

Bonnie Eckard
Chairperson, Arizona State
University Theater Department
October 15, 1998

Cocke: So, I have two questions. One, why did you decide to offer the Grassroots Theater course and two, how is the course benefiting the students and faculty? What is it confirming and what issues is it raising for you? And then anything else you want to say.

Eckard: I initiated the Grassroots Theatre course in order to take advantage of an opportunity that presented itself with the American Festival Project. It was a means of having the grassroots theatre artists from all over the country in one place, enabling students to see their work in action. In that sense, it was a matter of seeing a door and being willing to go through it. Additionally, the subject matter of the class matches department goals, college goals and university goals. I see that we are moving against separation of university and community that has been present since the earlier or mid-part of the century. Now, the walls are finally coming down and the universities need to be essential to communities. The President of ASU, Latti Coor, has identified regional and local research as an important way that ASU, as a Research One University, makes a unique contribution. He is encouraging our research to enrich the regional, local area and contribute to the culture and to the society in which we live. The Grassroots Theatre course matches departmental goals, and I have a personal interest in it as well. I have a strong belief that theatre is important to the community at large, and that it is very possible to make theatre relevant to a large population as opposed to a select elite. On the community level, people can use this art form to make their lives and their communities better.

In terms of how the course has worked to date, I think it has had mixed success. There is still some stigma questioning whether community based theatre can meet the standard of quality we expect in the professional theatre. Ben Cameron addresses this point directly in his article in *American Theatre* when he talks about community based theatre. He asks, "Why is there such tension between the artistic product and the community inclusion in what theatre is and what theatre does?" I've talked to students at

great length about community based theatre and I have run into similar thoughts. One comment was, “Well, isn’t this a leftover 60’s movement?” and another, “This may be really good for the communities, but is it good art?” I think that we need to look at these ideas, talk about them and confront them to see if we can find a way for community based theatre to meet the standard of excellence that we want to encourage in all of our theatre work.

On the other hand, I think that it has been extraordinary for people to hear voices that they haven’t heard before, or perhaps even their own voices from their own communities. One student felt like an outsider in the class because he was a white man. As he followed that thought through, he began to see why it was important for those voices to be heard. I think the class is bringing out some difficult and important issues.

Another difficulty in this particular class is that we have not been able to get people out working in the field as much as is needed and wanted. Much of this has to do with the stress and time that students have as university students, their lack of transportation, and other commitments in theatre. I’m thinking that when we offer this course again, we can learn from the first time and build the class into one which is not taking them away from the many other tasks which are expected of them. Also, it is very helpful for students to work together actively and perform in the class as opposed to just hearing about how it’s done. The Liz Lehrman Dancers were here last week and everybody has been talking about this ever since because they had a major experience doing the work themselves. Students may not be ready to bring the work into the community, but they can to do it themselves as part of their study in the program. The students felt they were creatively challenged when they did Liz’s work because what was being communicated in the work was about them, and they created something which was really quite magical.

Faculty involvement has been important to the success of the course. Several faculty members audited the course, others are actively doing community based theatre work, and many have expressed interest in going out and watching it to see what is going on. I think it’s like anything else; it starts small and then it becomes a part of the work we do in the department. Faculty have expressed concern about students’ time, but there has been considerable interest and much support philosophically. Many on this faculty feel

ready to embrace community based theatre. That, I think, is something unique about this faculty.

Cocke: What advice would you give somebody in another university who was thinking about going down a similar road and wanting to introduce this into a department that hadn't had a lot of previous experience? Is there anything that occurs?

Eckard: I think the students' time is a major concern. Traditional theatre departments have students working in productions 25-30 hours a week. This makes the commitment to working in the community almost impossible. Of course, I'm interested in bringing this work to theatre students so, the question is "how do we bring a group of theatre people together with enough time to commit to working with a community based project?" What helps, of course, is having some students in the class outside the discipline who aren't burdened with all the production work the theatre people are given. Still, I believe there is a way to schedule the class so theatre students can benefit fully from the community contact.

I know of no better way to deal with resistance from either students or faculty about quality preconceptions of community based theatre except to bring those preconceptions out and look at them. Also, we are in a time when we're experiencing a great deal of sensitivity regarding the oppression of diversity; this is part of the culture wars that we are living through right now. I think that within academia, there are professors who feel like they have been oppressed by having to deal with diversity. The questions become: "How do we examine our own fears and prejudices?" If we are able to express our concerns and look at them and look at our resistance to change and own it, then we can make some changes in our perceptions. I think many people haven't felt entitled to say that they're resistant to diversity and this is one reason hostility may exist about courses like this.

Another issue to address is engaging new faculty in community based theatre work. It is important to get young, energetic, forward-looking faculty on board. I think we're really fortunate with our faculty, because they're committed to building bridges in the community and exploring ways of increasing audiences.

Cocke: Okay great. That's good, very articulate.