

University Curriculum Committee Academic Program Review

School of Theater
College of Fine Arts
Ohio University

PURPOSE

The intention and purpose of this program review for the School of Theater in the College of Fine Arts at Ohio University is to report on the general program, faculty profile, programmatic practices, teaching, commendations, and recommendations. The program review is based upon the School of Theater Self-Study submitted September 15, 2023, and information gathered during an on-site visit in the 2023-2024 academic year on Thursday, October 26th and Friday, October 27th.

The internal reviewers were Dr. Robert Williams, Mechanical Engineering, OU and Dr. Becky Munhall, Hearing, Speech and Language Sciences, OU. The external reviewer, Trent Blanton, ECU School of Theater and Dance brought expertise from his academic background and professional affiliations.

During the site visit, the reviewers interviewed Matthew Shaftel, Dean, College of Fine Arts, Merri Biechler, Director, School of Theater and Graduate Chair, members of School of Theater faculty and staff, David Haugen, the School of Theater Undergraduate Chair, School of Theater undergraduate students, School of Theater graduate students, Drew Surovjak, School of Theater administrator, Tantrum Theater Leadership – Ellie Clark, Roberto Di Donato, and Michael Lincoln. The reviewers took a tour of the facilities including workshops, theaters, classroom spaces and storage.

The report contains an Executive Summary, Program Review, Faculty Profile, Programmatic Practices, Commendations, and Recommendations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The School of Theater is accredited under the National Association of Schools of Theater and will undergo a self-study and accreditation review during the 2023-2024 academic year. The reviewers find that the School of Theater is a viable program.

PROGRAM REVIEW

CURRICULUM:

The School of Theater has a long history with Ohio University. Since the last program review conducted in 2015, the department has undergone various changes. Covid-19 impacted the school's ability to function in a typical fashion, forcing the college and faculty to find creative ways to deliver content material. The school lost faculty and staff due to cuts and voluntary

separation. Additionally, the school has been responding to demands by students, faculty, and staff to increase equity and inclusivity.

The School of Theater works closely with Tantrum Theater, a professional theater company, to satisfy the URTA requirement. The theater was housed in Dublin, Ohio from 2015-2018, but was brought to the Athens campus in 2018.

As of fall 2022, there were 198 undergraduate majors and 15 students enrolled in a theater minor. There were 39 graduate students in the School of Theater. Across the board, (faculty, undergraduate students, and graduate students) expressed the need for additional faculty to meet the needs of the various programs to support the growing number of students and to assist with recruitment. In addition, faculty reported a concern about the amount of graduate student stipends. It was indicated that this has not been reviewed and updated in twenty years.

ASSURANCES OF LEARNING:

The School of Theater is home to several undergraduate and graduate degrees. The program delivers the required courses and electives for students to complete the program requirements in a timely manner. As noted in the self-study, their program learning outcomes are as follows:

- Bachelor of Arts in Theater
 - Students will be able to identify and work conceptually with theater's elements and aesthetic properties.
 - Students will develop technical skills, and the capability to produce work and solve professional problems independently.
 - Students will be able to demonstrate knowledge and skills for analyzing text, productions, and creating performances.
- Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree Programs (Bachelor of Fine Arts in Performance, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Stage Management, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Design & Technology, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Playwriting)
 - Demonstrate entry-level skills in professional presentation, collaboration, and communication.
 - Demonstrate fundamental knowledge of research practices, dramatic literature, theory, and history.
 - Apply skills and demonstrate a comprehension of theories and methodologies as they relate to professional practice in specific disciplines.
- Master of Fine Arts Degree Programs (Master of Fine Arts in Directing, Master of Fine Arts in Acting, Master of Fine Arts in Production Design)
 - As students progress, they will gain the ability to work independently and make sound artistic and intellectual judgements. These skills will enable them to make informed professional decisions related to their chosen area of specialization.
 - Students will demonstrate professional competence in the area of specialization before peers and faculty.

- Students will produce a final project or equivalent reviewed by more than one faculty member.
- Master of Arts in Theater
- Master of Arts Administration
- Master of Education in Theater

Based on the review process, the Theater Program meets its overall goals. The program provides students with the knowledge and practical experience necessary for gaining employment within the field of theater as evidenced by the success of undergraduate and graduate students.

