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The Evolution of Theater at Parkland College: Individual Paper

If someone were to ask you what factors in your life have shaped the person you are today, how would you respond? If you are anything like most people, it is possible that your immediate reaction would be to think of your friends and family and answer accordingly. While there is no denying the impact that those closest to us have on who we are and how we think and feel, as human beings, we instinctively look not just to our loved ones, but to the world around us to build our identities. As a medium with a certain magical ability to transcend everything from age to language to even time itself, art is one of a vast array of things which influence who we are and who we will become. The stories we read, the films we watch, the video games we play, the music we listen to, the paintings we admire, the political cartoons we laugh (or groan) at—all of these play an important role in helping us discover who we are, whether we are the ones consuming them or the ones producing them, and it is through these various forms of art that we find not only inspiration and shelter from the stress of everyday life, but also a way to make sense of the universe and find our place in it.

In his article “Theory in Cultural Anthropology”, which focuses on the various methodologies for studying culture and how those methodologies came to be, Robert Lavenda illustrates this point succinctly when, during his discussion of symbolic and interpretative

anthropology, he states that “human culture is a system of symbols and meanings that human beings create themselves and then use to direct, organize, and give coherence in their lives” (Lavenda, p. 227). Art is inherently personal; the meanings which one person ascribes to a piece of art will not necessarily be the same as what another person ascribes to it, and it is because of this that art is so essential to developing a sense of identity. Our group of three recognized this, and that is why we chose art as the foundation for our ethnography project. Because Champaign-Urbana is a town with a bustling and diverse theater community, we decided to focus on performing arts, specifically drama and acting.

In contrast to other forms of art, theater is unique in that there is a firsthand connection between the artists and their audience. They are not separated by a screen or a canvas; they are displaying their art in-person and in real time, and in some instances, depending on the nature of the production, they may even interact directly with the viewers by physically going out into the audience and interacting with them. Being a community college and not a traditional four-year university where, generally speaking, many of the activities are conducted for and by university students, Parkland College and by extension its theater have a similarly close and intimate relationship with Champaign-Urbana locals. In class, my group learned that ethnographies looked at social interactions as cultural performances to build identity. We knew that Parkland Theater brought students and locals together. They did this by inviting theater enthusiasts from outside the campus to participate directly in its productions through open auditions and opportunities to work a variety of backstage positions. Based on this knowledge our group decided to take a closer look at the relationship between the theater and the community and see how much that relationship has effected the development of Parkland Theater since its creation.

Our first order of business was to consult the Parkland Archives. By sorting through the various programs, documents, and photographs that had been compiled over the years, we hoped to uncover not only basic information on the theater's history, but also some indication that there had been a shift in the theater's choice of productions. Once we did that, we said, we would then use our discoveries to come up with a set of questions to ask people who were either currently involved with the theater or had been involved with it in the past. Unfortunately, this did not go as planned: while we did find a great deal of pictures from past productions, almost all of them were presented to us without context. There were no dates or names to tell us when they were performed and who was involved, and in most cases, they did not even list the names of the plays, which made it even more difficult for us to make sense of the images we were finding.

Similarly, the programs for the plays did not provide us much by way of information, as they did not provide us any descriptions of what the plays were about and therefore failed to answer any of our questions regarding whether or not the content of the plays had changed. In retrospect, however, I do recall that many of the plays put on over the years have been relatively obscure, and that none of them seemed to have been performed more than once. This would become relevant when we later set out to conduct our interviews with David Dillman, the Shop Manager, and Mary Kay Smith, the Student Services Advisor. Through Dillman, we learned that Parkland Theater does, in fact, have a policy of never putting on the same play twice, and that historically they've tried to stick to plays that are lesser-known. We also learned that despite what we found in the archives, the theater does make an effort to keep its productions timely; the most recent example he provided was of Stephen Sondheim's "Assassins", a musical about presidential assassins which ran during the 2004-2005 presidential election.

Dillman also mentioned that in recent years, the theater has begun putting on more mainstream productions. This statement was later supported by Smith, who was hired to be the Audience Development Manager in 1998. In Smith's words, her job was “to try to build an audience” for the theater by persuading groups to attend its productions - “school groups, American Legion groups, Rotary groups, anybody that could come as a group”. In the spring of 1999, she conducted a survey to figure out what brought people to the theater and what they were interested in, and discovered that the main demographic for the theater at the time was older women who attended plays on a regular basis. From that point on, her goal was to figure out how to draw in not just people from that demographic, but from other demographics as well.

The ways in which she chose to accomplish this were varied: she spoke to radio stations, she held giveaways, and, again, she made sure to market towards groups of people rather than individuals, such as by inviting local grade schools to productions of “The Ugly Duckling”. This is a point she reiterated several times throughout our interview with her: according to her, the Artistic Director at the time, Randi Hart, knew that the only way that the theater would thrive would be by bringing in audiences in groups, and one of the ways to do that was to appeal to students and the community directly and take an active role in making sure they not only came in to see shows, but that they kept coming back. The other way, she said, was by doing “unusual things” like putting on “The Laramie Project”, which originally calls for eight people to play forty roles, and casting forty people to play all of those roles individually. Not only would this attract a wider audience because it would compel all forty of those peoples' families and friends to come in and see the show, it would also create significant word-of-mouth advertising because of how unconventional it was.

“She was trying to fill a niche at Parkland that wasn't filled by theater elsewhere,” Smith told us. The goal was to produce plays that were unique and would challenge the minds of both the actors and the audience, but were more accessible to the community than the more “high-brow” productions at The Krannert Center and The Station Theater. However, after the theater put on a production of Bryony Lavery's “Frozen” during the 2011-2012 season, the theater's choice in plays have begun veering more towards the conventional. According to Smith, this is because Frozen's subject matter (the rape and murder of a child) made several people within the community uncomfortable. However, when asked whether or not there has been a noticeable change in what shows the theater chooses to produce over the past couple of years, Dillman also mentioned financial troubles within the theater department, which lead us to believe that the shift has as much to do with the theater trying to bring in revenue as it does with them trying to appeal to a wider audience.

Elizabeth P. Challinor, in her blog post entitled, “The sensory ways of knowing” states “The anthropologist, like the artist, cannot separate his or her work from the personal experience involved in producing it”. While she was referring specifically to her assertion that participant observation cannot be conducted in an objective manner, I find that her statement is applicable to this project not only because of the reference to art and its unique significance to us as individual human beings, but also because of how deeply I feel about the importance of Parkland's Theater as a research topic and the dissatisfaction I have with our results which only barely begin to answer our many questions. From our interviews with both Smith and Dillman, it has become abundantly clear to us that Parkland Theater and the Champaign-Urbana community are inexorably linked. Without the support and patronage of the community, the theater would not be what it is today, and by being sensitive to the desires and thoughts of the community and by

keeping its doors open to whomever wants to take an active role in its productions, the theater has proven that it has a vested interest in being a space where students and locals can bond over their shared passion for the stage.

However, as a student and as someone who enjoys theater specifically because of its ability to unite people of different backgrounds, I find myself dogged by questions we hadn't given ourselves adequate time to answer. What was the theater's relationship with the community like in its early days? How have its method of reaching out to the community changed? What perspectives do locals and students past and present have on this topic? I believe that with further investigation into these questions, the connection between Parkland Theater and the Champaign-Urbana community can be better understood and appreciated.

WORKS CITED

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