INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION AND THE MAKING OF HAMLET

Collaborate or Die

Collaboration is the name of the game, of course, when it comes to theatre productions. It scarcely needs saying that plays—like motion pictures—require the work of many hands to fashion art that many of us enjoy on stage and screen.

Grand Valley’s theatre artists are no exception. Seven of us faculty and staff come together three times annually as a team for weeks on end to work on University plays, and at the same time we continue teaching our classes and administering our program just as faculty in other academic units. Students, too, are part of this collaboration, and they’re perhaps the most essential collaborators of all. They sit on our administrative and production committees that meet weekly, they learn many different skills working onstage and backstage, and when the shows open they are the ones in control of each performance, functioning as a team without faculty/staff supervision.

The degree and nature of collaboration required for GVSU’s annual Shakespeare Festival productions, however, is significantly different from the general features of theatre work I’ve just been describing, and those differences are the subject of this essay. I want to discuss my staging of the Bard’s greatest work, Hamlet, a play that required a high degree of collaboration and interdisciplinary teamwork between our theatre production staff, students, other Grand Valley units, and off-campus experts and specialists. And one that also required me, as producer-director, to spend as much time coordinating everyone’s work as I spent directing actors in the actual scenes of the play.

Basic Assumptions

I want to begin with an overview of some major challenges that faced us in the fall of 2004 when the play was chosen. For our own part, we Festival organizers wanted an impressive, solid production to reflect our twelve years of experience doing professional-level Shake-
HISTORY, HAMLET, AND THE PRODUCTION

The game, of course, requires production pictures—require that many of us no exception. Seven times annually, we work on University productions, continue teaching our program just as faculty do, too, are part of this the most essential administrative and weekly, they learn stage and backstage, the ones in control as a team without Carlo, collaboration required for festival productions, from the general describing, and in this essay. I want to this essay, Hamlet, of collaboration and in our theatre program, Valley units, and And one that also to spend as much as I spent directing play.

of some major challenge when the play was produced, organizers wanted to reflect our twelve national-level Shakespare: a large and important show that would challenge the skill of our artistic staff and prominently feature our student talent. Additionally, I felt that a play as famous as Hamlet would likely attract record audiences, each member of whom would surely bring his or her own expectations of what “the greatest play ever written” should look like onstage. Unlike the Bard’s less familiar plays, Hamlet is very well-known (if only from recent cinematic treatments); Hamlet is a “definitive work.” So I guessed that most of our patrons would expect a full-bodied historical setting, an intelligent reading of the text, and a compelling performance that would unleash the powerful energy in Shakespeare’s play.

In order to meet these expectations, I decided to draw a larger than usual number of collaborators into the project. I planned to work with a lot of students this time—more than forty onstage and backstage—and I knew that I’d have to attract that talent wherever it lay: in Engineering, English, Music, Theatre, Hospitality & Tourism, Film & TV, Broadcasting, Psychology and other fields. Additionally, I knew that I’d have to collaborate with a large production team made up of campus, local community, and guest artist resource people, including the Shakespeare Festival Committee (itself an interdisciplinary group) for handling necessary paratheatrical functions like advertising, catering, building the lobby displays, scheduling symposia, and performing other production tasks.

Scheduling Really Useful Work

With these points in mind, I guided the Hamlet-project through the following stages over a period of eleven months:

Between November/December of 2004 and April of 2005, I read the script many times and reached out to directors and scholars from other Shakespeare stages around the country who had experience with staging Hamlet, and with the different versions of the script. People like Ralph Cohen of Shenandoah Shakespeare, Jeff Watkins of Atlanta Shakespeare, Michael Best from the Swan Internet Shakespeare project, and Gerald Freedman who had directed the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Delacorte series for many years offered me a lot of helpful advice. My immediate goal was to create an acting version of the script to guide me in casting
the show. I had to know what lines and scenes needed to be cut, just how many actors would be needed and which roles they would play. All these meetings and discussions yielded valuable insights for me.

