

Sarah Jo Monaghan - Teaching & Diversity Statement

Teaching Priorities:

Learning happens best when educators can adapt their own views and practices in response to the changes that each generation ushers in. I believe it is just as important for educators to listen to their students as it is to impart necessary practical skills. We have to teach with the assumption that the values and expectations that were previously accepted practice—both professionally and academically—will change, and hope that those changes will be for the better. As a consequence of completing my graduate school experience during a global pandemic, I am keenly aware that I, as an educator, am responsible for passing down skills without passing on my own outdated expectations. It is my responsibility to teach the next generation with the assumption that the progressive changes I have worked to see in my own professional life are slowly but surely remaking the world of professional theatre.

Building Professional Skills & Real World Expectations:

As a first priority, theatre educators are responsible for providing knowledge and hands-on skill-building experiences for students, both technically and artistically, to prepare them for the professional world. However, not all students will pursue theatrical work professionally, so it is key to create curriculum that is simultaneously professionally focused yet centered around widely applicable critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

Working collaboratively with students in the classroom is the foundation of my teaching practice. My priority is to create a classroom setting that prioritizes collaboration, delight in discovery, student growth, and a commitment to continued learning. In this environment, it is my goal to share with students the practical, technical, and creative skills I have built during my years of working in the theatre industry. My approach to teaching costume technology and design has overwhelmingly been informed by my professional experience as a technician, designer, collaborator and colleague.

As I progressed through my professional career and tackled different kinds of work in the theatre, I began mentally compiling a list of skills necessary to any costumer entering the professional market. These are the skills around which I have based my technical curriculum. I broke down my own technical process, observed and learned from other professionals, and developed a series of hands-on projects for garment construction, cutting & draping, and costume crafts. My coursework builds on previous skills in two ways. While students are using and reinforcing what they have already learned, they are also using those skills to problem-solve and discover new, more advanced tools that expand their learning and technical abilities.

Similarly, my approach to teaching Design derives largely from my own experiences as both a designer and technician. Research and renderings are key, but curating and delivering both in an artistically accessible and visually narrative format facilitates greater understanding of the designer's motivation for all members of the creative team, from the director to the draper. Renderings are a tool for communication. My priority is helping students to build drawing skills that preserve the designer's voice while clearly communicating the designer's intentions, both

practically and emotionally. I encourage students to experiment with a variety of mediums, both traditional and digital, so they can discover the best tools for their own practice.

My experience has demonstrated the necessity of teaching costume design and costume technology in tandem. One informs the other. As a draper, I know from experience that common technical language is necessary in realizing a designer's vision. When basic principles of construction are not understood by a designer, collaboration with their technical support team will suffer. Similarly, a draper's responsibility is to understand the emotional objectives of the designer and have the tools to propose solutions that will work for everyone to realize a complete design. I build curriculum that places equal value on both technical skills and design skills, training students to be equally fluent in both the practical and artistic language of costuming.

Beyond the concrete skills of technology and design, I also endeavor to bring the greater lessons of my professional experience into my classroom. Everyone has different strengths and limitations. Learning what those are and how to articulate them is a skill that can be learned if it is an expectation that is taught. I encourage students to understand where their strengths lie, what they bring to the table, what their limitations are, and how to articulate both proactively. I believe in saying "I know what I *can* do," and sometimes this comes with the caveat of, "and I know what I *can't* do." I believe it is necessary for educators to encourage collaboration while simultaneously demonstrating consistent boundaries and expectations. By this example students are able to develop an understanding of how to best serve the work, what to ask for to make it happen, and when to ask for help. Making my classroom a safe space for this kind of learning to happen is possibly my most important core value as an educator.

