



Case Studies Putting it Into Practice: Integrating UMS Performances into Humanities Classrooms

UMS believes that experiences with the performing arts can enrich and enliven academic inquiry across all disciplines. We are committed to creating uncommon learning opportunities for students and faculty, both in and outside the classroom. Through our Course Development Grants and Classroom Ticket program, we support faculty from across U-M's disciplines in the integration of performance into their courses.

Collaborating with our Campus Engagement Specialist, faculty creatively incorporate music, theater, and dance events into their syllabi. This detailed look at UMS performance in humanities courses highlights three examples from the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA): a brief account of an effective class activity, a study of one professor's challenging experience with a performance that didn't connect as expected with her students, and a study that examines in detail the process of incorporating performance into a course.

Spotlight: A most successful in-class exercise.

A lecturer at the Sweetland Center for Writing, in the English Department, and for the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program (LHSP), Paul Barron directed LHSP from 2015 to 2017. He describes what he considers a most successful teaching experience, centered around a performance of Sophokles' classic play *Antigone* (in a new translation by Anne Carson) in Autumn 2015:

His 18 first-year students in LHSP 125 *Introduction to College Writing/Writing Spaces* had read *Antigone* in preparation for a UMS production of the play, and Barron wanted them to connect with the play by gaining a new angle on the characters. He announced that during the class period they'd take on the ambitious task of writing a poem collectively. He then divided the class into two groups, assigning the character of Antigone to students in one group and the character Creon to the other. He asked students to write, as their assigned character, something he or she would want to communicate, prompting "If you could say anything to the world from the character's perspective, what would it be?" Students then faced each other in front of the class as Antigone and Creon and read their statements in turn, as a dialogue.

This call and response format generated new meaning, congruent with but distinct from Sophokles' play. Barron transcribed the students' exchange, keeping the stacks of lines in order as they had been read. The class then used this poem as a text in its own right, as a way to generate new questions and unearth latent meanings.

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In this way, knowledge production was sourced from the students themselves — one of the reasons Barron deemed the exercise particularly effective. He also found that students gained a profound understanding of Antigone and Creon, stemming from both writing and speaking in character, and from analysis of their poem.

He notes, "The act of remediating the play into a poem, translated via their understanding of the characters, effectively ruptured the play. Like newly ruptured ground, the new poem was composed of pieces, shards of the play that permitted students to engage in a sort of critical archeology. Their new insights could be cross-checked against the original to answer the question, how might their new understanding gained from the poem be used to think about the play?"

Case study 1: Embracing the risk of live performance.

Professor Victoria Langland: History and Romance Languages and Literature

THE COURSE

While Langland has taken several of her classes to UMS performances, this study focuses on her experiences with History 202 *Doing History*, a class in historical methodologies for undergraduates who have declared a History major.

WHY INCLUDE PERFORMANCE?

Langland uses attendance at UMS performances as an opportunity for her students to confront the contexts of cultural production. She asks them to consider cultural texts as historical creations whose meanings change over time, as well as to think about the nature of archival representation and research. For Langland, performance is a special treat for the students, something out of the ordinary that they might not experience otherwise.

In Autumn 2015, she and her *Doing History* students attended a UMS screening of the 1954 film classic *On the Waterfront*; for this one-time event, the film's score was played live by the New York Philharmonic at Hill Auditorium. Then, in Autumn 2016, she took her *Doing History* students to UMS's presentation of *RoosevElvis*, a gender-bending play created by ensemble theater company The TEAM and featuring the spirits of Elvis Presley and Theodore Roosevelt on a hallucinatory road trip. Her approach to the two events was similar, but the experiences of the two classes differed considerably.

APPROACHING THE PERFORMANCE

For Langland, the key to choosing a UMS performance and preparing her students for it lies in how well she knows the material. She says, "It needs to make sense for me, or I can't make it make sense for my students."

Before any performance, Langland lays a strong groundwork for her students, assigning them a variety of source readings. For *On the Waterfront*, her class read excerpts from the 1940 *New York Sun* articles that inspired the screenplay, excerpts from Leonard Bernstein's memoir about writing the score, and Elia Kazan's 1952 statement about his involvement with the House Un-American Activities Commission. This reading exposed them to the multiple layers of the story and prompted them to consider just what a historical text is, and how the meanings we take from it change depending on when we "read" it and what other sources we read with it. Likewise, before attending *RoosevElvis*, students read about how Teddy Roosevelt's and Elvis Presley's public identities were constructed, including excerpts from a scholarly history of gender and race in the U.S. and from Greil Marcus's *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'N' Roll Music*.

Langland characterizes the integration of performance into her classes as “a mix of security and insecurity.” For *On the Waterfront*, for example, she felt confident of the layered historical entry points she provided her class, but the music itself was an unknown element for her.

HOW IT WENT

In fact, the live orchestral performance of the score of *On the Waterfront* really drew Langland’s students in: “They were hyper-aware of the music.” The experience was a positive and energizing one for the class all around; Langland describes the students as “transfixed” in the theater, and their resounding response to the performance was, “This is so cool!” A visit from the New York Philharmonic’s in-house archivist and an assignment working with their online archives enhanced students’ appreciation of the performance while giving them some hands-on experience “doing history.”

