

**External Review  
Department of Theatre  
The University of Regina**

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## Process

On April 16 and 17, 2018, Dr. Bruce Kirkley (University of the Fraser Valley), Professor Robert Gardiner (University of British Columbia), and Dr. Valerie Triggs (University of Regina) conducted a site visit as part of an Academic Unit Review for the Department of Theatre at the University of Regina.

Prior to arriving at the University of Regina the reviewers were provided with a copy of the Department's self study, including information about enrolments and budgets. In addition to these documents, the reviewers consulted the University of Regina Academic Calendar, the Terms of Reference for External Reviewers, the Department of Theatre website, and the Faculty of Media, Arts, and Performance website.

During the site visit, the Review team met with:

- Dr. Thomas Chase, Provost and Vice-President (Academic) and Dr. David Malloy, Vice-President (Research)
- Department Faculty Dr. Leanne Groeneveld, Dr. Kathleen Irwin, Kathryn Bracht, and Department Chair William Hales
- Mason Roth and Cathy Mearns, Department Production staff
- Robin Poitras (New Dance Horizon)
- Marnie Gladwell (Saskatchewan Arts Alliance)
- Norm Yakel, Professor Emeritus, University of Regina Faculty of Education
- several students in the Department
- Dr. Jessie Archibald Barber (First Nations University of Canada)
- Julianna Barclay and Jayden Pfeifer (Sessional Lecturers)
- Philip Adams (Saskatchewan Arts Board)
- Layne Arthur (Regina International Fringe Festival)
- Rae Staseson, Dean of the Faculty of Media, Arts, and Performance
- Anne Campbell (author and member of the community)
- Darlene Briere (Saskatchewan Drama Association)

The External Reviewers are grateful for the outstanding support provided by Kristina Untereiner, Executive Assistant, Associate Vice-President (Academic & Research), the very informative and helpful sessions arranged by Department Chair William Hales, and all the people who spoke with us during our site visit.

## **Academic Unit Review – Theatre Department**

### **Executive Summary**

From the perspective of the External Reviewers, The University of Regina Department of Theatre is adjusting to difficult and changing conditions. Individual faculty, staff, and students are doing outstanding, even extraordinary, work. Classes are excellent, and enrolment has increased. The Department has widespread support from, and strong engagement with, the wider Arts community, and a supportive and energetic Dean. However, it appears to us that faculty are also somewhat demoralized by the loss of full-time positions in recent years, and that the current curriculum, following the closure of the BFA program, lacks a strong focus. The Department is developing a plan to re-institute a renewed BFA program with an innovative curriculum that builds on the strengths of the Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance, and various recent collaborations with other Departments, the Faculty of Education, and First Nations University of Canada. We endorse this plan and urge the University and the Faculty to provide support and assistance for the Department as it moves toward re-invigoration and growth.

### **The priorities and aspirations of each unit and the extent to which they are being realized**

We believe that the priorities and aspirations of the Theatre Department are to restore a re-vitalized and innovative BFA program that integrates well with other programs in the Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance and the Faculty of Education, expand enrolment, replace retired and soon-to-retire full time faculty, and plan for growth. We believe these aspirations are shared by the students with whom we spoke, by members of the various communities we consulted, and by the Dean of the Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance.

### **The challenges and opportunities faced by the unit**

1) The most significant challenge is that, since the early 2000s, a number of key faculty have retired and have not been replaced. This factor, whatever the cause or causes, crippled the BFA program to which those faculty had been essential contributors.

2) Closing that BFA program and leaving a BA in Theatre with various specialization options may have seemed prudent at the time, but hasn't resulted in excitement and ambition among the remaining faculty. Instead, the closure of the BFA is perceived as an un-deserved and demoralizing setback. And, although enrolment has grown and some successful new classes have been developed, a sense of cohesion and direction may have been lost.

3) The third challenge is enrolment. As provincial support for Saskatchewan Universities has declined, tuition plays an increasingly significant role in funding. A Department such as Theatre, which previously devoted most of its instructional time to providing very high-quality education to small cohorts of students, can be expected to experience difficulty adapting to a climate in which large numbers of students are an essential factor in budgeting.