Forward Thinking Artistic Practice:

Theatre has historically weathered natural disasters, wars and plagues. Audiences always return to the seats. However, theatre also evolves, changing its form to serve the stories of the audiences who need them. As theatre practitioners and educators, our particular work at this time of transition is to create a curriculum that honors our past while serving our future. As an educator, I place a high priority on finding innovative ways of teaching foundational artistic principles, tools for analysis, and practical skills that can easily serve traditional theatrical narratives and effectively translate to new media such as film, television, devised work, other unscripted genres, and the emerging fields of animation and interactive game design. The heart of all of these disciplines is storytelling, and I prepare students to become good storytellers in a variety of modern mediums.

Digital relevance is key to professional success. While traditional skills create a firm foundation, students entering the professional world today need to be equipped with, at minimum, basic digital tools such as familiarity with photo editing software and digital drawing tools. Incorporating website design and website maintenance into coursework as common practice should be the expectation, particularly in response to the current shift to primarily digital professional recruitment formats. In order to continue to serve students, educators are responsible for continuing to educate themselves and often it is the students who know best how they need their teachers to shift and grow. The challenge as an educator is to stay

relevant, pay attention and, when it becomes clear that the iPod shuffle isn't going to cut it anymore, ask a student what to replace it with.

Colonial Deconstruction, Cultural Fluency, Artistic Ethics & Body Positivity :

Despite the lofty, moral ambitions of theatre as an art form of free expression, professional and academic theatre have historically been passive participants in a systemic culture of oppression that underserves and under-represents people of color, women, LGBTQ people and the disabled. These are subtle, quiet prejudices that place obstacles in the way of free and equitable expression. In the theatre industry, this quiet, systemic prejudice is allowed to continue through passive acceptance and a reluctance to "make waves" or be perceived as a "bad team player." My own professional and academic experience has shown me that injustice is perpetuated by the acute reluctance of many to talk about systemic bias, particularly in the intimate, day-to-day interactions of our separate disciplines. As both an educator and a compassionate member of my global community, I take it as my personal responsibility to actively engage in necessary conversations about systemic bias in the classroom, the fitting room, the production meeting and at the dinner table, if that is what it takes. It is my responsibility to educate when and where I am empowered to do so, and it is my responsibility to remain available to be re-educated with grace and gratitude when necessary. This is a lifetime worth of work, but it is the work that I have been asking for as a student and as an educator. It is the work that I hear my peers and my students asking for. Moving forward in my teaching career, I will be continuously learning from my students in order to work with them toward a better world than the one I grew up in.

As theatre moves ever further away from the limitations of colonial traditions, our craft is entering a new era of responsibility in which we must commit to an active reexamination of accepted values and practices. As educators, it is our responsibility to integrate conversations about artistic ethics and cultural responsibility into our classrooms. Individuals are inevitably responsible for establishing their own moral code and set of ethical values by asking themselves the right questions. For any theatre artist, the first question needs always be, "Am I the right artistic voice to be telling this story?" I try to describe this process to students like a flow chart where one question might have several answers. The responsibility of educators is not to give students a yes or no, rather it is to give students more questions they can ask themselves so they can reach the answer for themselves.

As costumers, our ethical responsibility extends beyond the scope of other disciplines. We are in the unique position of being responsible for the physical well-being of the performers who are doing the active work of our theatrical craft. Clothing and costumes are deeply personal because they are carried on peoples' bodies. As costume designers, it is our responsibility to approach every body we dress with kindness and compassion. All bodies are good bodies. It is always my goal to establish a classroom and fitting room culture that deconstructs the social language and practices that actively perpetuate harm. I advocate for extending gratitude to our bodies, exactly as they are in the moment, and I will actively repudiate language or behavior that implies or states that any body is deficient. The backs that literally carry our labor as costumers must always be treated with care because without their work our costumes are just clothes.

Research Interests:

Art Education & Learning Disabilities: As a person who navigates both my education and my professional life with a learning disability, I am deeply interested in pursuing my own research into arts and education and the role both can play in the development of neurodiverse people.