The History 202 experience with *RoosevElvis* fell short of the one with *On the Waterfront*. Langland says, “It didn’t show them that performance is this wonderful thing; it showed them that the performing arts can be a conundrum.” A debriefing with her students after the play revealed that some elements of its production style made the performance hard for them to access — for example, the use of multiple television screens onstage. The images on these screens create a more collaged, non-linear performance than is typical in conventional plays, losing some of Langland’s students along the way. Furthermore, some students commented that the play “seemed like a stretch for a history class.” Langland explains, “When the play seemed to be about presenting historical figures through complex gendered means, it was great for us. But when it ventured into the really fictional, psychological dimensions of the two characters, it seemed to have less meaning for them as part of a history class.” However, with Langland’s prompting, the students did find relationships between *RoosevElvis* and their assigned readings, and drew conclusions about how people use the past to deal with issues in the present.

THE TAKE-AWAY

While Langland’s students found *RoosevElvis* challenging or underwhelming, most found the experience to be positive overall. In post-performance surveys, their answers to questions about whether they see the performing arts as an important part of their college education and whether they are likely to attend a theatrical event again were spread across a 5-point Likert-type scale, but were slightly weighted toward the positive high end. Their written comments were respectful and appreciative, although peppered with caveats like, “I did not gain much enhancement from this play, however, as I just did not enjoy it.”

Similarly, although the performance didn’t “work” as a teaching tool for all the students, some were able to make astute connections to the course material, commenting, “It fit nicely into our curriculum of different ways that history is presented to audiences,” and “I think this was a tangible example of how people ‘Do

history.’ As that is the title of this course, it was relevant to see how history is performed — literally — outside of the classroom.”

Langland admits that, “When it doesn’t work, it’s a little awkward. I lose a bit of authority.” Nonetheless, she characterizes her experiences integrating UMS performances into both *Doing History* and her course *Revolutionary Movements in Modern Latin America* (History/LACS 349) as positive, and plans to use performance in her classroom again. For her classes on Latin America, she looks for performances with Latin American subject matter, but for her broader history classes such as *Doing History*, genre is more important; she leans towards plays as “the narrative storytelling of a play is closest to historical narration.”

Case study 3: How a contemporary Irish play enhanced study of ancient Greek and Roman comedy.

Professor Ruth R. Caston: Classical Studies

THE COURSE

“It’s clear to me that the performance really stood out for my students... Talking about the differences was as stimulating and productive as noting the similarities.”

Caston’s course, *Classical Civilization 350 Comedy and Performance*, examines ancient comedy of the Greeks and Romans. She notes that the character of the class really depends on the roster: “I never know what will happen. This semester (Winter 2017) I had eleven students from engineering, out of a total of 26.” This was

the first time she had integrated a live performance into the syllabus.

WHY INCLUDE PERFORMANCE?

Caston wanted to give students more creativity in class, saying, “I was interested in having a class that was not so much based on the ancient evidence surrounding the plays, or not solely, but more on the students’ perception of what they might mean in contemporary performance. And some of the students had never seen a live performance.” She wanted them to have that experience, and saw several ways that the performance could enhance the content of her course, particularly through comparison — comparing the ancient plays with something later and different, comparing a script to a work on the stage, and finding themes that the ancient plays and the contemporary ones have in common. Her *Comedy and Performance* class attended first a U-M student production of Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* and then UMS’s presentation of McDonagh’s *The Beauty*

Queen of Leenane by Irish theatre company Druid. Performance was already present inside Caston's classroom in that she sometimes asks students to take parts and read from the plays they are studying. She recounts how "magical things" have happened in this process: "Two students read the dialogue, and when two others do it, it's totally different. It really changes our understanding of the characters; they aren't what we thought, and different actors bring out new dimensions of the characters." Embodying these roles brings about an understanding that isn't possible in the silent, solitary act of reading. Caston also finds that, for students who may be shy about contributing their opinions to discussion, reading a role from a play is another way to participate in class.

APPROACHING THE PERFORMANCE

Early in the semester, Caston's class had their first live performance experience with *A Winter's Tale*. For this play, Caston wanted students to notice elements of performance on their own, rather than prescribing what they should think. Therefore, Caston did not give her students a formal assignment around *A Winter's Tale*; rather, they had a brief questionnaire to fill out, and the class period following the play was devoted to discussion. She found that discussion somewhat unruly — "It was a forest of hands going up. They had so much to say!" In that class period, she also had students write the beginning of a review of the play, addressing how they were affected by it, and exchange reviews with their classmates. Imagining that their reviews were going to be published encouraged students to consider their words more carefully, and articulate the play's central issues as well as the impact it had on them.

