On and Off the Stage: A Look at Working with the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival

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On and Off the Stage: A Look at Working with the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival

Abstract

Festivals like the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival allow students an intensive hands-on experience with theatrical principles seen in the professional theatrical world. There are many aspects of professional theatre, and at times, colleges that offer theatrical degrees cannot offer the full scale of practical experience needed to succeed in theatre as a profession. After outlining and analyzing three years of festival experience, it can be seen that festivals help to create a greater understanding of what is needed to work in theatre professionally. One must understand organization and management structure, as well as the fundamentals of acting, directing, and other basic theatrical principles. Theatre students should be required to attend a professional theatrical festival, to help further education and preparation for theatre as a career and profession.
Introduction

When deciding what to do my honors research project on, I was struck by the many opportunities presented to a theatre major to research his or her craft. Theatre has such a numerous amount of facets that one does not have to look far in order to find an area of interest. As I thought about what I might want to do for my project, I realized that I had been presented four years earlier with the perfect opportunity. As a freshman at The University of Akron, the production participants and crew of The Great God Brown were invited to bring a scene to the 44th Annual Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, Region II. I had no idea how much that festival and the others that followed would shape my college career. During my festival experiences I have learned so much that I believe reflecting will help others to understand the value of such festivals and to persuade them to seek out similar learning opportunities. I believe that by highlighting the purposes of the Kennedy Center festivals, cataloguing my experiences, and analyzing what those experiences have taught me, I can accurately explain how the festivals have helped, as well as continue to prepare me for my future career in the theatre profession.

“The goals of the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival are:
• to encourage, recognize, and celebrate the finest and most diverse work produced in university and college theater programs;
• to provide opportunities for participants to develop their theater skills and insight; and achieve professionalism;
• to improve the quality of college and university theater in America;
• to encourage colleges and universities to give distinguished productions of new plays, especially those written by students; the classics, revitalized or newly conceived; and experimental works.”

-The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (kennedy-center.org)

The Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival

The Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, or KCACTF, is a theatre program, held annually, involving around 20,000 students from colleges and universities nationwide. Implemented in 1969, there are eight festivals held regionally across the United States, and one held at the national level, in Washington, DC. Each year, in January and February, the regional festivals showcase chosen
productions while also offering workshops, lectures, and regional-level scholarship competitions and awards. The national festival, held in April, allows students who competed in the highest level at the regional festivals, to compete and receive greater scholarships and recognition.

According to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts website, the four main goals of the KCACTF are:

• to encourage, recognize, and celebrate the finest and most diverse work produced in university and college theater programs;
• to provide opportunities for participants to develop their theater skills and insight; and achieve professionalism;
• to improve the quality of college and university theater in America;
• to encourage colleges and universities to give distinguished productions of new plays, especially those written by students; the classics, revitalized or newly conceived; and experimental works.

The Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival allows student and faculty participants to share creative insights, collaborate on many different levels, and honor and celebrate theatre as an art form.

(kennedy-center.org)

**KCACTF - Festival 44: Indiana, Pennsylvania**

In January of 2012, I attended the Region II KCACTF in Indiana, Pennsylvania. Region II consists of colleges and universities from Maryland, Delaware, Washington, DC, New Jersey, western New York, Northern Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.

I first became exposed to the KCACTF when respondents came and critiqued *The Great God Brown* in November, 2011. Two respondents, representatives from Region II, watched *The Great God Brown* and sat down with the cast and crew afterwards to discuss what worked and what did not. They commented on our use of masks and puppetry, the abstract set, as well as the use of song and musicality.
throughout the production. The respondents also addressed the production staff and crew, commenting on costumes, questioning directing decisions, and set design. This was my first look at how theatre productions are viewed by educated professionals in the theatre field. The respondents gave valuable insights about our work, and advised us that it was our decision to make changes or not. The respondents also nominated two cast members to participate in the Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship competition.

