Theatre/Practice: *The Online Journal of the Practice/Production Symposium of the Mid-America Theatre Conference*

Volume 13, 2024

Dramaturgical Approaches to the Challenges of Theatre History Pedagogy

A curated conversation by Diane Brewer and Caitlin Kane

In the Summer of 2022, we began discussing the challenges of teaching theatre history responsibly and engagingly. Those conversations quickly evolved into an outrageous dream: what if we could develop a sustainable, flexible, and accessible database of resources for people who teach theatre histories? To help answer this question, we decided to go on a listening tour at regional and national theatre conferences where we have asked people to identify what they consider the primary challenges in theatre history pedagogy to be and what they might find most useful in a digital resource. Through these conversations, we have learned about the experiences and needs of our colleagues and have begun clarifying our goals for this project.

When Karin Waidley reached out to us about encapsulating some of the conversations that we have been having this year in a piece for *Theatre/Practice*, we decided—given the relatively early stage of our work—that we would use an interview format for our discussion. The following text contains the questions we invented and the answers we devised. We hope that it will allow us to share insights from what we have gathered through our research thus far while also serving as an invitation for others to join us in this conversation and work. If you are interested in this project, we would love to hear from you. Our contact information can be found at the end of this conversation.

Let's begin with the vision. In a perfect world, what does this resource look like?

> **Diane Brewer** (DB): I imagine a place where those of us who teach the histories of theatre can find content to share with our undergraduate students. This content would replace the more conventional textbooks that have, at least for me, previously served as the backbone of these courses.
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> **Caitlin Kane** (CK): The hope is that this content would be more accessible – both in terms of cost and in terms of meeting the needs of students with disabilities – and that the digital format would allow this content to be more easily taken apart and put back

together than a printed textbook that (seemingly) offers a singular pathway for finding our way through theatre history.

DB: It's flexible.

CK: It's modular or networked, in terms of its construction. Individual instructors can reconfigure the content according to the needs of their classes and the kind of content they want students to engage with that semester. We hope that this flexibly structured resource and the breadth of content that we imagine will populate the site will facilitate critical approaches to theatre history pedagogy, including decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, and queer approaches to history and historiography.

DB: I have an image of a force-directed graph in my mind.[1] Each module fits inside a circle on this graph. So, for example, perhaps there's contextual information about medieval European theatre that would open when we click on one circle. We could look at that topic by itself, but what happens when we draw a line between that circle and one that contains information about Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' play *Everybody*? Or Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play*. And *Oberammergau*. That's one position for the graph. It's a group of circles connected by lines, and the one at the center—the one that draws the most focus—is the biggest. But what if we draw a circle around *Everybody* and *Passion Play* and make that circle the biggest? Maybe that creates an opportunity for us to draw a line to perspectives on queerness that Tison Pugh discusses in *On the Queerness of Early English Drama: Sex in the Subjunctive*.

That original circle with details about medieval European theatre still connects to the graph, but it's different in the overall contextual picture. What if this place we all go to would allow us to draw our own lines between circles of content and then export those modules for our students?

CK: Yes! In many ways, our vision for the site and for the ways that it reimagines how theatre histories are organized visually mirrors the changes made by The Kilroys this year. This collective of artists formed in 2014 in response to concerns about gender parity in the field, particularly in terms of whose work is most often getting produced. Between 2014 and 2020, they published an annual list of outstanding and underproduced plays by femme, nonbinary, and trans writers. This year, after a short hiatus prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, they changed formats and generated a web of artists that includes both those underproduced playwrights and some of the artists that they identify as advocates for their work.

In the ideal world where building this resource for the teaching of theatre histories is possible, we imagine a similar web of resources – or a force directed graph as you have

[1] Many thanks to Jacquelyn Elias, News Applications Developer at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, who helped me understand the data visualization graph she created for "Who Does Your College Think Its Peers Are?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 14, 2023, https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-does-your-college-think-its-peers-are.

described it – that will facilitate instructors addressing global theatre histories in some of their multiplicity and complexity. The vision is at once exhilarating and overwhelming, and it raises many questions about feasibility and sustainability that we're still working through.