In February, soon after embarking on this textual adventure, I decided that the show really needed a musical director because I didn’t want pre-recorded “background music” to dampen the energy of the show. I wanted a live music presence instead: for background, for bridges between scenes, and for accompaniment to some of the stage action (processions, combats, and the like). So I invited Professor Pablo Mahavé-Veglia in the Music department to collaborate with me in making these choices. We agreed that he and his student group, the Early Music Ensemble, would play for each performance and that he and I would select the music over the summer, and rehearse the student musicians in the Fall as “court players” in the various scenes.

By March, my ideas on the actual staging of certain key scenes were beginning to take shape, so I began to collaborate with local artists from the community theatre. My fight choreographer needed to know the role that combatives would play in the overall production, and how much stage time the fighting should take, so I began a series of conversations with her. My sound designer wanted to look over the ten or twenty sound cues and consider some of the special effects that I felt were needed. And a half-dozen local actors, whom I thought might be “right” for some of the key older roles, were anxious to learn from me what they should prepare for their auditions.

By the end of March, I was ready to cast union actors for some of the older character parts. To accomplish this, I collaborated with a group of four advanced theatre students whom I took with me to Chicago to the union office for the casting sessions. These students advised me on which auditionees seemed “right” from their perspective, noting such things as the actors’ openness to questions, their interest in our students and in our Festival program, their experience in other university settings, etc. I also agreed that he and his student group, the Early Music Ensemble, would play for each performance and that he and I would select the music over the summer, and rehearse the student musicians in the Fall as “court players” in the various scenes.

By the end of April, I had to get more firm ideas about the acting demands and move into casting and castings about the acting visibly. This I did with the help of the actors and our costume directors for the talent of many student actors, whom I had never seen before (and the number of actors I needed was limited).

Finally in a series of discussions, I was able to concentrate upon the collaboration with my designers, scenographer, director, and sound designer, scenographer, we produced a scale “play”, an actual setting, a series of scenes, and a guide the technical direction of how everything could be done over the summer, and kinds of costumes we’d need. I also had several conversations with local artists over the summer (theater, dance, etc.) order to “set the control factors. Most would arrive on the stage by late August, ready to go. Of course, there were deadlines, the sound designer and director of whom were taking increasingly important movement and sound cues.

Conducting these during the pre-production “leisurely” by comparison, events in late August w way. Deadlines were Necessary, everyone involved a lot of the players moving ahead together. Weekly productions were mandatory with all the musical directors and sound designer of whom were notating movement and sound cues. Conducting these in the rehearsal period, and the technical director of whom would all remain on the campus with the all-campus Festival for the same reason. We also added to the production times like a teacher’s schedule, religious times like a teacher’s schedule, religious
By the end of April, I was able to make final decisions about the acting version of the text we would use, and move into casting the remaining roles in the show. This I did with the help of my student assistant directors and our costume designer. They advised me about the talent of many student and alumni auditionees whom I had never seen before, and recommended the number of actors I needed to cast (based on costuming limitations).

Finally in a series of meetings over the summer, I was able to concentrate upon practical stage details through collaboration with my costume designer, lighting designer, scenographer, and technical director. Together we produced a scale "groundplan" and sketches of the actual setting, a series of blueprints and elevations to guide the technical director in construction, a schedule of how everything could all be built and used during the rehearsal period, and a rundown of the number and kinds of costumes we'd need to build, rent, or purchase. I also had several conversations with my leading actors over the summer (the Prince, Ophelia, Gertrude) in order to "set the controls" for their character interpretations. Most would arrive on campus, of course, with all their lines learned and background research completed by late August, ready to begin the stage rehearsals. And of course, there were ongoing summer meetings with my design team with whom I had never seen before, and recommended the number of actors I needed to cast (based on costuming limitations).

