

TEACHING STATEMENT

ANDREA STOLOWITZ

My goal as an educator is to ignite in my students a passion and curiosity for dramatic writing and then to guide them through the rigorous process of acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to advance to the next level of intellectual and creative development. I expect my students to take ownership of their educational experience and I attempt to convey that the value of their education is determined by their own development as artists and scholars and not by the grade or credit they receive. As a playwright, I am trained to work collaboratively and this is the model of teaching that I bring to my classroom. I invite my students into a learning partnership where much is expected of them but where much is offered as well.

Over the course of my fourteen years of university teaching experience, I have developed a system for exploring dramatic writing which guides students from introductory to advanced level writing while receiving practical experience in the field through participation in a public showing of their work, most often in the form of a new works festival. By offering sequenced writing courses along with classes and activities designed to supplement their experience with new play development, students are constantly asked to meld theory and practice. This creates an ideal learning environment for a genre of writing which exists to be performed.

My introductory courses in dramatic writing center around teaching students to write short one-act plays. They are expected to isolate and practice the basic skills of character, dialogue, conflict and plot while creating for the theatrical landscape. We spend much time exploring the toolkit of a playwright in order to examine what is unique about writing for theater and how we can utilize this.

At the advanced level, I work with students to create longer pieces of dramatic writing, teaching them how to create a plot over an extended period of dramatic time while still sharpening their skills with character, dialogue and conflict. Depending on the needs of the department the advanced classes have taken the form of playwriting, screenwriting, TV writing, devised theater, and adaptation.

My classes always offer a mix of directed free writing, specific exercises and assignments designed to teach certain skills, and the study of exemplary writing in the field by stylistically and topically diverse authors. My classes are conducted as workshops with outside readings in the fundamentals of theater assigned when needed. My classes encompass having student exercises and assignments read aloud by members of the class. One of the fundamental differences in dramatic writing from others forms of writing is that it is meant to be heard aloud. Writers and students must hear the work to understand how to sharpen it and revise it. It is through hearing work together and then discussing it that we arrive at the understanding of the fundamentals of dramatic writing. Through this method of sharing work, by the end of each semester the writers in the group are much more than a class of students; they are collaborators, advocates, and informed critics of each other's work.

The annual new works festival is an event which I try to bring to every teaching position I hold. It is crucial for students to have an understanding of how dramatic writing is designed to be performed by actors for an audience. This experience of bringing dramatic writing to life is a is one which should not be divorced from the teaching of writing. I seek to provide students with an event that allows them to experience the full application of their craft, which in the case of dramatic writing, mandates a public presentation.

A key element of my teaching style employs critique of both professional and student work as a method to strengthen one's own analytic ability and self-assessment skills. At the beginning of the semester most students are uncomfortable and unclear about how to give and receive feedback. For this reason we usually start with evaluating professional work which we see or read and then gradually move towards analyzing our own work. When critiquing each other's material, we use a modified version of the Liz Lerman approach to critical analysis to structure our feedback sessions. The method is based on the artist/scholar asking questions about their own work and therefore taking ownership of the feedback experience. This process often creates a trusting and fruitful dialogue, where the class and the creator are aligned in the same goal: to make the work stronger.

As an outcropping of understanding critique, I always ask my students to rewrite/rework a project during the course of the semester. It is important that students learn not only to evaluate and give critique, but also how to implement it. Incorporating feedback and then exhibiting the new work allows for the modeling of specific problem solving strategies. By reflecting on what went well or did not go well in the revision, the students slowly build a basis of knowledge, or a "toolkit", surrounding a specific skill.

In order to be successful scholars of dramatic writing, I believe students must be acquainted with the market and lifestyle realities of creating new work for the theater, screen, and television and be well-versed in the artistic trends and new voices influencing the field. I achieve this goal by sharing with my students first-hand accounts of my own and other artists' professional experiences and by assigning the current scholarship and literature.

It is essential to me that my classes expose students to the range of voices existing in the world of American theater and film. I select works to read and view which represent the diversity of the American landscape. As artists working nationally, we are in constant conversation with each other, the current social and political landscape, and the form. In order to teach dramatic writing effectively and comprehensively students must be aware of these conversations and this landscape.

My dedication to teaching and students has been recognized wherever I have taught. For my efforts at UCSD I was awarded a Saltman Excellence in Teaching Award. At Duke, based on the strength of my teaching, mentorship, and support for student new plays, my initial position was expanded so that I became a full-time visiting assistant professor with mentorship and departmental responsibilities. At Willamette University I built a dramatic writing program which spans the English and Theater departments, created new course offerings, received an Eli Lilly

Foundation grant to support the Atypical Performance class I taught in the spring of 2012, and had the opportunity to create professional mentorship opportunities for my advanced playwrights. My work at the University of Portland consists of teaching playwriting and screenwriting and mentoring the playwrights for their annual new play festival as well as for the American College Theater Festival.