DB: Indeed, because the vision – this ideal space where those of us who teach and create theatre agree to share resources – depends on a world that doesn't yet exist.

My particular privilege allows me to somewhat blithely suggest I could create a bunch of modules and make them available for others, including content I might otherwise try to publish as part of a tenure and promotion file. I have tenure. I've been promoted. I'm financially stable. I wonder, are there other people with privilege who have resources to share? And then I think about the people who don't have this privilege.

CK: There certainly are—particularly if we're thinking expansively about who might contribute to this and the vital perspectives that they would bring to the work. Independent scholars, critics, artists, graduate students, and many junior faculty are in much more precarious positions both financially and professionally than either of us. So ideally, we want to be able to pay people for their labor and to recognize their labor in ways that are meaningful for them, including having it be recognizable for tenure, for those who are on that track.

And then, there are also the technical limitations. The internet has created the illusion that it's easy to create and share a free resource, but the reality is that developing and hosting this material will cost money and require ongoing institutional support.

DB: And we're back to the enormity of the challenge.

That begs the question—Why are we doing this?

DB: I've been teaching theatre history full time since 1997, but the bottom fell out in 2020. The courses had always challenged me, but my students hadn't rejected the text in the way they did that semester. At the time, I was using *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* because I really appreciate the way it undermines the tyranny of the chronology.[2] And when my students rejected it—not because it was hard—but because they wanted something more explicitly anti-racist, I hit a crisis point. I shared their desire to unsettle the curriculum, but I didn't know what to do.

CK: I, on the other hand, am new to teaching theatre history. You and I met while I was building my first theatre history course, and your invitation into this conversation came at an ideal moment because I was working through huge anxieties about teaching a theatre history sequence as someone who is not a trained historian. The sample syllabi that I received from my institution looked shockingly similar to those that I encountered as an

[2] McConachie, Bruce A., Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, and Tamara L. Underiner. *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*. Edited by Tobin Nellhaus. Third edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016.

undergraduate student many years prior, particularly in terms of their Eurocentric and androcentric content. I knew enough about some of the major changes that we've seen from theatre historians in recent years to know that the syllabi didn't reflect the approach to theatre history that I would want to advance in my classes.[3] I had just begun the process of addressing these concerns by integrating global performance traditions and centering the work of women and queer artists in my theatre history syllabi when we met. So, we were coming from two quite different perspectives and points in our careers, but our shared concerns and the shared concerns of our students laid the foundation for this collaboration and vision.

DB: I'm grateful for the students' rejection of the *Theatre Histories* textbook. I've always wanted students to own their learning, to take responsibility for finding personally meaningful meaning in the content I put in front of them. I like experimenting with ways to get them to actively engage with the content, to approach it with curiosity and look for unspoken critical perspectives. But I have always begun that process with a stable text. In Fall 2020, the students gave me the admittedly painful chance to step back and realign the connection between my pedagogical values and course content. I started to think I could never effectively pursue this goal if I continued to rely on a stable textbook as a starting point for each course. I'm convinced that this radically unstable starting point helps me generate more meaningful learning opportunities.

CK: I have been using critical and feminist pedagogies in my classrooms since 2009, but the quantity of material and kinds of information that we are expected to cover in the theatre history sequence made those destabilizing approaches differently challenging to implement. Our conversations with one another and with other faculty broke things open and allowed me to begin taking a skills-based approach that emphasizes teaching students to read historical texts critically and to conduct rigorous research, while still providing a survey of theatre history.[4] Working on this project together has started to make space, at least for me, for an approach to theatre history that is less invested in what Paulo Freire calls the "banking concept of education," which imagines the instructor as the expert in the room, and more invested in a communal approach to learning alongside my students to use historical research and historiographic methods in our various disciplines and specialties.[5]

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[3] Among other texts, I am thinking about Claire Cochrane and Jo Robinson's *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Theatre History and Historiography* and Erika Fischer-Lichte, et. al's *Entangled Performance Histories: New Approaches to Theatre Historiography,* both of which advance approaches to historical research that mirror some of the visions for theatre history pedagogy that we are articulating here.