FACULTY:

The School of Theater has four and a half tenure-track faculty (one tenure track is shared with Interdisciplinary Arts) and twelve and one-quarter instruction faculty (non-tenure, three-quarter shared with Film). These faculty serve the various disciplines in the school. In addition, the school hires adjunct faculty as needed to cover course load. The School of Theater has a healthy hiring procedure, and they value and promote diversity. Faculty members have expertise in a variety of specializations in the field of theater and stay current with the trends and needs within the profession. Faculty are actively involved in student success, dedicating countless hours to mentoring, directing, scenery production, etc. In addition, they are active participants in theatrical productions and active members in professional organizations.

Teaching and Advising: Tenured faculty workload is complex and as noted in the review report, the school does not have a documented policy determining percentages of effort and each tenured professor has a unique distribution determined by the director. Typically, though most tenured-track faculty workload expectation is 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% service. Instructional faculty workload is 80% teaching and 20% service.

Recently, the College of Fine Arts has implemented a program that involves Student Success Advisors. Advisors help students with class scheduling and goal setting. Students are also assigned a mentor from the theater faculty whose area of expertise aligns with their area of interest. This process is new and is still experiencing the complications associated with a new process. The School of Theater faculty are working with the Student Success Advisors and the Dean of the College of Fine Arts to ensure a smooth transition.

Retention rates for the school have been stable, between 75-90%. The four-year graduation rates have increased over the past few years. Course completion rates are consistently in the 90th percentile.

Research and Creative Activity: The School of Theater faculty are activity involved in research and creative activity including a high number of performance productions, engaging in professional service opportunities, and acquiring both internal and external grants. Faculty are active participants in the contribution of knowledge through book, textbook and article publications. Artistic faculty are involved in all aspects of creating and producing theatrical works. The faculty has a high level of creative activity in their prospective disciplines.

Service: Service to the school, college and university are evaluated annually. Faculty and staff make large contributions to the areas of recruitment, new course development, curriculum changes, and mentoring. Many faculty serve the community through theatrical performances, high school outreach, summer camps, etc. They make professional contributions by serving as peer reviewers, serving the university on committees when possible, and presenting and serving at conferences. In addition, they are working to increase the diffusion of knowledge to the Appalachian area through collaboration with the OU School of Osteopathic Medicine by producing health related plays.

The faculty are highly qualified in their respective areas, though due to the shortage of faculty they have been forced into teaching areas that are not their strengths.

STUDENT SERVICES:

The school takes a well-rounded approach to teaching students. Students learn aspects of the workings of theater production regardless of if it is an area they wish to pursue upon graduation.

A few years ago, the program lost a part-time staff member whose focus was budget and financing. Due to the complexity of the theater, the demand for purchasing, ticketing, the work with Tantrum, etc. It would be beneficial for the college to have someone dedicated to the financial running of the school.

RESOURCES AND FACILITIES:

One hundred percent of the faculty we spoke to opposed the closing of Kantner Hall, where they currently enjoy easy access to each other and the students. The new facility being erected near the Patton Education Building is supposed to bring Fine Arts people together, but Theater personnel believe they will be scattered. Though there will be a theater, currently, there are no offices, workshops, teaching labs, and other necessary spaces in the design for the new building. Kantner Hall already has all of those items.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT/IMPROVEMENT:

In general, the faculty and staff are merely treading water, trying to keep it together – there is no time nor resources for individual student attention (so sorely needed in this area), high-quality shows, or innovation for the future.

A rather large musical theater program has recently been added, with many students. However, the Tantrum Theater is the ONLY ONE that puts on musicals since this program inception. In addition, it seems there is insufficient collaboration with the School of Music in this area.

AREAS OF CONCERN:

1. Students reported concerns with not knowing the safety requirements.
 - A graduate student reported doing electrical work without training or credentials.

