

1985

Collegiate Theatre: Alive, Diverse and Thriving

Abe J. Bassett

Wright State University - Main Campus, abe.bassett@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/theater>



Part of the [Acting Commons](#), [Dance Commons](#), [Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Bassett, A. J. (1985). Collegiate Theatre: Alive, Diverse and Thriving. *The Ohio Arts Council's Artspace*, 8 (5).

<https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/theater/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theatre Studies at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theatre Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.

Collegiate Theatre

Alive, Diverse and Thriving / Abe J. Bassett

Published in the Bulletin of the Ohio Community Theatre Association, 1986

Collegiate theatre is alive and well and thriving in more than 35 Ohio hamlets, towns and cities. A greater concentration of collegiate theatre can be found in only four other states in America, all significantly more populous than Ohio.

The combined statistics of collegiate theatre in Ohio are impressive in audience served, plays produced, artists employed and results rendered. For example, during the 1984-85 academic season, a combined audience of 290,000 persons attended 168 major productions on the 35 campuses that reported their figures to the Ohio Theatre Alliance. This was an average campus attendance of 9,354 persons, but even more astounding is that with 252 "studio" productions (often faculty-directed) and 213 student-directed workshop productions, a total of 633 plays were presented on the 35 campuses.

The Ohio Theatre Alliance's "Playbill and Directory of Colleges and Universities,"—published annually and available to the general public at a nominal cost—reports that in the 1984-85 academic year, the 35 reporting institutions employed 192 full-time faculty and 33 full-time professional staff. The estimated payroll of these faculty and staff is \$700,000. Another 73 persons are employed in a part-time capacity.

Of the more than 10,000 undergraduate students enrolled in theatre courses each fall, 1,800 are theatre majors. A combined total of 333 theatre majors received their bachelor's degrees last year. The typical institution offers a curriculum with 43 courses, but the range is from as few as one dozen courses to as many as 194. The range reflects the varying objectives of the various colleges, which may be roughly divided into five categories:

The liberal arts theatre program. Although all but one of the four-year colleges offer a bachelor's of arts degree program, 14 colleges offer the bachelor's degree exclusively. Muskingum College is typical of this class of institution with a philosophy that states, "The liberal arts environment is precisely where theatre arts belong" because they are most interested in "self-knowledge and an understanding of the world." In a well-developed statement, theatre professionals at Muskingum argue, "Training in theatre is a training for life." Other institutions in this class included such renowned and venerable institutions as Baldwin Wallace, Capital, Dayton, Mount Union, Hiram and Wooster, among others.

The pre-professional theatre training program is a second group, characterized by a more intense training program and greater specialization. These institutions are firmly rooted in the liberal arts, but ultimately prepare their students for the professional world. Many of their students seek further training following graduation, either through internship programs or graduate training. These institutions may be either on private campuses, such as Otterbein or Denison, or at some of the state-assisted universities, such as Akron or Youngstown.

A third group of colleges and universities offer *professional training* which is marked by intense training and the implication that further graduate study is not necessary to enter the professional world. Ohio University and Wright State are typical of institutions in this category.

Comprehensive universities, offering programs on the undergraduate and graduate levels, comprise a fourth category. The Ohio State University offers two undergraduate

degrees and three graduate degrees. Bowling Green and Ohio State also offer a master's degree and doctorate. Case Western Reserve Ohio's only private institution to have enrolled doctoral students, eliminated that program several years ago.

Finally, there are 16 *community colleges and branch campuses*, which offer courses in theatre. Several of them present frequent productions and significant numbers of courses. Sinclair Community College in Dayton, for example, boasts three full-time faculty members in theatre and dance, 22 courses in the curriculum and a season of four major productions. Other active two-year campuses include Lorain County Community College and the Kent State University branch at Trumbull.

What does it mean to say that Ohio's colleges train students in theatre? Depending on the institution, students may concentrate their studies in acting, directing, musical theatre, theatre design (costume and scenery), technical theatre, arts management, theatre history and criticism, theatre education, dance and motion pictures. All programs teach theatre through a combination of the classroom and hands-on experience. All programs are interested in the general education of their students, and many programs are innovative in combining theatre studies with other disciplines, including motion pictures, dance, communication, English, art, pharmacy, engineering, and others.

When it comes to bragging rights among the colleges and universities as to which have the most famous alumni, there is no clear winner. Notable alumni have come from Denison (Hal Holbrook and John Davidson,) Bowling Green (Eva Marie Saint,) and Ohio State (Eileen Heckert.) Most Ohio institutions have former students, whose names will not be of the household variety, are working professionals, such as Otterbein's David Graf ("Police Academy"); Toledo's Jami Farr ("M.A.S.H."); and Miami's Marilyn Miller (who helped produce "Nine").

Diversity is a true mark of collegiate theatre in Ohio. There is no uniformity in the way the curriculum is organized and courses are taught, no uniformity in the qualifications required for a teaching position, and not even uniformity in the name of the department that houses the theatre program. For example, only eight programs are in a department of theatre, while three are theatre arts. Others are in theatre and English, or speech communication and theatre, or drama, or communications arts. In larger institutions, theatre may be in a college of fine arts, college of the arts, college of fine and professional arts, college of performing and visual arts, college of liberal arts, college of arts and sciences, or a school of theatre.

While theatre programs have long existed, first with English departments, and later with speech departments, there is a trend toward a separate existence, or increasingly, an alliance with dance and/or motion pictures/film studies. Dance is part of the theatre programs at Ohio Wesleyan, Otterbein, Wright State, Case Western Reserve, Oberlin and Wittenberg. Film studies are connected with theatre at Denison, Toledo and Wright State.

As theatre in Ohio has grown stronger in the past decades, the future of theatre and arts seems bright. At one time viewed by some administrators and faculty in other disciplines as frivolous or superfluous, theatre is now increasingly recognized as an important, separate discipline. Virtually all the serious theatre training in America now takes place on the campus. A strong relationship between campus and the professional world has been developed in the past decade. In 1984-85, Ohio colleges produced more than 85 plays that used "guest artists," many of whom are professional Equity actors.

By developing future audiences and artists and providing education and entertainment, Ohio's diverse and rich collegiate theatre, collectively, is alive, well and making its mark.

Abe J Bassett is chairman of the department of theatre arts at Wright State University