[4] Special thanks to Dr. Kirsten Pullen who has been in conversation with me about these questions since the fall of 2022 and who has generously shared a variety of teaching materials with me.

[5] Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 30th Anniversary Edition. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012, 71-86.

We are not the first to imagine a digital resource-sharing platform to help address some of these challenges. How have other initiatives inspired us?

CK: The conversations at conferences have been uplifting. There's clear enthusiasm about and desire for a resource-sharing space like this. We've also found a good deal of encouragement in projects that have accomplished similar goals in other parts of the field; we talk a lot about *HowlRound*, *New Play Exchange*, and *The Hemispheric Institute* as inspiring models for what this work could be.

DB: True, and several of the people we have reached out to are way ahead of the curve in their understanding of the resource-sharing landscape. In conjunction with University of Michigan Press, Scott Magelssen and Henry Bial started *Theater Historiography: A Gathering Place for Theater Students and Scholars to Share Ideas and Tools*. At the Washington University Fabula(b) Theatre + New Media Lab, Elizabeth Hunter has been involving students in innovative research with emergent technologies. And Eric Colleary, the Cline Curator of Theatre & Performing Arts at the Harry Ransom Center, has curated a highly useful set of digital resources related to theatre history. All these people have generously shared their wisdom with us. They also have direct experience with the sheer impossibility of trying to craft a single, inclusive, and sustainable solution.

How have those conversations given us a window into how we, as theatre people, might benefit from the lessons of colleagues in the adjacent field of Digital Humanities?

DB: I've been grasping at a lot of new vocabulary. Through a course at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute, I learned to differentiate between the terms Open Access Scholarship, Open Social Knowledge, and Open Educational Resources. As I understand it, Open Access Scholarship refers to peer-reviewed articles that don't require journal subscriptions. But many authors who make their works open access must pay thousands of dollars to do so. Open Social Knowledge refers to information that's made available in a Commons such as *Wikipedia, HowlRound*, or the *Hemispheric Institute*. And Open Educational Resources are, much as the wording suggests, resources that teachers can download and (depending on the creative commons licensing designation) adapt or simply give to their students. There's a website called *US History Scene* that's a good example of such a resource.

If I had to describe our project using all that new vocabulary, I might say I'd like to be able to tap into the peer-reviewed legitimacy of Open Access Scholarship, the compensation model that supports *HowlRound*'s Open Social Knowledge framework, and the pedagogical generosity of people who contribute to Open Educational Resources.

CK: I think that's right. When I'm thinking about the content modules and inviting scholars to craft essays aimed towards undergraduate students, I'm usually thinking in terms of Open Access scholarship, and when I'm thinking about diversifying the media that theatre history instructors have access to and sharing a variety of lesson-plans, classroom activities, and assessment strategies, I'm thinking more about the kinds of

compensation made possible through spaces like *HowlRound* and the flexibility of Open Educational Resources. These models offer important insights into how we might be able to make this resource productive for contributors and relatively easy to navigate for users.

As we've listened to people at conferences in the field, what have we learned about what others might find helpful?

CK: We began at the 2023 Mid-America Theatre Conference (MATC) with a session that we titled "The Impossibilities of Theatre History Pedagogies," building on that year's theme of "Impossible Theatre." Since we were at the very beginning of this process, we planned the session as a resource-sharing workshop, which invited participants to work together to 1) identify the key challenges facing theatre history instructors at this moment, 2) share publicly-available resources that they have found useful in their classes thus far, and 3) begin collectively envisioning an open-access digital humanities project that could fill in some of the gaps that other resources have yet to address.

