

# TEACHING STATEMENT

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## 1. Approach

Scenographers function as historians, artists and technicians. In teaching scenography, I provide students with the tools they need to fulfill these roles. It is my objective to equip them with the ability to analyze texts, research topics, adhere to industry standards, integrate new technology, and articulate their design approaches orally and visually. Armed with these tools, they can chart their own path to achieve their design objectives, whether it is for the stage or a wide range of live event productions. Young designers must find their individual artistic voices while adapting their talent and skills to the needs of each project and creative ensemble.

Students from a number of disciplines, including art, architecture, engineering, media study, performance, and design, take my beginning and advanced lighting design, scene design and scenography courses, in which we tackle a new library of plays each semester. We discuss the classics, new works, and plays by minorities, to provoke discussion of themes relevant to today's society. I include titles that are forthcoming in our production season in order to give students a jump start on understanding the demands of the plays and musicals they will realize. As some students will take more than four courses with me during their time at the university, it is important that they are always challenged by a new text, as each will present a different set of design challenges to learn and grow from. Independent studies and special projects in production allow me to experiment in emerging practices and site specific work alongside students, providing a training ground for projection design and mapping, wearable media, and customized systems integrating microprocessors. No matter what career path the students will follow, they should leave my design courses with an awareness of theatrical design and its creative process.

## 2. Philosophy

Designing for theatre requires an exploration into the denotative and connotative world of the play. It is impossible to express this content without the ability to achieve strong technical form. I care deeply about text analysis, research, oral and visual communication, and graphic standards. In my design courses, I question the students on the details of the text and require them to write down their responses. In writing, each student solidifies the given circumstances of the play for him- or herself. With this information, students can balance the needs of the play with the dynamic of the playing space that they select for the production. I believe that a quick and visceral visual response to a play can unlock a design approach. In class I have done a number of exercises that allow the students to visually explore the play: analog drawings, creating bash models out of molded paper, building sculpture in response to the text, and arranging geometric shapes in a scaled drawing as a way to explore composition. These gestural responses can inspire an abstract environment, lead to the arrangement of real objects, or influence lighting transitions. I require the students to create an extensive research file, inclusive of both factual and emotional data that they may use to inform their design direction. Factual research may include background information on the playwright, the social context of the play, and period and environmentally specific research. Emotionally based research consists of images that speak to the play in a non-literal way and are personal to the student. Beyond analytical skills, to communicate as a designer the student must have graphic ability. To that end I dedicate class time to teach how to draw, paint, model build and how to use drafting equipment. Both manual and digital practices are introduced.

### **3. Innovations in Teaching**

I embrace technology and integrate it into my teaching. I use computer programs that allow me to render space in three dimensions and create pre-visualizations of intended lighting looks. This “what you see is what you get” technology, known as WYSIWYG, has changed the way in which I communicate to the director, the lab technicians and my students. Ideas that once could only be discussed by looking at two-dimensional representations or by executing them fully in the actual space are tested and revised in virtual worlds. As a junior faculty member, I created a computer design lab dedicated to the department, allowing the students and me to integrate this new technology into our work. Now, after many software updates and industry shifts, the lab allows students to build venues in Vectorworks Spotlight, the theatre industry’s most prevalent CAD software for designers. Tied in with ESP Vision and lighting control software, we are now able to program lighting cues in virtual worlds. A demonstration of this work earned student Ian Shelanskey a Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF) National Honor.

Through the integration of advanced instrumentation designed for production, I have reinvented the way I teach. With the advent of automated lighting technology, all the controllable properties of light: placement, shape, size, color, texture, and motion, can be adjusted remotely. I have conducted experiments with the students, exploring how light can be used as a malleable object that emotes, evolves, and interacts with performers. I work in conjunction with master electricians from UB’s Center for the Arts to build a son et lumière show whereby groups of students experience the roles of designer and automated lighting programmer. This is advanced work. A recent student, who went through this training, went on to program automated lighting for the Buffalo Sabres as a member of the Pegula Entertainment Team at HSBC arena. He now travels the country with Bandit Lights. This innovation in teaching helps the designers understand how tech tools can be an integral part of the collaborative process, rapidly demonstrating ideas to their team, and how technology can be used to enhance production values.

The Design and Technology wing as a whole is committed to sustainable practices, with the 2016-2017 academic year marking the first season that all eight UB Theatre & Dance productions incorporated LED technology. It is critical for students to understand energy efficient systems and to look for ways to reduce waste in the creation of temporary work. As a teaching artist, I strive to lead by example.

### **4. Theory and Practice**

To truly grow, the theatre artist must practice within a laboratory setting. As Producing Director of our department’s season, I am proud to say that we offer five hundred experiential learning opportunities for students annually, including positions onstage and behind the scenes. Students in production benefit from working with faculty directors and choreographers, and professional guest artists. I have been a part of several successful visiting professor applications which have built residencies that create a unique interdisciplinary learning experience for the faculty and students alike. Among these are: Doug Fitch’s HOW DID WE?, an opera of images constructed from a series of storyboards rather than a traditional script; Sean Graney’s A RING NEVER END, an experiment in genderless playwriting; and the upcoming AT BUFFALO residency whereby students will learn what it means to put the archives of the 1901 Pan American Exposition onstage through the production of a musical theatre workshop, and where I will lead beta-testing of Zuckerberg Media’s augmented reality software.

