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Margaret Franson

Valparaiso University, Margaret.Franson@Valpo.edu

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“The Play’s the Thing”: Theater Arts and Liberal Learning

MARGARET FRANSON

VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY

The recurrent disposition to view undergraduate learning as most valuable when it prepares students for specific careers by equipping them with the particular “skill sets” of their chosen occupations has led invariably to a number of unfortunate consequences. Foremost among them has been the distressing tendency to comprehend and design even music, theater, and dance activities exclusively as pre-professional training exercises. This over-reverence for technique often weakens the inherent powers of the performing arts to deepen self-knowledge, to develop the virtues most useful in the pursuit of truth, to build community, to enhance appreciation for the ways in which texts of all kinds function to make meaning and evoke feeling, and to introduce young people to the life of the mind. Honors programs can therefore perform a great educational service by restoring the performing arts, especially the theater arts, to their proper place within a collegial setting as instruments of liberal learning. The renowned Freshman Production at Valparaiso University’s honors college, Christ College, both clarifies the meaning and demonstrates the truth of the claim that the performing arts are indeed liberal arts and that they are therefore essential to a liberal education.

Though liberal learning is extremely difficult to define theoretically, especially in an honors setting, it is relatively easy to recognize in practice. It involves the cultivation of certain arts and skills of analysis, criticism, and interpretation. It frees students and teachers from unexamined tyrannies that hold dominion over their souls and minds, even as it frees them for love of the world through responsible and lifelong engagement with fundamental human questions. Liberal learning, therefore, includes both the improvement of the mind and the cultivation of those virtues that are indispensable to the pursuit of the truth of matters. Since liberal learning is a public, not a private, endeavor, most of these virtues are social, governing the manner in which human beings relate to one another.

But how do we cultivate in ourselves and in our students virtues like trust, humility, courage, justice, civility, honesty, and friendship? Aristotle argued persuasively that we become courageous by performing courageous acts in the manner in which a courageous person would perform them. In short, we become virtuous in the same way in which we become virtuosos: practice, practice, practice. So if we wish to shape character, it will not be enough to hold up examples, to exhort,

and to study works about virtue and character. If we are serious about liberal learning in its broadest sense, we must order our common life in such a way that we are all led to those practices of public life whose application will encourage students and faculty members alike to become more civil, honest, and trustworthy. Becoming virtuous is, therefore, from one point of view at least, a “performing art.”

This understanding of the significance of the performing arts for a liberal education has become steadily more compelling to those of us at Valparaiso’s honors college who have taught in the Freshman Program, a required course of study that includes a theater arts component. The Freshman Program is a two-semester sequence of interdisciplinary honors courses titled *Texts and Contexts: Traditions of Human Thought*. Throughout the course, students read selected great works of history, literature, drama, philosophy, and religion and consider closely the ideas that have shaped a range of traditions of the East and West. Ideas are explored in many ways—through critical reading and close analysis of texts; through careful research and focused expository and persuasive writing; through scholarly lectures, faculty-guided small group discussion among classmates, and formal public debate; and through creative dramatic and musical expression.

This last means of exploration—creative dramatic and musical expression—is guided and molded during the fall semester in the weekly Freshman Program Drama Workshop. In just ten weeks of sustained collaboration, the students who make up the honors college freshman class write, stage, and perform an original 90-minute theater piece with music, based on ideas and themes encountered in *Texts and Contexts*. The Christ College Freshman Production is performed five times for the campus community and the families of the students in mid-November each year.

This creative and collaborative activity was designed initially—almost 30 years ago, shortly after the founding of Christ College in 1967—to complement the analytical and expository part of the course. But it soon exceeded those comparatively modest expectations. Indeed, the Freshman Production has enabled us to discover features of liberal education that might otherwise have escaped our notice. We cannot now imagine our program without the production, though we can imagine doing without many of the other components of our course of study that we would have at some earlier time thought much more fundamental to our common purposes.

Some of the things we learned about liberal learning through the Freshman Production were not surprising. We always believed that liberal learning involved communal inquiry, so we had hoped to build and strengthen a sense of community through the production, and we have thus far succeeded. Every year, 80 adolescent strangers learn to discover one another’s gifts, to celebrate the diversity of those gifts, to rely upon one another, and to see that the excellence of the final performance depends upon such diversity. Educationally, this experience is superior to many lectures and several books on the subject of the potentially constructive aspects of a diverse community. And the production reinforces in subtle but forceful ways the opinion guiding our choice to grade the first semester’s honors work on a pass/fail basis—namely, that though conflict is often supportive of healthy communities of learning, competition is inimical to them.

MARGARET FRANSON

At its best, liberal learning entails dialectical conflict that leads to some kind of creative synthesis. Creating the Freshman Production involves a great deal of conflict and synthesis, along with a great deal of very hard work and no small amount of disappointment. In the early days of the fall semester, the director of the production, who is a faculty member in Valparaiso University's theater department, convenes a student writing committee of about twenty members. This committee invariably generates two or three splendid possible theme or plot ideas, but may adopt only one of them. Many students must therefore not only give up their preferred choice, but must work industriously for several weeks to advance what was once someone else's rival idea. This same process of intense argument governs the writing of the script itself, the composition of the music, the set design, the choreography—all the things that make up the show. But at some point, after hours of negotiation and a good deal of anger and frustration, all students become deeply invested in the overall quality of the production. They move, however painstakingly, from conflict to common purpose, back to conflict, and eventually to the final performance of the production itself.