- A graduate student reported almost falling 35 feet through a grate in the ceiling while working on lighting.
 - There is no clear-cut protocol for safety of students and faculty posted.
2. Graduate MFA students are not paid sufficiently (no increase in 20 years). Full stipends put the students below the poverty level, and half-stipends are of course worse. Graduate students are on Medicaid, Food Stamps, and take advantage of free meals around the Athens community.
 3. There is a high level of faculty turnover and danger of burnout from too many duties per person.
 4. There is a general feeling among the faculty and staff that the production values of the Ohio University theater performances have declined over the past years. Previously the institution has depended upon the labor of the graduate students in Design & Production to shoulder a significant amount of the work. There is a trend of difficulty in recruiting quality students for the study of Design and Production nationwide. This could be connected to the size of the stipend and access to appropriate technology.
 5. The Costume Design and Construction faculty and staff has not recovered from a mass walkout a few years back. Further, students trying to fill this gap may not be trained or skilled in the required areas.
 6. Most tenure-track lines have been lost recently in Theater due to Voluntary Separation and other exiting personnel. If they are replaced at all, these are replaced with instructors, who are not paid well and have no job security, and largely 1-year contracts. Current faculty and staff are stressed, with no ability to stand up for themselves. Even the Chair of the Theater Department is a non-tenure-track instructor person. This aspect seems to be a problem across the entire OU campus and is a huge mistake for our future.
 7. The lack of ability to do “over hire” for staff positions or for guest artists due to the location of the University combined with the relatively low pay for OU employees makes for difficulty in finding ways to ease the workloads with short term “patch” solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Hire additional faculty to help fill needs of the program. At the minimum, the school needs a full-time production manager to handle day to day logistics, scheduling how shows are produced, merging of all production elements, sets the schedules for all aspects of the production, etc. In addition, a Master Electrician should be hired for safety and accountability measures.
2. Furthermore, the faculty and staff have a large wish list of hiring, most of which existed at OU in the recent past: Draper, Scene Artist, Master Carpenter, Props Artist, Full-time Theater Historian, Part-time recruiting staff, 2nd Full-time Musical Theater Faculty, Directing Faculty, Staff Pianist, Show Foreman, one new faculty per department, Voice Teacher, Dance Teacher.
3. The Musical Theatre program was instrumental in keeping enrollment numbers high during the pandemic. The numbers that are being admitted into the program are unsustainable without the proper faculty hires. No one program needs to carry the admissions burden of all programs. Large cohorts may look good on paper but lead to

difficulties in retention. There must be proper academic and production support provided with the School of Theater. Look to models from academic competitors and you will see that large Musical Theatre cohorts are not the norm.

4. Continue to identify and articulate what makes the School of Theater programs unique. Especially with regard to such highly desired and competitive programs like Musical Theatre. Development of collaborative programs with the MFA is a possibility. (MFA in Directing with an emphasis in Musical Theatre, MFA in Playwrighting with an emphasis in Musical Theatre Composition, M.F.A. in Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy & Vocal Performance, and MFA in Musical Direction (the latter would be in conjunction with your School of Music. Creating Graduate Concentrations in Musical Theatre with existing degrees (Acting, Directing, Playwrighting) is extremely marketable. The caliber of students who attend them is very high, usually returning professionals. It will also help to alleviate the problems with Voice, Dance, and Acting teachers within that program.
5. Hire a part-time financial/budget administrator to oversee the financial workings of the school.
6. An independent Board of Directors should be created for Tantrum Theater made up of theater professionals. It is not a common practice for an Equity Theatre to operate without a board. The theatre can only increase its national visibility by being able to fundraise and operate independently. With the staff of Tantrum holding fixed-term academic appointments to the University and those fixed terms “at-will” of their academic deans, this could foster some fear on the side of the untenured staff in important decision-making processes. This particular dynamic between untenured staff and administration can cultivate decision-making out of a sense of fear rather than what is needed for the theatre, its staff and the students of the School of Theatre.
7. Clearly define the organizational flow of decision making (autonomy), reporting, requirements, etc. for Tantrum Theater.
8. Reexamine the plays produced by students in the Playspace. Could the space be utilized to help meet the curriculum requirements of the program as well as provide an opportunity for outside feedback?
9. Set up a two-day orientation in the fall for incoming graduate students that focuses on graduate resources and teaching Assistantship including required course content, course material, etc. (This will help to create consistency within classes.), goals and expectations, technology (Blackboard, gradebook, class lists, people soft, etc.), policies and procedures (chain of command, handling problem situations, etc.)
10. Relieve the production burden of the musicals from being exclusively by Tantrum. The mission of the theatre is to be a professional theatre that supports the graduate training programs. It is a way for the school to maintain the connection with URTA and fulfill the requirement for professional affiliation. If the Musical Theatre production is primarily realized with undergraduates doing their “mainstage” shows under the Tantrum name, it diminishes the value in developing Tantrum as a brand.