Conducting these dialogs with so many people during the pre-production phase was actually very "leisurely" by comparison with the quickening pace of events in late August when stage rehearsals got underway. Deadlines were now very close, and my work as a director involved a lot of daily coordination to keep all the players moving ahead at a brisk pace and working together. Weekly production meetings in September were mandatory with student managers, designers, musical directors and others in attendance so that we could all remain on the same track. Bi-weekly meetings with the all-campus Festival Committee were essential for the same reason. Nightly rehearsals followed a precise schedule, religiously adhered to, that seemed at times like a teacher's "lesson plan." New students were added to the production team as well: a dramaturg to write the audience program and design lobby displays; a properties designer to provide props for the actual show as well as "rehearsal props;" a fightmaster and musical accompanist to drill the combatants daily for six weeks, and rehearse songs with the Ophelia-actress; a film/video documentarist to attend all rehearsals in order to shoot and produce a twenty-minute feature on developing the show start to finish.

Finally, there were faculty scholars with whom the student actors and I collaborated in rehearsal and performance: Professor McCargar from GVSU's Broadcasting program to record actors' voices and mix them electronically for the ghost scenes; Professor Borden from Calvin College's Theatre program who collaborated in rehearsal and performance with our design lobby displays; a properties designer to provide props for the actual show as well as "rehearsal props;" a fightmaster and musical accompanist to drill the combatants daily for six weeks, and rehearse songs with the Ophelia-actress; a film/video documentarist to attend all rehearsals in order to shoot and produce a twenty-minute feature on developing the show start to finish.

Assessing the Work
Considering Hamlet solely from this perspective of interdisciplinary-cooperation has drawn my attention in retrospect to a few key features of collaborative work onstage. For one thing, it's clear that directors really do need at least a full year of plan-
ning for a project of this scale and importance. With so many hands stirring the pot, things can easily go awry and quickly lead to artistic or financial disaster. In fact, I soon learned to compartmentalize my efforts as the production took shape: the direct artistic work occupied one portion of my attention, while the coordination of everyone's contributions occupied another, equally significant portion. This becomes especially true when key, irreversible, decisions have to be made six months before the show must open: which version of the script to use (everyone needs to be "on the same page" early in the game), which actors to cast (casting accounts for 80% - 90% of the success or failure of any production), how to gain the commitment of outside artists (professionals are usually booked on different projects many months in advance), and so forth.

Another noteworthy feature of collaborative work onstage is the producer-director's obligation to make "group mechanics" work, to constantly strengthen the communication skills among members of the team throughout the production period. All of us involved with Hamlet, for example—students, faculty/staff, outside artists—consciously strived to work together in a disciplined fashion, and I think this really paid off for us. For example, we were able to score a large regional impact with the show because Hamlet established important linkages with the local community. Grand Rapids enjoys an incredibly vital theatre scene for a city its size. There are at least six community theatres active year-round, in addition to five university stages, professional opera and ballet companies, and hundreds of local actors, dancers, directors, choreographers and designers who ply their trade in this setting. Few of these people or their local audiences ever travel to Allendale to attend our shows, but Hamlet attracted a large number of them. Many were curious about how successful this scale of collaboration on the part of a local group would turn out. Others were eager to see the work of their friends and colleagues on a classical masterwork that had not been done here in some time. Still others, of course, participated directly in the show because they wanted to work alongside professionals from stage and screen, or because they welcomed the opportunities for employment or for building their resumes. Thus, Hamlet became an entée for them to collaborate with us; getting Valley, participating in and experiencing the in particular.