The key challenges articulated during the session were largely aligned with what we expected. Participants described having too much content to cover in too little time, struggling to choose amongst expensive textbooks that don't hold students' interest, and communicating the value of these courses to students (and sometimes colleagues) who struggle to understand how they can use theatre history in their own disciplines. While many of us shared these challenges, there was less consensus as to how a singular digital resource might be able to address them. It was one of the first moments when the enormity of the task at hand became truly clear because there were such disparate visions for what this resource could be and for what instructors need.

What felt most useful about the session was the act of collectively sharing the resources we turn to in order to address these challenges. While some folks mentioned familiar resources, like *Theatre Historiography*, *Digital Theatre+,* and Michael Lueger's *The Theatre History Podcast.* Other materials seemed lesser known and offered exciting new content and tools to use in our classes. These included Coya Paz Brownrigg's "Theatre History Resources Link Tree," Eric Colleary's "Digital Collections in Performing Arts," and Classix's *(re)clamation* podcast.

Part of what I think we're trying to capture with this flexible, networked model is that energy of sharing resources and tools that have worked in our own classrooms and that can be adapted to other instructors' contexts.

DB: I had an aha moment at the 2023 Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) conference as I talked with people about a resource that would excite them. The conference attracts people with diverse professional identities, and a lot of the people I spoke with about this project identify more as dramaturgs than theatre historians. That got me thinking. What does a dramaturgical approach to theatre history look like? How does

it differ from an approach rooted in historiography, performance studies, or history-through-the-study-of-dramatic-texts?

I found an answer to that question when I began talking with people about "intersecting time zones." I didn't invent this idea; I learned about it from the designer Ian MacNeil, who has said, "I think that any play does in fact exist in many time zones – any piece of work does. The chances are it exists in three time zones. There is the time in which it was written; there is the time which it refers to consciously, and there is the time in which it is being read or watched."[6] When we study plays, we necessarily wrestle with the perspectives in all those time zones. It's not enough for us to strive for "historical accuracy" in the characters' time zone. The discursive structures that affect the words and actions the playwright selects and those the audience hears are equally important. The personally meaningful meaning of the story emerges in the constantly shifting intersections of these zones. We can apply this same way of thinking to the study of theatre history. At LMDA, I found myself talking with people who grasped this dramaturgical approach to theatre history. I think that's where the image of the force-directed graph crystallized for me.

CK: It's interesting because almost simultaneously, some colleagues in Theatrical Intimacy Education's Educator Advocate Program and I were in conversation about our approaches to teaching theatre history, and when I described my focus on using active learning and skill-building in the classroom, those colleagues described it as a dramaturgical approach to theatre history, so I think that term has taken on multiple meanings for us.

DB: How would you define a dramaturgical approach for yourself?

CK: Right now, I'm thinking of it largely as a practice-based approach to theatre history. Although I value the role of an individual dramaturg and often take on that title in creative processes, I also think that all theatre artists use dramaturgical skills in our work. Whenever we research the historical context of a play or study a playwright's other works or engage in structural thinking about what makes a particular play work, we're thinking dramaturgically. Studying theatre history can set students up to do that work more effectively, especially if we help them to identify that our theatre history classes are not about passively absorbing content but instead about developing skills for making sense of and critically evaluating that content. How about you?

DB: Yeah, for me, the dramaturgical approach involves looking at a moment in time from multiple angles because that's the kind of thinking I do in the rehearsal room. And it's also at the core of all artistic practice.

CK: Then, we both participated in a poster session entitled "Innovations in Theatre History and Musical Theatre History Pedagogy: A Gallery Walk" at the Association for

[6] Ian MacNeil quoted in Kim Greengrass, "An Inspector Calls Resource Pack." (The Magenta Partnership, 1999): 3, www.aninspectorcalls.com.