11. People pay professional money to see professional shows. The budgets should be increased in the School of Theater operating expenses to properly support undergraduate Musical Theatre productions. The independence of Tantrum is vital for the development of the Tantrum brand. Without this independence, in reality, Tantrum is simply adding more school of theater productions with “a couple of professionals.” thrown in. Clarity in thought and mission of Tantrum can alleviate the perceived “tier” of importance of production by students. This clear branding still allows for full collaboration, but allows Tantrum to attempt more contemporary, challenging scripts that will ultimately serve the entire School and region.
12. Provide students with access to technology and programs impacting the future of theater production. Add new course content that addresses how students can use AI and other advanced technologies in order that they remain competitive upon graduation. Students should be able to download and have access on their personal computers to software that is being used in class. Graduate students should be treated as employees/staff and given free access to download software on their personal devices. Very little work in Design can be done on-campus in the provided computer lab.
13. Look for ways to integrate more with the Film & Television program. It is what the contemporary students’ desires. An example is bringing back the MFA Playwriting Program, and collaborating to create Writing for Stage, Screen and Television. The same collaborations could happen with MFA Acting, Directing and Design & Production.
14. Continue finding collaborations with other entities at the school like the Healthcare Theatre programs.
15. Leave Kantner as a space for the School of Theater. Space is finite and territorial at Universities. The idea of demolishing or reappropriating a space that has already been used so effectively for so many years is a poor use of resources. Each program within the College of Fine Arts has very different needs. The idea that sharing the space may encourage collaboration is really not quantifiable. Through our analysis, there is no reason to take about the myriad of rehearsal and performance space that Kantner provides. This is also necessary as there is no plan for faculty offices.

COMMENDATIONS:

The faculty are passionate about what they do and the students they serve. They want to provide students with a well-rounded education in theater that gives them exciting and lucrative opportunities upon graduation. This passion is evident in the amount of time and effort they spend with their students rehearsing, training, mentoring, etc. The School of Theater has a strong national reputation training future professionals. This is due to the diligent members of the faculty and staff.

OVERALL JUDGMENT:

The program is viable and is doing some amazing things. It should be supported and valued by the university.



School of Theater
Kantner Hall 307
1 Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701

T: 740-593-4818
F: 740-593-4817
www.ohio.edu/finearts/theater

December 1, 2023

Provost Elizabeth Sayrs and Dean Matthew Shaftel

Re: School of Theater response to UCC review

Dear Provost Sayrs and Dean Shaftel,

We are grateful for the UCC committee, the reviewers, and this opportunity for a self-study. Faculty, staff, and students saw this as a chance to advocate for change, focusing particularly on additional targeted hires, and clarification on the new COFA facility. As we work towards the 2024 renewal of our national accreditation with the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) and the University Resident Theatre Association (URTA), this was a step towards identifying where we are as a School and where we're headed.

The UCC reviewers were generous with their time, and reported faculty, staff, and student comments almost verbatim. In this response, I'll group together recommendations mentioned in their letter, and which ones to focus on as actionable.

Area of Concern #1 and Recommendations #1, 5

A graduate student reported almost falling 35 feet through a grate in the ceiling while working on lighting.

Hire additional faculty to help fill needs of the program. At the minimum, the school needs a full-time production manager to handle day to day logistics, scheduling how shows are produced, merging of all production elements, sets the schedules for all aspects of the production, etc. In addition, a Master Electrician should be hired for safety and accountability measures.

Response

Safety is the School's top priority. We've asked in the past for the Forum Theater's tension wire grid to be updated so there's no danger of students falling partially or fully through the lighting grid. We continue to advocate for this update, as well as the Forum Theater floors which are rotting due to the standing water in the subfloor. We recently were awarded a substantial 1804 Fund for stage automation, but without a secure subfloor, we can't install the new equipment without risk of failure or injury. We submitted these requests through the University's major equipment request in July 2023, and are asking again for assistance to complete these important updates. We received estimates which were approximately \$274,000 for the tension wire grid installation, and \$115,000 for the modular staging system.

As we broaden our safety scope, the need for a full-time, additional staff Master Electrician (ME) has been repeatedly identified by faculty, staff, and students. This position was eliminated in 2018, and since then, students and staff have voiced safety issues regarding electrical knowledge. Several ideas for new hires are mentioned in the report, and we feel the ME position is important for the safety of our students working in the Baker Theater, Forum Theater, Hahne Theater, and the PlaySpace. This is important due to the nature of our older facilities, as well as the new planned facility. We are currently in the process of searching for the Production Manager position.