As a teacher of scenographic practice, I promote undergraduate research activity, as it is not until a student designer works with a collaborative team and takes a design from start to finish that they truly understand all the pieces and parts of the process. In the Department of

Theatre & Dance, undergraduate design students design eight fully-realized productions each season. I am proud of our ability to bring designers up through the ranks, starting off underclassmen in supporting positions and allowing them to grow into being the lead designer on a production. To give structure to the students' independent research in design, I have created protocol sheets and project check-lists for each assignment, which in effect, has created a manual for production protocol in the Department of Theatre & Dance. As undergraduate students hold these positions of responsibility, my coaching of the students through the process is essential. I attend design and production meetings, and meet with the students independently to make sure their paperwork is in good order. It is critical for design schematics to be accurate so that the build phase goes smoothly. I am on-site for all technical rehearsals, staying in the background to let the students command their original designs while being accessible when they are faced with a production problem.

By combining theoretical projects, realized work, and involvement in theatrical practices beyond the university, my area (design and technology) fully prepares our students for a life in the theatre. My research and creative activities off-campus give my students opportunities to act as assistant set and lighting designers, automated lighting programmers, technical directors, carpenters and scenic artists in professional arenas. This exposes the students to other production methods, to a variety of venues, and to state of the art technologies, and it allows them to start to build a professional network. THE NUTCRACKER alone, now in its ninth year, has engaged nearly 50 current students and alumni. When working out of town, I have negotiated accommodations for University at Buffalo students to accompany me as assistants, a tremendous opportunity that I am pleased to share with my advanced undergraduates. My recent work in the use of the ephemeral (light and projection) to reveal the narrative of site, has created opportunity for students to engage in site specific work at Silo City, Buffalo's First Ward, and the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens. On-campus, I have arranged for demonstrations of high-end lighting systems for our students on-campus, and have hosted United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) Regional Programs, most notably a seminar with Han Lixun, Beijing Olympics art director.

## **5. Teaching Outcomes**

My teaching outcomes are exemplified in recognition from national organizations and UB. Student success is the ultimate teaching outcome, and a record of student honors, award recipients, graduate placements, and professional careers are all gratifying measures.

Invitations from USITT to review the portfolios of emerging designers and technicians at the organization's national conference speak to my national profile as a respected designer/educator. Furthermore, having seen my recent lighting commission poster which highlighted my work in the classroom, the institute has invited me to contribute to their quarterly publication, TD&T. They believe that the subject of the poster, the Lumagination project at the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens, could inspire "a fascinating discussion of the intersections of design, pedagogy, community engagement, and site specific work."

Examples of student success also come from engagement with USITT through the Prague Quadrennial (PQ). These include Collin Ranney, who was named to the 2011 PQ USA Student Exhibit Design and Curation Team; and Jon Shimon (now UB Assistant Professor of Technology) who was named as the Technical Director for the 2019 PQ USA Professional and Emerging Designer Exhibits. This most recent award means that Professor Shimon, with a team of UB Theatre and Dance students, will engineer and fabricate the design pavilions that will travel to Prague in 2019. The PQ is recognized as the pre-eminent international exhibit of stage design.

KCACTF has also taken note of my accomplishments as a designer and educator. In recognition of my creative work and teaching I was elected to the KCACTF National Selection Team. With

the honor came the opportunity to review fifty-four collegiate productions as I travelled to eight regional festivals across the US, responding to student exhibits of design and offering workshops as I went. One workshop, my signature for the organization, "Design Bash," was subsequently invited to the International Shakespeare Festival in Gdansk, Poland for presentation.

Throughout the years, I've helped UB students prepare their portfolios for review by industry professionals at KCACTF regional design exhibits. Following review, a number of students have received honors, including free tuition and travel for master classes at the Kennedy Center and Stagecraft Institute of Las Vegas.

At UB, I am in the class of first annual recipients of the President Emeritus and Mrs. Meyerson Award for Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching and Mentoring. In testament to my teaching success, students who have been in my classes, and especially those that have functioned on my artistic teams as lab assistants, have been accepted to top graduate programs across the country. Recent graduates are currently studying at Carnegie Mellon, Florida State University, Northwestern University and Southern Methodist University. Former students hold positions with professional companies such as Bandit Lites, Buffalo Audio Visual, Dallas Stage Scenery, Showman Fabricators, Tait Towers, and Santa Fe Opera; others are in tenure-track teaching positions at American University, Longwood University, University of Minneapolis, Twin Cities; and several have won or been nominated for major stage design honors including Joseph Jefferson (Chicago), Helen Hayes (DC), and Ovation (LA) awards.

As a teaching artist, I expose my students to a process for design that I have developed through numerous collaborations. My courses follow a dramaturgical approach, where students "own" the text as equal collaborators with the director, and are qualified to devise their own work. They learn to become contributing artists to the production process and develop the ability to articulate their design ideas both visually and orally. My students are aware of and practiced in industry standards. Their proficiency will allow them to take the profession forward, re-invigorating methods for production, and, I hope, setting the trends for the future of American stage design. In teaching scenography, I aim to inspire the next generation of theatre artists with the fearlessness to create honest theatre that can educate, inspire and amuse. Through my guidance, I help students find their artistic voice and equip them to function in a professional arena. I am interested in training young designers to rise to new levels of inventiveness while always maintaining awareness that each element of a theatrical production forwards storytelling in a unique way. It is my goal to continue to provide students with informative and energizing challenges to further their development as theatre artists, technicians, and managers.