We, and the faculty with whom we spoke, perceive these challenges also as opportunities. "Standard model" professional theatre production is no longer the only available career path for young artists working in live performance. New – and very successful – Canadian plays are created by, and for,

diverse but uniquely Canadian communities. Some of these works are more or less conventional theatrical shows – but arise from the stories of a particular local community. The development of this kind of script often arises from intensive engagement with specific groups. One example is the musical *Come From Away*, which developed with participation by Sheridan College and recently transferred to New York with great success. Another example is *Making Treaty 4*, which originated at, and with support from, the University of Regina and First Nations University of Canada, and is slated for an upcoming professional production at the Globe Theatre. Both of these shows involved students and faculty in their early development, both arose from innovative approaches, and both present local or regional stories in a way that makes them appealing to national and international audiences. So, the challenge created by the loss of a “standard model” BFA Theatre program is also an opportunity to create and develop a new approach to teaching and learning live performance, an approach based in the particular stories and circumstances of the region and the students.

Similarly, the loss of faculty expertise in some areas can be seen as an opportunity to develop a plan for adding faculty expertise in new and crossover areas, and for working with other Departments in developing new approaches to preparing students for careers in the live performing arts that bridge disciplines in the Faculty of Media Arts, and Performance.

Finally, the financial constraints that require increasing enrolment can be turned to advantage. The Department has, to some extent, taken the initiative and increased overall enrolment from previous lows. A couple of additional steps might be taken.

### **The structure and quality of undergraduate and graduate programs and instruction**

The Review Committee did not focus on the MA and MFA programs. The census data included with the self-study shows a small number of graduate students in Theatre. The University of Regina calendar describes “special case” MA and MFA programs in Theatre, and these seem very well-designed programs that accommodate the small number of full-time faculty. Increasing the size of the graduate programs did not appear to be a high priority for the Department, but building graduate programming in new Canadian Theatre and Indigenous theatre is a goal that should be encouraged and pursued.

At the undergraduate level the Department currently offers a BA degree with 4 streams: “General Studio,” “Acting concentration,” “Design/Stage Management concentration,” and a three-year program with the Faculty of Education. The Department’s energies and resources seem spread too thin by these multiple streams, and the extensive array of courses. This may have resulted from the long history of offering courses in a range of BFA and BA programs. While some courses are common to each stream, the overall impact of seeking to support all four areas and serve students adequately may be problematic. Students complained of not being able to get the courses they needed for their programs in a timely way, with many offered on a two or even three-year rotation. The individual courses are well delivered and, as we were told during interviews with students and members of the regional theatre community, the quality of the education is outstanding.

We suggest that the Department and the Faculty streamline the BA and develop a re-vitalized BFA, emphasizing alternative training approaches, with the goals of growing in new directions, increasing enrolment in visible and effective ways, and adding full-time faculty positions. During our site visit we received a preliminary proposal for a new BFA program which has considerable promise.

### **The contribution of each program to related disciplines and fields of study**

The Department has a history of active collaboration with the Faculty of Education, and individual faculty are engaged in numerous projects that combine disciplines, such as opera, dance, and construction of art installations. A promising relationship exists between design / production curriculum in Theatre and the Creative Technologies Department, and there are other areas of collaboration, notably the recent play development work with First Nations University of Canada. These interdisciplinary initiatives could be expanded, and would certainly play a large role in a unique and innovative restored BFA program. The Theatre Department also provides extensive facilities and support for a broad range of local groups outside the University, making it a significant resource for the performing Arts in Regina and Saskatchewan.

### **The scope and significance of research being pursued**

The faculty are all engaged in significant creative activity and research in their disciplines. Faculty have generated a reasonable amount of grant and project funding over the years, and continue to develop noteworthy projects. Since the total number of faculty engaging in scholarly activity has been reduced by half over the past decade, and since several faculty have significant administrative responsibilities, the total amount of activity in the Department is less than at institutions having many more professorial-stream faculty. Given the heavy teaching and administrative loads, the creative and research productivity of the Department is excellent, and influential in Canadian and International theatre practice.

### **The degree to which academic programs meet students' learning needs and goals**

As noted above, there may be too many different BA streams for the number of available faculty. The students with whom we spoke were engaged with their education, very supportive of the Department, and enthusiastic about the opportunities for learning they'd experienced. However, they did mention difficulties with scheduling and course availability.