As we look to the future to further support our growing Musical Theater program, we would like to consider an additional Assistant/Associate Professor of Instruction. Due to the complexity of the MT curriculum, it makes sense that this position would be a generalist who could focus on multiple facets of the program. With direction from an acting instructor, together with a music director required for the full range of teaching within most classes, an additional faculty member could teach voice lessons, accompanying, and other advanced subjects. In addition, this hire could support the production of musicals, whether as a director, or other important member of the production team. Our musical theater students have repeatedly requested more time in voice lessons to make them more competitive at the national level, and an additional hire could round out this curriculum collaborating with the School of Music.

Recommendations #4, 13, 14

Continue to identify and articulate what makes the School of Theater programs unique. Especially with regard to such highly desired and competitive programs like Musical Theatre. Development of collaborative programs with the MFA is a possibility. (MFA in Directing with an emphasis in Musical Theatre, MFA in Playwrighting with an emphasis in Musical Theatre Composition, M.F.A. in Musical Theatre Voice Pedagogy & Vocal Performance, and MFA in Musical Direction (the latter would be in conjunction with your School of Music. Creating Graduate Concentrations in Musical Theatre with existing degrees (Acting, Directing, Playwrighting) is extremely marketable. The caliber of students who attend them is very high, usually returning professionals. It will also help to alleviate the problems with Voice, Dance, and Acting teachers within that program.

Response

Several recommendations were made about additional graduate programs and working with other Schools and Colleges. We remain open and excited to explore possibilities, however, any additional programs will require new faculty hires. Faculty and staff are at workload capacity and can't create additional programs or teach additional classes without new hires in place. Similarly, as theater is an embodied art form, we do not feel an online master's writing program would serve our students. We are excited about the new Arts in Health programs and how we might extend what the School is already doing with the College of Health Sciences and Professions and the Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine. As we move into an integrated facility, we believe further collaborations within our College will come to light.

Recommendations #6, 10, 11

An independent Board of Directors should be created for Tantrum Theater made up of theater professionals. It is not a common practice for an Equity Theatre to operate without a board. The theatre can only increase its national visibility by being able to fundraise and operate independently. With the

staff of Tantrum holding fixed-term academic appointments to the University and those fixed terms “at-will” of their academic deans, this could foster some fear on the side of the untenured staff in important decision-making processes. This particular dynamic between untenured staff and administration can cultivate decision-making out of a sense of fear rather than what is needed for the theatre, its staff and the students of the School of Theatre.

Relieve the production burden of the musicals from being exclusively by Tantrum. The mission of the theatre is to be a professional theatre that supports the graduate training programs. It is a way for the school to maintain the connection with URTA and fulfill the requirement for professional affiliation. If the Musical Theatre production is primarily realized with undergraduates doing their “mainstage” shows under the Tantrum name, it diminishes the value in developing Tantrum as a brand.

People pay professional money to see professional shows. The budgets should be increased in the School of Theater operating expenses to properly support undergraduate Musical Theatre productions. The independence of Tantrum is vital for the development of the Tantrum brand. Without this independence, in reality, Tantrum is simply adding more school of theater productions with “a couple of professionals” thrown in. Clarity in thought and mission of Tantrum can alleviate the perceived “tier” of importance of production by students. This clear branding still allows for full collaboration, but allows Tantrum to attempt more contemporary, challenging scripts that will ultimately serve the entire School and region.

Response

Several of the recommendations involve Tantrum Theater, and I’ll address them together. As Tantrum enters its fourth year on the Athens campus, we are developing a more realistic view of what it can accomplish with our financial and staff/student capacity. COFA and the School have struggled to identify Tantrum’s mission and convey that effectively to our students and community. We have an opportunity to clarify Tantrum's mission and goals with its new leadership now in place, but only if we implement changes.

Instead of an independent board of directors, Tantrum would likely be better served by an advisory board which could work with Advancement and ascertain how to better involve our community and audiences while cultivating potential donors. An independent board of directors would be more appropriate if Tantrum was a separate 501(c)3 organization. While an advisory board was attempted in the past, it should become a priority for new leadership.