Caston's learning goals for *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* were more specific. While she didn't want to tell students too much about her opinions or limit their interpretation, she did want them to attend to the generational conflict in the play — because it is a recurring theme in the ancient plays they were reading — and to consider dark comedy and the fine line between comedy and tragedy. She also wanted to pursue the class's ongoing investigation of how a script is brought to life on stage. Therefore, students were given a few questions about the performance beforehand, including

- How well did the play represent the perspectives of mother and daughter? Was your sympathy directed more at Mag or Maureen?
- How familiar did these characters and their relationship seem to you? Could you identify with them, or at least with the generational conflict?
- This is a very dark play, yet one still considered a comedy. Does that label seem right to you? Did you laugh? If so, at what kinds of moments?
- Name two things that struck you about the staging and why.

Many student responses, due on Canvas after the performance, exceeded the length guidelines she had set up; again, students had a lot to say.

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

The class period immediately following *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* was devoted entirely to talking about the play. Throughout the discussion, Caston coaxed her students to consider particular aspects of the performance but did not dictate what they should think about those aspects. For example, she asked about the realism of the play — real porridge, real water, real fire — saying, "Couldn't they just *indicate* the porridge and the water?" Student responses led to talk about the intensity of their emotional reactions — disgust, shock, amusement — and about how they related to the characters. Caston further prompted students to consider the connection between realism and humor, leading to a lively discussion about how, exactly, the characters were funny and how closely darkness and laughter were intertwined.

Occasionally, Caston compared *Beauty Queen* to ancient plays on the course syllabus. Sketching on the blackboard its layout of scenery on stage, she asked, "What's different between this and 'New Comedy'?" When the discussion turned to the Mag and Maureen's interdependence, and from there to their obligations to each other, Caston interjected, "Hang on to these ideas of duty and obligation; they're going to be relevant in the next plays we're reading."

Her questions around the staging of the play — "Did the scene change at all?...Who comes and goes?... Could you see the pipes through the windows? What did that make you think of?" — each led to student observations on feelings of isolation, imprisonment, poverty, and stasis. Caston asked the students to stand up and walk around the classroom as Maureen, one of the main characters in *Beauty Queen*. Watching them, she commented that they were bent over, lumbering. Students responded, "Maureen reminded me of an animal in the zoo, in a cage," and, "Yes, but when she was in her negligee, when the man was there, she moved more freely." By physicalizing their observations, students expanded their understanding of isolation and stasis in the play.

Caston explained that staging not only adds layers of meaning to a script; it can also bring out different aspects of the script than other stagings of the same play would. She then asked students in groups of three or four to consider two comical scenes from ancient plays they had recently read in class. Moving from reflection and observation to a creative activity, she asked them to sketch out how those scenes could be staged to emphasize the disappointment or the power struggle of the respective situations, rather than the humor. "How does *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* help you think about ways to bring other plays to life?"

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

In the weeks after *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Caston observed, “I have been really pleased to see my students voluntarily bringing up *Beauty Queen of Leenane* in our class discussions. Both the plays we saw, including the Shakespeare play, were more accessible in some ways for them than the ancient material, with all of its foreign names and references. So seeing *Beauty Queen* has turned out to be a kind of touchstone for them about certain themes, and also performance elements that they can use to help them raise questions or interpret the ancient dramas.”

As a final project for *Comedy and Performance*, students could either write a research paper or complete a creative project around an ancient play; options for the creative project included updating portions of it, staging and filming a portion of it, or creating a soundtrack for it. Caston found that *Beauty Queen*, and the issues raised in classroom discussion of it, strongly influenced students’ creative final projects, saying, “I saw this connection in a number of features of their projects, for example the way they emphasized female roles, the effective use of music, and the combination of humor and the absurd with serious themes. I suspect some of them may also have been thinking quite closely of *Beauty Queen* when they wrote up droll interactions between mothers and daughters.”

WHAT SHE WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY

“Seeing *Beauty Queen* has turned out to be a kind of touchstone for them...that they can use to help them raise questions or interpret the ancient dramas.”

Caston envisions a scaffolding of written assignments for the next time she uses performance in her course: “I still prefer to keep something more informal for their immediate reactions, but then give them some time to write about the performance (perhaps in conjunction with other things as well) in a more formal paper. My main interest is in how different elements of performance ultimately contribute to our interpretation of a play,

something which obviously takes some time and which is aided by class discussion as well.”

She would like to give her students more experiential activities in the classroom. Although Caston notes, “It’s okay for students to see you’re not an expert in everything, to see you a little insecure,” she is interested in inviting a theater artist to lead her students in these activities.

THE TAKE-AWAY

Caston reflects, “It’s clear to me that the performance really stood out for my students, and that despite the ‘hodge podge’ nature of my syllabus (readings from four different playwrights, attending two unrelated modern performances, watching some in-class performance by total amateurs and film clips drawn from a wide variety of sources), they can find connections where I might have worried they would be obscure or strained. I would say that it has been a boon to be able to take the students to plays that were not related in any obvious or direct way to the assigned texts. Talking about the differences was as stimulating and productive as noting the similarities.

“I think that faculty engaged in UMS programs tend to be concerned about what types of performance will be on the schedule the semester they teach their course, and I can reassure them that at least for some courses, not having a one-on-one match will still make for a successful experience of bringing performance to the classroom.”