The amount of "common ground" among the various BA degree concentrations wasn't very clear to us, nor do we entirely understand why a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre requires concentration options more often found in BFA degrees. It's clear that a generalized stream relating to the joint BA with Education would be necessary, since a considerable amount of that coursework is taken in another Faculty, but in general the "streaming" might be a carryover from the former BFA program rather than part of a curriculum plan based on BA program learning outcomes. A BFA-like specialization approach within a BA can lead to scheduling complexities when faculty numbers are reduced.

### **The characteristics of staffing complements**

The Department has a small number of very outstanding staff who make essential contributions to student education and training, and to the University's relationship with the regional community. There's an obvious need for more production support staff, particularly in areas of infrastructure maintenance and probably student supervision, but we assume that funding constraints have

affected not only faculty numbers but also staff support. The current staff are doing an excellent job with the resources available.

### **The degree to which the unit is meeting its internal and external service responsibilities**

Self Study: "...All of the Theatre Department's introductory courses are open to all undergraduates, and upper level classes are only restricted by the pre-requisites of the introductory courses...Technical theatre courses are especially popular with students from Visual Arts and Media (Film and Video production)... Department productions are open to all university students who wish to audition, and recent shows have included a large number of students from other faculties and disciplines...The Theatre Department has a close working relationship with the Arts Education program..."

Faculty community service activities listed in the self study are wide ranging and exemplary. We spoke with many members of the performing arts community in Regina who praised the role that the Department had played in the community over the years.

The Department is meeting and exceeding its service responsibilities and is a flagship representative of the University. This has been accomplished with ever-diminishing resources in recent years, another indicator for us that the Department should be supported in its efforts to rebuild.

### **The role the unit plays in meeting the University's vision, mission, goals and priorities**

The Theatre Department is and has been successful in developing educated contributors and career-ready graduates, as indicated by the list of alumni in the self study. Creative work and research by faculty and students is excellent, as indicated not only by faculty CVs but also by the Department's participation in the development of projects such as *Making Treaty 4* or the recent co-production with Curtain Razers. These and other projects are examples of high quality and accessible educational opportunities combined with influential creative work in pursuit of local and global contributions to knowledge (and *Making Treaty 4* exemplifies significant engagement with aboriginal communities). As noted above, the Theatre Department is closely linked with and very important to a large number of performing arts organizations and communities in the region. The Department of Theatre plays a very important role in meeting and activating the University's vision, mission, goals and priorities

### **The financial resources of the unit.**

The financial resources of the unit have been eroding, and – while they're adequate to continue the current courses, community relationships, and scholarly activity, they aren't sufficient to both undertake innovative directions and also continue business as usual. In our view, If the Department and Faculty investigate creative new directions combined with a thorough curriculum review based on learning outcomes and some strategic resource allocation, the Department's funding for full time faculty and staff positions is likely to improve.

## **With the above in mind we have the following recommendations:**

### Program and Curriculum

Reinstate the BFA with a renewed vision and direction.

The proposed BFA in Theatre, Creation and Performance provides an excellent starting point for a rethinking and revival of the BFA. The proposed program integrates in dynamic, collaborative ways with other programs in the Faculty of Media, Art and Performance. The proposal presents a proactive, forward-thinking interdisciplinary approach that could prepare students well for the work environments of today and the future that require excellent collaboration and interdisciplinary communication skills. The proposal we received during our site visit is an excellent start. We would suggest that the “standard model cohort” of 12 – 16 acting students and another 5 – 10 design and production students is probably too small (and also perhaps not a very innovative approach), but that a target cohort of 30 – 40 students could be both achievable and pedagogically appropriate for a BFA in “Theatre Creation and Performance.”

Refocus and greatly streamline the BA program to have a single clear focus and purpose.

The department should be provided with some resources (i.e. release time) to re-imagine and re-invent the BA and BFA programs. This process should involve engagement with other areas, such as the other MAP disciplines and the Faculty of Education. The main objectives of this process should be (a) to tailor the BA program realistically to the available resources of the department; (b) develop core competencies in creative and critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and team-work, communication, and professionalism that are essential in a range of workplaces, including creative industries, educational environments, and innovative project management.

Ensure the BA and BFA programs complement and reinforce one another.

Strategize on how to maximize resources effectively to serve the needs of both programs. They should support and energize one another, and not become rivals competing for students, spaces, or status. One approach that might be considered is for both programs to have common lower level requirements, with an option to apply to the BFA after completion of 30-45 credit hours (i.e. in the second year). Hence a BFA cohort would be at least partly drawn from, and have already developed relationships with, the wider pool of students in theatre.