As a freshman, I was a bit overwhelmed by the festival respondents, and the events that followed their critiques. In December, we found out that our production of The Great God Brown had been invited to bring a scene from the show to the regional festival being held in Indiana, Pennsylvania. The scene would be performed without a full set, amongst a series of other scenes from selected pieces.

When we first arrived at the festival, I was struck by the organization of the managing staff. Each school had a packet of badges for each member, guide books, food and lodging information, as well as shuttle schedules. We also received the schedule of events, as well as the rules for our invited scene to follow.

In educational theatre, one rarely thinks of the limiting factors that are put in place by designers and the director. A student becomes familiar with the space and works with what is given and presented to them. When the production is made to perform in a different setting, that dynamic changes. There are rules depicting how long the scene can be, what types of set and props can be used, and how much space is going to be provided. These rules were my first taste of the professional organizational structure in theatre.

KCACTF - Festival 45: Towson, Maryland

While working on The Bacchae: 2012, I felt prepared for the next KCACTF. With one festival under my belt, I was excited to see what the next festival would have in store. The respondents for The Bacchae: 2012, seemed incredibly interested in our work, and were blown away by some of our decisions as an ensemble. When it was time for Festival 45, we were asked to perform The Bacchae: 2012 as a full participating production. This meant that our entire set, all of our props, and our stock of costumes needed to be transported, along with our cast and crew, to Towson, Maryland. I was also a partner for an Irene Ryan participant, which made Festival 45 even more interesting.

Performing in a Full Participating Production
The Festival required our group of staff and students to be on a strict schedule. We had to set aside time for rehearsal, and the festival had specific rules and timelines for the production load-in and load out.

For load-in, the cast was split up into groups and assigned different tasks. There were groups assigned to be in charge of putting together certain set pieces, organizing props, and the unpacking, organizing, and steaming of costumes.

Our performance space was the largest theatre on the Towson campus, a large auditorium with a proscenium stage, fly system, and dressing rooms down below the stage. Many of the cast members, myself included, had never worked with a professional fly system. We had practiced with a smaller version back in our home Paul A. Daum Theatre, but it in no way prepared us for the magnitude of the system at Towson. The hanging of part of the set required the help and cooperation of the entire cast and crew. Once the hanging was completed, we were able to split off into our groups and continue the building of the set and other projects. All the while, KCACFT staff were taking notes and rating our work as a group. Towson University technical staff also helped by programming our lights and giving us other technical advice.

The entire process was run as if we were a professional company coming in to perform. We followed given protocols and worked closely with professional staff to

**THE BACCHAE 2012** by Euripides and Charles Mee  
Produced by: University of Akron  
Director: James Slowiak  
Monday, January 14, 8:30 p.m.  
Stephens Hall Theatre ST 217  
Response 3:00 p.m., Tuesday, January 15 - CA 2079  

A Communion Rite (based on plays by Euripides, Charles Mee, and others) is the third part of The Dionysus Project, a three year investigation of the spirit of the god Dionysus and his/her presence in today's theatre.

After research on possession and organicity (Caryl Churchill and David Lan's A Mouthful of Birds), masks and artificiality (Eugene O'Neill's The Great God Brown), UA students tackled the essential Greek myth and its mix of ecstasy and communion, telling the tale of the god's return to Thebes (Akron in our production) and the tragic outcome for Pentheus and his mother Agave.
ensure safety and quality. Once the performance was over, the process was reversed and materials packed away for the journey home.

**Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship Competition**

In the midst of preparing for our performance of *The Bacchae: 2012*, I was also working with an Irene Ryan participant, to help her compete for the prestigious acting scholarship. Irene Ryan’s, as they are known, present timed scenes to a table of judges, using little to no props. The participants are provided with a table and two chairs, if needed, and once the first action is given or first word is spoken, the timing begins. In the preliminary rounds at the regional level, participants receive a total of three minutes to present their scene. If they advance, they receive five minutes to present their preliminary scene and a contrasting scene. The final round allows six minutes for the two previous scenes and a monologue or solo musical number.

