

Diversity Statement -- Marla Burkholder

The art of theater is by nature collaborative, and collaboration involves navigating differences – a skill that I believe must lie at the heart of any creative study. I believe teaching collaboration means insisting on an atmosphere of respect in and out of the classroom. I build my courses on the assumption that there is a broad range of human expression and working together means working through and with difference. My speech pedagogy is based in the work of Catherine Fitzmaurice and Dudley Knight, two master teachers who spent their careers opening the field of voice and speech to embrace the diversity of expressive potential in the human voice, as opposed to decades of traditional performer training that insisted on one prescribed way of speaking on the stage. In the theater appreciation courses I teach, I assign group projects with intentional mixing of students from a variety of backgrounds. Their common goal is to create a complete concept for a theatre production, but they must rely on each other's skills and strengths to construct a unified project.

I am deeply interested in the intersection of art and community life, in particular the potential of the arts to affect social change and promote holistic development within and between diverse groups of people. My current artistic directorship is leading a company called Intercultural Journeys that nurtures artists from Philadelphia's incredibly diverse cultural landscape that are asking particular questions of social justice through their artistic practice.

My formative experiences as an artist and individual have been rooted in the peace-seeking culture of my Mennonite upbringing. I first decided to pursue performing arts as a career in the midst of Mennonite education experiences that took me to the Middle East to learn about religion-based conflict, to Washington D.C. for an internship at an experimental theater company dedicated to engaging Black and Latinx children, and around North America with choirs that collaborated with artists from Europe, Africa and Asia.

Because of those formative experiences, I chose to live in Philadelphia and embrace the challenge of making art in a diverse urban environment. I understand first-hand the difficulties and rewards of curating and creating art with a multitude of voices in the room.

As a woman who founded and ran a scrappy theater company that grew into the signature Shakespeare performance event in Philadelphia, I know some of the challenges of minority leadership in American theater. But by running a Shakespeare theater, I also learned a tremendous amount about the layers of exclusion that run deep in classical work -- ways that BIPOC people have long been excluded at all levels including leadership, casting, literary decision-making and promotion. I see it as an evolving part of my mission as a university instructor to share a vision of a truly diverse, collaborative, equitable artistic community with my students and embolden them to insist on a bigger view of what is possible for themselves and everyone in the world of theater.