The question of whether the School or Tantrum should produce our yearly musical is closely tied to production costs and who is served in the production. Tantrum has undertaken producing the annual musical for several reasons: (1) our graduate and undergraduate students across all disciplines must have this form of professional experience; (2) musicals are expensive to produce and require high-level production; (3) musicals draw a large audience and, as a professional theater, Tantrum must generate both earned and contributed revenue. Our URTA review next year will ask us to address how Tantrum interacts with our graduate and undergraduate student populations and we’ll seek to further clarify the working relationship through that process.

Recommendation #7

Clearly define the organizational flow of decision making (autonomy), reporting, requirements, etc. for Tantrum Theater.

Response

Faculty, staff and students are requesting clarification on how decisions are made in the School with regards to Tantrum Theater and Vibrancy Theater. As a student led organization, Vibrancy makes some independent choices but is housed in the School and must follow production norms. We can easily clarify reporting lines for both organizations during the academic year.

Recommendation #8

Reexamine the plays produced by students in the Playspace. Could the space be utilized to help meet the curriculum requirements of the program as well as provide an opportunity for outside feedback?

Response

We will put into writing more robust guidelines for the student produced PlaySpace to eliminate confusion about its purpose regarding curriculum.

Recommendation #9

Set up a two-day orientation in the fall for incoming graduate students that focuses on graduate resources and teaching Assistantship including required course content, course material, etc. (This will help to create consistency within classes.), goals and expectations, technology (Blackboard, gradebook, class lists, people soft, etc.), policies and procedures (chain of command, handling problem situations, etc.)

Response

We believe that a two-day orientation for incoming MFA theater students is redundant to the University Graduate College two-day orientation. We, in fact, already hold a one-day School orientation that covers policies and will enforce mandatory attendance beginning next year. We currently offer a directed instruction course for the Acting MFA students who teach, and we will explore expanding that class to include all theater MFA students who teach.

Recommendation #12

Provide students with access to technology and programs impacting the future of theater production. Add new course content that addresses how students can use AI and other advanced technologies in order that they remain competitive upon graduation. Students should be able to download and have access on their personal computers to software that is being used in class. Graduate students should be treated as employees/staff and given free access to download software on their personal devices. Very little work in Design can be done on-campus in the provided computer lab.

Response

Currently, our theater graduate students do not have access to Adobe Creative Cloud and other University-provided software. It's unrealistic to ask students to find a University operated desktop in order to complete assignments. These software programs need to be provided to all theater graduate students who would need them. There are programs within Art + Design that do provide this software to graduate students and we will investigate partnering with them.

Recommendation #15

Leave Kantner as a space for the School of Theater. Space is finite and territorial at Universities. The idea of demolishing or reappropriating a space that has already been used so effectively for so many years is a poor use of resources. Each program within the College of Fine Arts has very different needs. The idea that sharing the space may encourage collaboration is really not quantifiable. Through our analysis, there is no reason to take about the myriad of rehearsal and performance space that Kantner provides. This is also necessary as there is no plan for faculty offices.

Response

Faculty, staff, and students understand that the Patton Center for Arts Education is a once in a lifetime opportunity for the College. We have also witnessed our friends and colleagues across the country advocate for new theater buildings only to have insufficient designs render them unworkable as teaching and performance spaces. As we embark on the design phase, there will need to be extensive conversations on how the new spaces will be built to produce theater and serve our students successfully, as the planning phase resulted in what we feel are compromises that don't meet the needs of professional theater production. We are highly involved with the design process, with theater faculty engaged at every level, and are eager to begin work with the new architects to continue advocating for facilities that best meet the needs of our current and future theater students.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the UCC review. We look forward to continued conversations about the School, Tantrum Theater, College, and University.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Merri Biechler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Merri" and last name "Biechler" clearly distinguishable.

Merri Biechler
she/her/hers
Director, Associate Professor of Instruction
School of Theater
740-593-9355
biechler@ohio.edu

Dear Professors Williams and Munhall,

Many grateful thanks for a thorough and helpful external review of the School of Theater and its degree programs. We are also appreciative of your bringing in Professor Blanton, who was both thoughtful and gracious in his time here. We are also pleased to note that we are well on our way to several changes based on the suggestions in the support. Fundamentally, we are all in agreement that the Theater program has “a strong national reputation” and is “doing amazing things” due to the “passionate” and “diligent members of the faculty and staff.”