The original creators of the Freshman Production had at least hoped for this much, but they had not anticipated the way in which the experience of making a play together would strengthen liberal learning in an even more fundamental way by making students better readers and writers. Surely liberal learning involves the effort to entertain seriously ideas and images that seem initially strange, sometimes altogether obscure, and often threatening. And surely this process in turn involves approaching texts and other materials with an attitude that is at once humble and suspicious. We now notice that our students, once they themselves must invent characters who are consistent, connect endings to beginnings, and carry forward thematic emphases through an entire 90-minute performance, become much more intrigued by questions that invite them to discover the theme, the structure, the argument, and the overall intention governing a text written by Mencius or Jane Austen or Toni Morrison. In brief, their own experience of making something, their own sense of the difficulty in giving both form and substance to an idea or a feeling, makes them at once more respectful and more critical of the works of literature, philosophy, history, and theology they are reading concurrently with their work on the production. This development every fall seems an unexpected miracle.

Nor had the original creators of the Freshman Production anticipated the extent to which it would serve the same function for the honors college community that drama once served in ancient Greece, one of the wellsprings of liberal inquiry. Yet year after year performances of the Freshman Production have shaped, for weeks thereafter, the atmosphere and the conversation among the entire honors college community as well as among a large part of the university community beyond it. These musical dramas differ in theme and tone from year to year. Recent themes have included love and friendship, the deterioration of the family, the prospect of ecocatastrophe, the culture wars, the increasing threat of random violence, the problem of exclusion and community, urban decay, and terrorism. Often over the years shows have had especially inventive or intriguing titles, including *Peanuts*, *Popcorn*, and *the Peloponnesian War*; *Pursuit of Happiness*; *Six Feet Under*, or *A Grave Matter*; *One Hero to Go*; *Something to Believe*; *The Price is Life*; *The Ties that Bind*; and *In Sam We Trust?*

“THE PLAY’S THE THING”: THEATER ARTS AND LIBERAL LEARNING

The honors college has about 225 sophomores, juniors, and seniors, almost all of whom were once in their own Freshman Production, and almost all of whom attend one of the five performances staged by the first-year class each year. After the premier performance of any Freshman Production, comparisons and contrasts are instantly in the air, some of them invidious, others trivial, many of them sophomoric (literally and figuratively). All of the comparisons suggest fundamental questions about the intricate connections between a community and its art (questions that have engaged viewing publics since the days of ancient Athens), between a production’s several creators and the final work, and between the larger culture and a given, very localized, highly perishable element of it, such as a particular student body. The civil but intense pursuit of these questions is surely a vital part of the experience of a liberal education.

Communal response to the Freshman Production has been so various, continuous, and intense that we have had to institutionalize it to some extent. Nine years ago, we reserved the hour for our weekly college symposium on the Thursday evening after the Freshman Production for a critical response from a panel of sophomores followed by a rejoinder by a panel of freshmen. These panel presentations, which soon open up to the entire assembled collegiate community, are always filled with conflict, enthusiasm, and (occasionally) great insight into the kinds of things that matter most to today’s students. So, for better or for worse, and in sometimes raucous exchanges, the community grows to know itself better, to see what the deepest concerns and impulses that move its members look like and feel like and sound like. Learning to keep your head and your temper in the midst of this kind of public self-examination, to be at once charitable and critical, civil and contentious, is an essential part of liberal education. And it is especially valuable for honors students, whom we expect to mature into leaders in the community and in the academy.

Finally, theater initiates young people into intellectual life, especially to those two frequently opposed dimensions of the life of the mind that the late Richard Hofstadter called piety and playfulness. Part of liberal learning, a larger part of it than we have customarily recognized, involves the training of the affections and the education of the imagination. Students tend to lose themselves in the collective venture of making theater, thereby achieving a balance between the spirit of playfulness and the demand for serious coherence and integrity. These are hard matters to express with precision. As Aristotle would have said, harmony involves a mean relative to the individual, a mean that can only be found through experience and settled through practice in the midst of a supportive community. To feel the right way in the right circumstance for the right reason in the right manner: these are delicate but crucially important moments in the process of becoming fully human and humane. And theater as liberal arts pedagogy provides the curricular opportunity and the public space for this kind of difficult learning.

To tell the whole truth, the importance of theater as pedagogy in the life of Christ College is something that we discovered only with 20-20 hindsight. We have now had almost 30 years of history to contemplate retrospectively. In sum, we have a tradition, whereas initially we had only a grab bag of ideas—some of which quickly

MARGARET FRANSON

perished and others of which endured. We soon enough noticed one thing, though—that our students, as they returned to us year after year, seldom remembered Kant's categorical imperative but always remembered the words and music to the theme song of their Freshman Production. But just as important as what they learned, our students have taught faculty members again and again that the pleasures of friendship and the pursuit of wisdom are bound up deeply with one another. And the production has taught us that disciplined activities that engage the imagination as well as the intellect, the body as well as the spirit, and the affections as well as the reason are critical to liberal education by any name anywhere.

Note

This article was inspired by a discussion of the Christ College Freshman Production that appeared in *Liberal Education*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Spring 1995) as *Theater as Liberal Arts Pedagogy*, authored by Mark R. Schwehn, the Dean of Christ College, and John Steven Paul, the Director of the Christ College Freshman Production.

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The author may be contacted at
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana 46383
e-mail: Margaret.Franson@Valpo.edu

