropriate remarks to blatant sexual advancements. For the safety of the victims and to respect their wishes, we will not specify any more details that would identify them or their transgressors.

Not all guest artists are reprehensible. Many have had a superb positive impact on the students, such as Amy Seeley, Mike Ross, Tony Carreiro, Jonathan Singer, Laura Dickinson-Turner, and Anthony Merchant. Students were able to learn what it is like to be a professional from professionals that are currently out and working. They took the time to work with the students and gave them tools that are inaccessible within the department. A talk about their life and career should not qualify or justify a guest artist. When a guest artist is hired, they need to be someone who is present to teach, not simply to take a role [i.e. Most of the cast of *King Lear* (Spring 2015)].

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS:

SEASON SELECTING COMMITTEE:

We propose a Season Selecting Committee that would be comprised of faculty and 1-2 (or more) student representatives to assist in selecting the show season for the following year. All members of the committee will have to critically analyze the proposed plays while asking themselves several questions

(most of which we should not have to ask, but are forced to because of the prior circumstances that are aforementioned):

- ❖ Will students of color be considered for every role?
 - If not, why?
- ❖ Is anyone being **brownfaced**?
- ❖ Do we have the students to appropriately fill the roles in the context of academic theatre?
 - Can a student be aged to fulfill a role?
 - Is there a gender expression issue?
 - Is a student's body type a contributing factor as to why they are not being cast?
- ❖ Will negative stereotypes be reinforced?
- ❖ Is the selected director a suitable choice?
 - Do their experiences qualify them to make artistic decisions regarding the playwright's intentions?
 - Is a white director suitable for *Raisin in the Sun*?
 - Are the playwright's intentions being honored?
- ❖ Is the play a relevant choice for the student body?
- ❖ What commentary is being made by the show selection, its concept, and its potential casting?
 - Political statements?
 - Social statements?
 - Environmental statements?
 - Et cetera.
- ❖ Will this make an impact on students (in and outside the theatre) in a positive way?

If these questions, and any additional questions that may be considered, are not asked for *every* show, then the department is not taking all of their students into consideration when choosing shows.

We suggest the student representatives be given the option to propose a show. It will open up the possibility for qualified students to direct or assistant direct a season show. This will foster student investment in what will be produced because they will have a say in the season.

Directors should take into consideration how some casting decisions could damage the psyche of minority students in and outside of the theatre department. Professors and directors should be culturally and ethnically aware of what the students have to offer and take advantage of each of their talents and attributes. Are people of color only cast as bad guys, servants, and ensemble? If so, why? Do they not have the proper training? What could the faculty and students do to ensure that everyone is getting proper training and opportunities to learn and grow? If the white students, cis students, or hetero students are "more qualified," then what about department culture is resulting

in that inequity? It is the job of the department to interrogate its practices and resolve this glaring inequality. All students, regardless of skin color, gender, body type, or sexual orientation, need to be given the same opportunity to thrive and succeed.

REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE:

Rehearsal and Performance should *not* be an automatic A. There is a chance here to allow students to learn. The department can utilize Rehearsal and Performance to answer students' questions concerning casting and to further engage students. We should have an acting instructor, a member of the Season Selecting Committee, and the selected show's director assess auditioners on casting attributes, such as those that follow:

- ❖ Appearance
- ❖ Slate
- ❖ Piece Selection
- ❖ Text Interpretation
- ❖ Memorization
- ❖ Projection
- ❖ Diction
- ❖ Physicality
- ❖ Characterization
- ❖ and any others that may come up

These audition assessments will allow students and mentors to follow their progress during their academic career at Stanislaus State, which will allow students to understand what they need to improve on and how. This can also assist with directors being more aware of the reasons they are not casting certain people, including the possibility that there is a bias regarding body type, skin color, and gender, or if they are legitimately not fit for the part.

We suggest a penalty on the Rehearsal and Performance grade, or makeup hours in either scenic shop or costume shop, for students who have unexcused absences for rehearsal and strike. There are too many students that do not show up to strike, or miss rehearsals without an excuse. This impacts the rest of the students, and it's simply not fair for those students who are putting in more work. However, there should be a form a student can fill out if reason for missing strike or rehearsal is legitimate such as work, mental health, or physical health.