I think, too, that outside resource people from our theatre faculty and the guest artists-in-residence on the project. Our entire team were demanding two hundred hours of highly rewarding. Did bring fresh ideas to the rehearsals. And usually always have their own situations and challenges work in step and integrate from Wayne State and Michigan school attend like this on their camp but I think most from the collaboration it gave our students. For our Hamlet-actor, P with Dustin Hoffman that our Gertrude-a professional recording and would offer a free Kris Byerly, was trained theatre conservatories, running shows for psychology as well as Psychology alike, spear-carriers of these people onstage a challenged to stretch demanded performance used to. They also felt by its scale alone, provided than they usually put we do each year.
importance. With so many things can easily go awry financially. In fact, my efforts as the artistic work occupied me and the coordination required another, equally demanding, effort, especially true when a version of the script was made six months before the “same page” early casting accounts for the same production—outside artists (professionals) on different projects, for example, always bring fresh ideas to the table for production meetings or rehearsals. And union artists or outside professionals always have their own unique set of standards, expectations and challenges with which we faculty need to keep in step and integrate into our training program. Aside from Wayne State and the U of M, that is, no other Michigan school attempts to create a mixed ensemble like this on their campuses—and GVSU has been doing it annually for the past twelve years.

But I think most importantly, the greatest impact from the collaboration on Hamlet was the inspiration it gave our students. Many were thrilled to know that our Hamlet-actor, Paul Riopelle, was fresh off a film with Dustin Hoffman before arriving at GVSU. Or that our Gertrude-actress, Laural Merlington, does professional recording work in Chicago and New York, and would offer a free evening workshop in vocal skills as part of her residency. Or that our stage manager, Kris Byerly, was trained at one of the nation’s leading theatre conservatories and works all over the country running shows for professional stages. Theatre majors as well as Psychology students, freshmen and seniors alike, spear-carriers or leads could rub shoulders with these people onstage and off for seven weeks. As a result of collaborating with these outside artists, students felt challenged to stretch themselves in order to meet more demanding performance standards than they’d been used to. They also felt part of a major enterprise that, by its scale alone, prompted them to exert more effort than they usually put forth on the “smaller” shows that we do each year.
And a key part of this student impact, of course, was the learning experience it provided. Listening to our guest actors, for example, in the seminar group on *Hamlet* that met twice weekly, students were shown how to engage with primary source material in a deeply personal and thrilling manner. Trading opinions and observations on Platonism, historical conventions, literary style and other topics with professors from around the campus opened their minds to connections between their own concerns and other liberal arts fields, and deepened their skills with language, interpretation and critical thinking.

Nor can I overlook the critical importance of having our students learn how to call cues the way industry professionals do, or how to care for stage weapons and learn the intricate combative movements from trained and widely-experienced weapons specialists. And most of all, how to work cooperatively as members of a creative team with others—both friends and strangers, peers and mentor-models—on a common project. Within the Festival context, students learned to respect the work that each person brought to the rehearsal studio or the performance stage; they learned how to develop professional work habits by making all their rehearsal calls punctually and without fail; they also learned how to focus and concentrate on their piece of the work for hours without slipping-up (hopefully!) and letting others down. And of course, they did all this over a period of eight weeks, each of them learning how to take personal responsibility for twelve performances that they ran without faculty/staff help, presenting *Hamlet* to nearly 4,500 spectators.

We were about five weeks into rehearsal on *Hamlet* when I began to notice some very unusual behavior among the cast. After directing GVSU shows for thirty years, I was struck by the realization that no student had dropped out since being cast five months previously, and that I had to contend with no excuses for missing rehearsals on account of terminally ill grandmothers or grandfathers, high-maintenance boyfriends or girlfriends, cats/dogs who needed to go to the vet, and so forth. When I asked a few of them why this was so, the students would give me a blank stare for a moment and then reply, “Well, because it’s *Hamlet*.” As though this said it all? Did they venerate Shakespeare and *Hamlet* in particular? Were of the commitment maintaining our outside “gu” audiences and putting order to prepare?

On the other hand, faculty and staff guests—to collaborate on production work? Might does say it all.
in particular? Were they impressed by and respectful of the commitment of everyone around them, including our outside “guests”? Were they expecting huge audiences and putting their noses to the grindstone in order to prepare?

On the other hand, what motivated any of us—students, faculty and staff, community artists and national guests—to collaborate so well in order to make this production work? Maybe “because it’s Hamlet” really does say it all.

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