Anti Racism & Colonial Deconstruction in the Arts: Integrating antiracist work and active colonial deconstruction into academic practice requires constant and persistent engagement on the part of educators as a primary aspect of both classroom and research pursuits.

Wage Equality & the Gender Gap in Theatre: Professional theatre, like the majority of other professional occupations suffers from a consistent problem with wage inequality. This predominantly occurs in historically gendered disciplines, specifically costuming. I am interested in pursuing research into how this inequitable practice is perpetuated in both academic and professional settings.

Costuming & Gender Identity: As society progresses, concepts, social behaviors and expectations about gender continue to shift. Developing new language, design and technical practices to serve this shift is a necessary area of research, understanding, and reeducation.

Translating Narrative Tools of Analysis for Costumers: Many of the tools used for literary and theatrical analysis have only been used, researched, and discussed in broad academic contexts. I am interested in deconstructing the common vocabulary of theatrical analysis with specific application to costumers and costume design. Research questions include: How might the narrative and analytical tool, the Hero's Journey, be applied to inform costume choices? How are costumers responsible for translating the nuances of character archetype as visual narratives?

Devised Work & Costumes: Devised work has become an increasingly common theatrical practice with a variety of approaches. Costumers consistently struggle with the nontraditional nature of the work and the often very condensed construction timelines this work requires. While a great deal of scholarly work has been put forward by directing and acting professionals about devised work, very little has been written about devised work in other theatrical disciplines. Research questions include: What is the role of costumes in devised work? How do we develop effective tools for all disciplines to be involved in devised work in a way that is equitable, particularly in terms of labor and time, for all members of the production team?

Continuing Education & Technical Skill Building: Maintaining and building technical skills in new areas as a technician and educator is a consistent and continuous responsibility. As a costume technician and designer first, active self-improvement is a necessary research pursuit. Research and continuous education areas that I intend to pursue include furthering my fluency in theatrical makeup and prosthetics design and application, wig construction and styling, puppetry construction, and performance practices, theatrical fabric dyeing practices and methods, and sewing machine and serger maintenance.

Service Focus:

Racial Equity Training & Diversity: I am committed to the necessary work of equity both inside and outside the classroom. As a member of an academic community, I am committed to service in aid of building a more equitable and accessible academic landscape.

Curriculum Development: Making sure that my own curriculum is in keeping with the needs of my students, colleagues and peers requires that I be an active participant in the larger curricular choices that shape both my department as well as the larger academic community.

Season Selection: A successful academic season is one in which everyone learns something AND the box office at least breaks even. Choosing a season that provides opportunities for students to learn and puts butts in seats is a tricky business. Having the right voices onstage and offstage requires that all disciplines are represented in the season selection committee room.

Union Representation: Union participation has always been one of my professional priorities and will continue to be work that I actively participate in throughout my career.

URTA & USITT: Making and maintaining connections with leading professional resources within the theatrical community is a necessary responsibility of educators. I am particularly interested in developing common language and practices with the resources that build bridges between academic and professional practice, such as developing a communal standard of skill expectations for entry-level theatrical practitioners and guidelines for industry standard arts and technical education.

Student Comments:

“The organization, teaching style, assignments, instructor support/knowledge and great use of class time [contributed the most to my learning]. I felt respected and welcome - a wonderful learning environment.”

- Flat Patterning, 2015.

“Sarah was a great instructor! I learned so much more than I thought was possible in a semester. I really enjoyed and appreciated her teaching methods.”

- Flat Patterning, 2015

“The instructor herself was fun and easy to understand. She made this class worthwhile.”

- Stage Craft, 2015

“Sarah’s hands-on approach and willingness to help us solve problems [contributed most to my learning.] She always tries to word things in a way each individual can understand.”

- Draping, 2016

“Sarah is a fantastic educator. I feel like this has been one of the most beneficial courses I could take. She did a magnificent job and I feel lucky to have been able to have her at the University. She is incredible.”

- Draping, 2016