Over the years my teaching evaluations have been consistently excellent, ranking at or above the mean for my various departments and divisions. On many occasions I have assisted my students in their career pursuits by using my professional connections to create internship opportunities for them, helping them get their work read by national theater companies and directors, and advising them on agents and other career decisions. Because of the amount of time I have been teaching I have had the opportunity to see several of my students achieve career success in the fields of theater and film, watch them gain admission to competitive graduate programs, and receive national awards.

There is nothing more satisfying as a professor than meeting my former students in the world of theater and film as we both go about our professional activities in those fields. Recently I was pleased to learn that one of my former Duke students attributed his pursuing his career in film to my encouragement of him and his work while he was at Duke.¹ He is now the lead producer on *The Hunger Games*. I have always considered my work with students as integral to my own life as an artist. I teach them with the passion I feel for the subject knowing that I am helping to support the next generation of artists, scholars, audience members, and supporters of the arts. This coalescence of my teaching work with my professional work completes me as an artist.

STUDENT EVALUATIONS/COMMENTS:

Because I have taught so many classes over the years I include data from my most recent evaluations and then a few comments from earlier in my career. Entire evaluations are available upon request.

Willamette University:

Atypical Performance: THTR 011X SP 2012

This was a new class which I created to combine developing student plays, actors and directors for a public performance of new student plays with hands-on professional mentorship activities in Portland and on-site at Willamette. I received an Eli Lilly Foundation grant in order to fund the special activities and professional guests related to this class.

- In summary, the instructor effectively taught this class (1.5 compared to the College of Liberal Arts average 1.7)
- Overall the course contributed significantly to my education (1.5 compared to the College of Liberal Arts average of 1.8)

¹ Kyle, Nichole. "A Producer With Duke Roots.", *Duke Chronicle*, 1 Jul. 2012. 10 Nov. 2012. [<http://www.dukechronicle.com/article/producer-duke-roots>].

“This was an amazing experience. I loved the feeling of coming into the theatre to work. I learned a lot about acting and playwrighting [sic]; this was my favorite course at this school by far”

“One of the most fun and educational courses I have taken!”

“This course gave me a good image of what being involved with theater is like”

“Thank you so much for these opportunities”

English 339: Special Topics Screenwriting: SP 2012

This was an advanced level creative writing class in the genre of screenwriting.

- In summary, the instructor effectively taught this class (1.2 compared to the College of Liberal Arts Average 1.7)
- Overall the course contributed significantly to my education (1.2 compared to the College of Liberal Arts average of 1.8)

“I loved this class. Thanks for your patience and passion in teaching us! It’s changed how I write and think about movies”

“She did a great job teaching a subject that isn’t easy to teach in a group setting”

“I really enjoyed this class. No critique, just compliments”

English 135: Creative Writing/Playwriting: Fall 2010

This is an introductory level playwriting class that fulfills the creating in the arts general education requirement at Willamette.

- In summary, the instructor effectively taught this class (1.0 compared to the College of Liberal Arts Average 1.7)
- Overall the course contributed significantly to my education (1.3 compared to the College of Liberal Arts average of 1.8)

“This has been one of the most enjoyable classes I have taken at Willamette”

“Have never taken a class like this before and had my reservations...I ended up enjoying this class and learning more about playwriting than I had anticipated”

“I just want to say that I really enjoyed this course and will miss it...I guess you really effectively cultivated an environment that promotes creative development”

Other Comments

“Andrea is very knowledgeable about play structure. With her help, along with the text, I’ve been able to learn a great deal about finding ways into a play that I think will serve me well as a director” (Drama 541: Script Analysis, University of Portland, Sp 2010)

“The prompts are fantastic. The teacher knows her stuff” (Drama 427: Playwriting/Screenwriting, University of Portland, Sp 2010)

“One of the best courses I’ve ever had at Duke” (TS 135.02: Dramatic Writing, Duke University, Fall 2004)

“Workload was demanding, but still well worth it. Most importantly, the exercises were interesting and none were without purpose” (TS 135.01: Dramatic Writing, Duke University, Fall 2004)

“She encouraged us to be creative and think outside our comfort zone...Always available outside of class to give extra help.Would love to take another class with her” (TS: 137: Screenwriting, Duke University, 2007)

“Over the past six years, Andrea Stolowitz has had a profound influence on over hundreds of undergraduate theater majors, minors, and the general undergraduate population who have taken her classes....Whether in lecture or seminar settings, Andrea has always distinguished herself as one of our finest teachers...Andrea is a professional of the first order: an articulate passionate, overachiever who has set a rigorous standard for herself and her students alike. She is an entrepreneur, a leader, and an advocate for the undergraduates she teaches.”

(Excerpt from teaching file: written by Walton Jones, Chair, Department of Theatre and Dance, University of California, San Diego 2002)



Gore Vidal visited Duke in 2005. Pictured, he speaks to the new works playwriting class led by professor Andrea Stolowitz. Photo by Les Todd/Duke University Photography

REFERENCES:

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