Collaborate with First Nations University of Canada in developing an Indigenous Theatre certificate program.

The recent success of the devised production *Making Treaty 4*, created through collaboration between the Department of Indigenous Languages, Arts and Culture at First Nations University of Canada and the University of Regina Theatre Department, stands as an exemplary model of experiential learning that engages students in developing high-level knowledge and skills that integrate with and contribute to the larger community beyond the university in vital and transformative ways. The groundwork initiated through this project should continue to be nurtured, especially since it complements the proposed BFA in Theatre, Creation and Performance so effectively. Dr. Jesse Archibald-Barber, Associate Professor of English in the Department of Indigenous Languages, Arts and Culture, expressed a strong interest in working with the Theatre Department to develop a certificate program in Indigenous Theatre production. From our perspective, this proposal represents an exciting opportunity for both departments and should be actively pursued, first because it supports the reimagining and revitalization of the Theatre

Department's proposed new BFA, and second because it contributes in significant and meaningful ways to the educational mission of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations. In our view, this is not just a recommendation but a responsibility of universities nation-wide.

Complete a comprehensive review and updating of curriculum with the aim of reducing the overall number of courses and aligning all remaining course offerings with clearly defined program learning outcomes.

A comprehensive review of all courses should be undertaken based on criteria that provide a rigorous method for determining clearly how each course contributes to the distinct learning outcomes of the BA and BFA programs and allows the department to determine any gaps in curriculum, identify any unnecessary duplication in course content, or identify courses that may no longer be contributing in productive ways to program learning outcomes. For this initiative to be successful, the university should provide resources to help facilitate the review, by making release time available for the faculty who do the work, arranging for staff participation, and bringing in an outside facilitator with significant expertise in this area who can initiate and guide the curriculum review process.

Initiate regular meetings with the Drama department at the University of Saskatchewan (one annually should be sufficient) to compare course and program offerings.

As part of the process of reviewing programs and curriculum, the Theatre Department should consider establishing annual meetings with colleagues at the University of Saskatchewan. The purpose of these meetings would be to compare notes, partly with the aim of articulating the distinctiveness of each departments' offerings, but also of ensuring transferability of courses/credits from one department to another. (Note: while initially it might seem counterintuitive to facilitate transfer, in practice it could benefit both departments. For example, students from Saskatoon might be very interested in pursuing the new BFA in Theatre, Creation and Performance at the University of Regina, but not have the financial ability to do so for the entire four years required. If they can complete the first two years at the institution closer to home and then transfer their credits to another to pursue their degree of choice, this may in fact be mutually beneficial to both departments – and certainly is beneficial to students.) Beyond this, annual meetings would allow both programs to compare notes on a range of issues, define common needs or objectives, and work collaboratively to find solutions.

### Faculty Renewal

Investigate solutions and opportunities for strategic planning on retirements with the aim of determining how to provide some (renewable) limited term appointments that may, in time, develop into tenure positions.

To design, develop and implement new directions and initiatives, the department needs additional faculty with fresh ideas and energy. Existing faculty are excellent scholars, teachers and artists, but they are also overstretched. With several tenure positions lost to retirements in the last decade, and several more retirements on the horizon, the university needs to commit to working transparently with the Dean and the department to develop a proactive strategy for managing retirements, while also attracting new talent and energy. Grant funded artists-in-residence, while not replacing full time faculty, might be a cost-effective way to benefit students and develop projects. Distinguished artists are available in or near Regina, so travel and accommodation expenses aren't necessarily

required. Since the University has excellent theatre facilities, co-production with professional companies might help with funding and would provide valuable learning experiences for students.

Establish a new faculty position in Indigenous performance and performance forms to strengthen and expand the outstanding initiatives already underway in this area.

This recommendation follows on and supports the earlier recommendation to collaborate with First Nations University of Canada in creating a certificate program in Indigenous Theatre. The possibilities for a cross-appointment with the Department of Indigenous Languages, Arts and Culture at First Nations University of Canada should be investigated as a way of: (a) revitalizing the faculty complement in the Theatre Department, (b) supporting the development of the proposed new BFA in Theatre Creation and Performance, and (c) strengthening Indigenous programming, including the proposed certificate in Indigenous Theatre.