Theatre in Higher Education's 2023 conference coordinated by Amy S. Osatinski and Barrie Gelles. At the in-person session, as I was moving around the room talking with other contributors, I was struck by how many people are interested in re-imagining theatre history and musical theatre history curricula and by how daunting that task seemed to almost everyone I spoke with. The interventions that were offered in this session were incredibly varied, including modifying theatre games to teach theatre history, using memes to capture key ideas about ancient theatre traditions, and interrogating what we can and cannot know about women's contributions to Ancient Greek theatre.

DB: Colleagues continued to inspire us at the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference in Providence, RI. Even though you and I sent separate applications, we both ended up participating in "Generating Hope through the Co-Construction of Syllabi," convened by Sarah Campbell and Shelby Lunderman.

CK: We also co-convened our own virtual session, entitled "Closing the Distance: Resource Mapping for Dynamic Theatre Histories."

DB: During that session, participants once again shared resources they've been using to engage students in meaningful investigations of the content they teach. The projects ranged from Susan Anthony's prototype of a data visualization assignment, Melinda Powers's syllabus for a course that puts classical and contemporary playwrights in conversation with each other, and a close reading guide that Charles O'Malley and Ariel Sibert developed to help students connect to texts. Everyone we spoke with shared a profound interest in resisting the banking concept of education.

CK: At the same time, being in those spaces has reminded me of just how overwhelming it can be to encounter so many disparate approaches to a single topic, which is one of the logistical challenges that we've been facing as we think about how this resource will be structured. Retrospectively, the MATC theme really does feel quite apt – it's tempting to throw up our hands and say that this is an impossible dream.
DB: And yet we go on.

How has our experimentation as teachers affected our thinking about this resource?

CK: One of the initial challenges of teaching theatre history as someone whose research centers on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was building up the content knowledge that I needed to teach the course, particularly in terms of global theatre traditions that I was not exposed to in my own theatre history courses. I began to use active learning techniques in my classes partially because I thought that they might be an effective way to acknowledge that in some instances I am learning alongside my students and to encourage students to embrace learning with and from one another. It has also had the added benefit of creating spaces where students can work from their own curiosities and share aspects of theatre history with one another that we'd likely not have the chance to cover if I taught through lecture alone. Some of the most engaging moments in the course

have grown out of students' independent research projects, their comparative performances of classical texts and contemporary adaptations of them, and our collective development of a glossary and timeline at the end of each unit, both of which try to attend to what we covered in class and some of the gaps that we've identified while moving through the material.

DB: I've found it helpful to reverse my perspective and think about a specific course structure, one this resource might support. It's one thing to to abandon the purely chronological flow of topics and quite another to know what to put in its place. I'm also beginning to think about how I might approach theatre history with organizational strategies I've used in other classes. For example, in the dramatic literature course I teach, I've always found it relatively easy to resist moving in a line from Ancient Greek Tragedy to contemporary Realism. Instead of focusing on changes in dramatic structure that might occur chronologically, we zig-zag through time and look at plays in conversation with each other.[7] The model works on a fulcrum, beginning with clusters of plays that fit (loosely) within the "Aristotelian Tradition" before pivoting to those that intentionally reject it. The syllabus still contains a loose chronology; we read *Oedipus Tyrannous* before *Fences.* But we also read *Fences* before *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* Because I don't feel tied to a timeline, I'm also able to adjust the syllabus in response to contemporary discourse, creating avenues for me to put *Fairview* in direct conversation with *Six Characters,* which I obviously couldn't do when I began teaching the course in 1997. To do that, though, I had to cut another play or contextual article. And I'm okay with doing so in that course. As I let go of the pressure to cover everything in theatre history, I'm looking for a similar pivot that might help me organize clusters of topics.

Independently of each other, you and I have also experimented with getting students directly involved with selecting the topics we study.

CK: Yes. I build the syllabi for several of my other courses, including Theatre and Social Change and LGBTQ Theatre from scratch with my students at the beginning of each semester. It's a labor-intensive approach made possible largely by both of those courses being well within my areas of expertise, but it does generate a different kind of investment from my students, gives them a better understanding of the breadth of the field that we are studying, and establishes from the beginning an expectation that they will approach the course and its content with both a critical eye and critical generosity.