SYLLABI:

Classes need to have structure, including a written and distributed syllabus for each class with expected course outcomes, a breakdown providing students with at least a general sense of what is intended for each class meeting during the semester (which does not have to be set in stone), a list of

major assignments with accompanying grading criteria and grading scale for the course, and an absence policy. When a syllabus is being created, tech and performances should be kept in mind. Class is separate from shows, yes; however, when large projects/essays/scenes are due the same time as a show, it can damage the mental and physical health of students that are heavily involved in the shows. There is only so much one person can do, and health should always be taken into consideration. Faculty should contemplate delegating theatre deadlines within the department so there is little to no crossover. Harmony within the theatre department will allow for less friction for students when they attempt to schedule general education coursework alongside the theatre major workload. Google drive has some great sharing technologies that can be utilized. For example, Google Calendars can be shared among the faculty and the students, which may provide a useful forum for suggestion and collaboration on class and performance scheduling.

We are mentioning the need for syllabi because we have not received calendars, course outcomes, or grading criteria for many of the classes we have taken in the CSU Stanislaus Theatre Department. This semester alone, theatre students have not received syllabi for Voice, Intermediate Acting, and Senior Seminar (even though a syllabus was explicitly requested when we addressed our needs in the beginning of the semester).

FACULTY TRAINING:

Sensitivity training is needed for the faculty in order for appropriate steps to be taken to advance the department.

LEGACY LETTER:

We appreciate the many things the department has provided for us, such as assistance in the following: The Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, CSU Summer Arts, work opportunities in and outside the department, United States Institute of Theatre Technology, Summer Repertory Theatre, allowing us the opportunities to produce our own shows, and more. We know that the department has helped many of us get to where we are today, and we are not saying that everything the department has produced is offensive. There have been multiple shows that, in some sense, have successfully utilized the actors' backgrounds. *Vinegar Tom* (Fall 2015) was an excellent example of color-conscious casting. Nandi Mathews was cast in a role that was shaped and adjusted by the director to highlight her ethnicity without marginalizing her. Her character was used as social commentary and was a strong character, rather than flat and stereotypical. For another example, *Scapin!* (Fall 2013) pushed the concept of gender to be represented as fluid—which it is—rather than a binary concept; Amelia Blank and Ileana Ramirez both played gender-ambiguous characters.

Our intention of this letter is not to attack, but to evoke a conversation on the issues we have presented with the ultimate goal of continually working toward becoming a more progressive department. Gender and sexuality, ethnicity and culture, and mental health are

not subjects that can simply be ignored; we must work together to remedy these issues for future generations of CSU Stanislaus Theatre majors.

LGBT+ students have been so heavily marginalized that they have formed a "Queer Pack" in order to provide a safe, judgement-free environment within the theatre department. The LGBT+ students in the department need to be given a voice. The rationale that we live in "conservative Turlock" is irrelevant; we should be exposing the community to material outside of the white-cis-heteronormative culture that is prevalent.

Just as the LGBT+ students need to be given a voice and place within the department, so do the students of color. We are not asking for colorblind casting, but rather color-conscious casting, which "means casting a production with a lens for how race factors into the story of the play" [Lavina Jadhvani, *Color Conscious Directing: Three More Questions to Ask* (November 2015)].

"What's required now is a color-conscious, not colorblind, casting approach. Color-conscious casting intentionally considers the race and ethnicity of actors and the characters they play in order to oppose racism, honor and respect cultures, foster stronger productions, and contribute to a more equitable world. Without it, we risk perpetuating a system that privileges whiteness with greater access and opportunity, and appropriates the cultures of communities of color." [Teresa Eyring, *Standing Up for Playwrights and Against 'Colorblind' Casting* (January 2016)]

The quote above is from an article discussing the casting of the hit musical *Hamilton*. The casting of the show is a good example of how to appropriately cast people of color while acknowledging their ethnicity and culture. Plays like *Hamilton* are the type of theatre all students should be exposed to.

Mental Health is just as important as physical health. The mental health of students should not be pushed aside for the "quality" of a production. We ask the issues not be disregarded, but rather *confronted*. We hope this letter sparks a consciousness that will strive towards equity and empathy for every single member of our department.

If students are denied opportunities because their body type, skin color, gender, or sexual orientation is not suitable in the "real world," how can we ever hope to have a "real world" that can see past prejudice?

We cannot have this letter end with us. We propose to have future senior seminar classes collectively compose a *Legacy Letter* analyzing the department. The *Legacy Letter* should not be slander, but a constructive critique to help the department stay current, progressive, and safe—a goal we hope this letter will work toward achieving.

We chose to use writing as our medium because we did not feel confident that our concerns would be addressed without providing in-depth rationale. We felt, if we did not completely justify our positions on these critical issues, our concerns would have been

disregarded and trivialized. We remain concerned that this letter will go unconsidered, but we are ultimately hopeful that the department will thoroughly read and contemplate our criticisms and suggestions.

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