As a partner for an Irene Ryan, I was there to help and support. I was a technical aspect of each scene, making sure that the scenes emphasized my partner, the person who was actually competing for the scholarship. Unfortunately, my partner and I did not make it past the preliminary round, but we gained valuable knowledge about what “professional acting” looks like.

**KCACTF - Festival 47: Cleveland, Ohio**

After making the decision that time and money were an issue, I decided not to participate in Festival 46. I was in the middle of the most demanding parts of my college course load, and I knew that the festival would take time away from my studies. By the time Festival 47 came around, I was ready to be back. The KCACTF Festival 47 for Region II was unique because it was close to home. In January of 2015, the festival was hosted by Cleveland State University at Playhouse Square. When the festival was announced, there was a request for local volunteers. With this, I was presented with a unique opportunity. Instead of participating in the festival as a student and performer, I could work behind the scenes and see how a KCACTF is managed. I immediately began formulating my honors research project around this idea, the idea that there is a difference between the experience of participating and volunteering, and that from both, I could learn different aspects of professionalism in theatre.

With my decision to volunteer at Festival 47, I turned down my personal nomination for the Irene Ryan competition for my performance in *Godspell*. I decided that my time would be better spent focusing on my volunteer duties.
When the festival began, I had already helped set up the presentation area for the Theatrical Design Excellence and the Allied Design and Technology Awards, the check-in tables, and the Irene Ryan performance rooms. I quickly realized that there was a managing staff to whom everyone reported depending on task (check-in organizer, technical director, Irene Ryan coordinator, etc). Each managing body had a committee, and each committee was split into factions, each with a specific function.

Most of my time at the KCACTF - Festival 47 was spent working the Irene Ryan competition. I was assigned the task of timing all of the scenes during the preliminary and semi-final rounds. This task was particularly interesting, because I was originally supposed to be competing alongside the same participants whom I was timing. During the rounds, I started the timer when the first word was spoken, or the first dramatic action was witnessed. If scenes went over the three-minute mark, I yelled out, “Time!” And the scene was then over. Afterwards, I reported all times to the judges.

The experience taught me what to look for in professional acting, as well as the importance of order and organization behind the scenes. This was the foundation of my honors research.

**KCACTF - Performing vs. Volunteering**

There are many differences between attending a KCACTF as a performer and attending as a volunteer. As a performer, one is subject to the guidelines and restrictions of the managing staff. The managing staff runs the festival as a professional organization, maintaining guidelines that would be given by union contracts. This allows the performer to experience what it might be like to act professionally. An actor must follow protocols that are set by the managing body, not only promptly, but completely and consistently.

Working behind the scenes as a volunteer is a different matter. When one is a member of the managing body, organization is crucial. One must follow protocols and guidelines given by higher-ups, while also keeping a level head and over-seeing given tasks. A managing body must work like a well-oiled machine. Mistakes create setbacks and complications that can cause the organization to fall apart. With these two different views of the professional world, I am able to apply relevant experience and ideals to my future theatrical career.

**Why KCACTF?**

The Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festivals I have attended have taught me multiple principles that can be taken with me after college and into my
professional career. I have learned about the importance of collaboration and organization, as well as the leadership structure associated with professional theaters. I have learned that in acting, clarity of action and simplicity makes for a much better performance than generalizations. I know how to conduct and participate in a professional-style load-in and load-out, as well as assigning and distributing tasks to others.

During my college career I gained some of this practical experience at school, but the KCACTF allows for a week-long intensive in these principles and skills. I believe that festivals, like the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, are an asset to the theatre community. The focus on collaboration, learning, the sharing of creative insights in a professional setting, allows students and faculty alike to take away valuable hands-on experience that can be directly applied to working in theatre professionally. I believe that students should be required to seek out opportunities like the KCACTF and use them to their advantage. I have learned and gained such an incredible amount of insight from my participation in the festivals that I know others will attain similar knowledge.
Works Cited