DB: At the beginning of theatre history courses, I've started giving students a list of more topics than we can possibly cover. I take them through a process whereby they each do a bit of research on one topic and make an argument for or against its inclusion in the calendar of assignments. From there, they do a little round robin, investigating a little more, until we land on the ones we will investigate in greater depth. I find this tactic helps balance my effort to expose them to a broad range of topics and create space for the

[7] I owe the general structure of this course to an approach that William Macduff developed while he and I were both Teaching Assistants in our graduate program at UCLA.

deeper dives that we all find more meaningful. Plus, when we get to the topic students pitched at the beginning of the semester, those students have some expertise to share with their peers, and it helps shift the ethos away from the banking model of education you mentioned earlier. The approach has engaged students as they take ownership of their learning. It also means I can't simply create a reading list. To respond to students' evolving discoveries, I need to have a trove of texts that are ready to go. I am confident the resource we are imagining would make the process somewhat less stressful for us all.

Have these experiments influenced our understanding of how this resource could function?

CK: Initially, we were talking mostly about content: materials crafted from anti-racist, feminist, queer, and decolonial perspectives and written for undergraduate students that faculty could pick and choose from when building their courses. This remains important and is certainly one of the primary areas that we are hoping to address since so many textbooks lack the flexibility that we desire and are out of reach for many of our students in terms of cost. With that said, I am increasingly interested in more effective ways to share classroom activities and assignments with one another since engaging students in research and historiographic thinking has been one of the most effective changes that I have made to our theatre history curriculum thus far.

DB: Yes, and I also wonder how this resource might help me integrate these discrete classroom activities into a coherent framework that supports my individual pedagogical goals. I know I want to disrupt the chronology, and I can imagine a resource that would help me put together clusters of topics. Are there enough people with similar pedagogical goals to merit the level of cooperation it would require to develop peer-reviewed clusters to sustain such a framework?

CK: Right. That's one of the challenges that others have shared with us in reflecting on earlier versions of this, like *Theatre Historiography*. It's also easy to see how quickly such a resource could become overwhelming unless some of those connections are built into the structure of the site. There seems to be a need to strike a balance between creating a public commons that invites robust participation and curating the content, so it is useful to the people who engage with it.

DB: Ultimately, this resource will only come to life through continued conversation with additional collaborators. We'd love to ideate with people who want to move beyond simply cheering us on.

Given that, let's talk next steps. Who are the people we are looking to include in this project as it moves forward?

CK: We're interested in talking with anyone who is excited by the prospect of this resource, but there is certainly a need for folks with specific skillsets and areas of expertise. Perhaps most obviously, we are looking for: theatre historians and other scholars who work on/with theatre history who are interested in writing content for specifically undergraduate audiences; people who teach courses in theatre history who

would be willing to share lesson plans and tools for activating theatre histories in the classroom; and people who would be willing to serve peer-reviewers for the content included in this resource.

DB: We also need Digital Designers and individuals with Digital Humanities expertise who are excited about developing a resource like this.

CK: Perhaps archivists who are willing to share tools that students can use to engage with primary sources.

DB: And artists who could connect us with people whose creative work intentionally engages in conversation with an otherwise "historical" topic or event.

What do we imagine the next year of this project will look like?

DB: Once we have that team of people, we can get more into the weeds. I imagine us beginning with a project management technique I learned from Nastasia Herold at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute. As a group, we can address who is responsible for what, to whom, for which circumstances, and according to what standards. It's a helpful exercise for getting project participants on the same page.

CK: And then we can iterate beta versions before diving into the fundraising required to make this vision possible.

How can people interested in getting involved get in touch with us?

CK: We're both very responsive to email, so please do reach out to us at db57@evansville.edu and ckane18@kent.edu.

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