To highlight positive changes below:

- Faculty and Staff: We couldn't agree more that our faculty and staff are our greatest asset and, while we are constantly trying to balance the cost of instruction per theater major with budget limitations, we must continue to invest in order to grow. We are currently hiring a new Production Manager and have placed a Master Electrician position on our hiring plan for next year. We have also planned for growth in the musical theater area with a plan to include musical theater expertise in future faculty searches in voice and dance as lines become available. This will allow us to continue to maintain our absolute commitment to safety, while continuing to support growth.
- Facilities: As stated by the reviewers—perhaps tongue in cheek—our faculty and staff are literally “treading water.” With decades of deferred maintenance, systems that cannot be updated, space that cannot be renovated to meet theater's needs, and regular flooding, our primary theater building is failing. As determined in the 2017 HGA study, the building is on its final stretch and soon will not meet basic student needs, much less the larger programmatic needs dictated by the quality and growth of the program. A draft concept created by Eastman Perkins last year allowed us to secure \$94M and approval to move forward with an ambitious new building and renovations to existing buildings on what will soon be the “Arts and Education” green. The investment is significant and a sign of the value the university places on the arts.

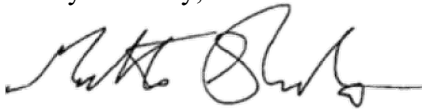
The facilities plan allows us to move into the state-of-the-art facilities that our students and faculty deserve and manages the limited budget while encouraging critical collaboration across disciplines by sharing spaces where possible. This is a big change for a program that has remained essentially siloed for half a century. We have hired a new architectural firm: HGA/AECOM to complete the program and do final designs this year. In a process that has been outlined through shared-governance processes, we have 9 different faculty task forces with nearly 50 faculty involved in making decisions about how we will thoughtfully arrange our spaces while holding to the square-footage and budget limitations of the approved concept. With thoughtful support of the theater faculty, we have also hired theater consultants Schuler-Shook to help guide the design process, which they assure us will allow us to meet the future

needs of the School of Theater. With hours of cross-disciplinary discussion under our belts already, and many more decisions ahead, the comfort level with the project is significantly higher than it was during the time of the report and the nature of collaboration between COFA schools is truly changing in a way that will serve future students well.

- **Tantrum Theater:** Our professional theater is an important part of our accreditation process and gives our students critical professional experience. As we have shifted Tantrum operations to Athens from Dublin, there have been growing pains as we attempt to clarify the mission of the professional theater as it both relates and differs from the work of the School of Theater. A strong degree of independence is necessary for Tantrum to truly act as a professional theater, and yet the interdependence on department faculty and students is critical. I agree that a community advisory board for Tantrum will help to maintain independence, as will clarity about the need for Tantrum to generate both earned and contributed revenue. Because greater attendance is essential to Tantrum's need to generate revenue, it is critical that musical theater is maintained as part of the yearly repertoire. We will continue to think about where intersections between curriculum and professional programming can provide us budget advantages, while maintaining independence. Having recently hired a new executive producer, we believe that we have the personnel in place to strike this balance. way that will serve future students well.
- **New programs, student enrollments, and graduate students:** As stated by our highly capable and thoughtful director of the School of Theater, we do not currently have faculty, staff, or space capabilities for new programming that would bring in additional students in the performance or playwriting areas. There is future potential in the dramatic-writing area in collaboration with the school of film, but our focus now is on balancing our current programming through limiting the size of our incoming performance classes and marketing/intense recruiting around our production and design areas. Early signs are that our marketing and recruiting is working to generate both undergraduate and graduate interest in our production/design areas and we will experiment with a couple of "fellowship-level" graduate stipends to support the yield efforts in this area.

To reiterate, I am so thankful for this thoughtful review and appreciative that it has already provided guidance as we continue to build a sustainably excellent portfolio of theater-related programs for our students,

Very sincerely,



Matthew Shaftel
Dean, College of Fine Arts



February 2024

This a summary of the Graduate Council - Program Review Committee's review of the UCC review and related materials from the School of Theater.

The School of Theater is deemed viable from the materials provided. We would like to emphasize the following points:

- The school has positioned itself well with the new Musical Theatre program. However staffing issues must be addressed for continued success of programs like this.
- We encourage leadership to look at the review committee's concerns about stipend levels for graduate students.
- Leadership and other stakeholders need to be aligned about the interim facility strategy for minimizing safety and health risks.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or the other committee members, David Brown or Vladimir Marchenkov, if you have any questions about this review.

Sincerely,

Gabe Giordano
Chair, Program Review Committee - University Graduate Council