### Enrolments

Develop and implement several high-enrolment (more than 100 students) first-year courses open to students from across the university, such as a YouTube Performance / Production course that gives students tools in visual storytelling, on-camera performance, and digital techniques to engage online audiences in ways that are compelling, informative, ethical and socially responsible.

Creating popular, high-enrolment courses could help significantly and efficiently with meeting enrolment targets. Courses with performance as a focus that bring together students from a range of disciplines to collaborate and learn how to communicate their ideas effectively using new technologies can be very effective. Courses dealing with popular topics, such as musical theatre, areas of regional interest such as indigenous performance forms, or areas of broad applicability such as effective public speaking, can enrol large numbers of students. A course with 100 students costs less to offer than 4 courses with 25 students each, can provide invaluable basic education for students across the campus, builds audiences for live performance, and can help recruit majors.

### Facilities

Strategize on how best to manage the department's exceptional theatre facilities in ways that will support student learning, facilitate community engagement, and use department resources effectively.

The department has outstanding facilities; however, program changes and faculty attrition over the years have placed an increasing strain on the department's ability to utilize and operate these facilities. Furthermore, with the proposed changes to the vision and direction of the department's BA and BFA programs, the specific requirements for performance and production facilities will likely shift more to the greater flexibility offered by a "black box" space such as the Shu-Box, with less programming needing the more traditional performance model offered by the larger proscenium stage of the Riddell Theatre. Over the two days of the site visit, the review panel heard from many representatives of the cultural community in Regina and Saskatchewan, who were unanimous in their support of the program, and especially in emphasizing the vital role the department plays in sustaining and fortifying the province's cultural ecosystem. This role takes many forms, but a vital one was the support provided to the community through the availability of the department's facilities. A possible solution to the challenges of operating these facilities might be for the department to shift the Riddell Theatre to becoming primarily a community facility, available for rental at a reduced fee on the condition that community users – especially professional or semi-professional companies – will work with senior technical and design students from the

theatre program and cast performance students when appropriate. To support this arrangement, the department could implement an internship semester for a cohort of technical/design students who would work with the community groups on setting up and operating the technical requirements for their shows. Organizations renting the Riddell Theatre for reduced fees would do so fully recognizing they are committing to help facilitate valuable experiential learning opportunities for theatre students and would need to agree to supporting this learning through various accommodations (i.e. mentoring students on specific techniques or skills, scheduling tech and cuing sessions in ways that respect other demands on students' time, etc.).

### Celebrating and Promoting Success

Work with the Faculty of Media, Arts, and Performance to develop marketing, promotion, and recruitment strategies, especially using social media.

Alumni success stories, student websites and social media groups, and an exciting Department website are essential tools in a connected world. Visits to regional secondary schools, particularly if undertaken with colleagues in other areas of the Faculty, can help with recruitment, as can arranging tours of Department facilities, especially if combined with group bookings of high school classes to see productions in the Department's theatre season. That said, while connecting with prospective students and the community via digital platforms is vital, these initiatives should complement and reinforce face-to-face, embodied social interactions, not substitute for them.

### Music, Theatre and Education

The Department should continue and expand its relationships with Music, Creative Technologies, and the Faculty of Education, with the goals of developing new joint courses and joint faculty appointments, and expanding course enrolments, as well as fostering inventive cross-disciplinary productions and performances.

During the site visit, we heard repeatedly from many prominent professional and community organizations about the vital role the University of Regina Theatre Department plays in the overall cultural ecosystem of the province. While there are many ways the department contributes to the province's cultural vitality, one of the significant areas mentioned was how the department supports K-12 education and provides rich opportunities for high-school and elementary level students to experience theatre. Several speakers pointed to the significant number of musical theatre productions performed at high schools throughout the province, and the need to strengthen support for this activity since it provides valuable learning experiences in identity formation, interpersonal communication, teamwork and collaboration, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving. One of the directions well worth investigating as the department works on a revised vision for the BA in Theatre is a cross-disciplinary program with Music, Creative Technologies, and Education that seeks to: (a) give future (and current) teachers training and skills in managing and directing musical productions at the K-12 level (with K-12 facilities and resources); and (b) create opportunities for K-12 students to attend University of Regina productions and events, and/or for university students to conduct workshops and tour productions in the K-12 system, thus serving as a valuable cooperative learning experience as well as an effective educational and recruitment vehicle.