

# Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Karen Jean Martinson, Ph.D  
532 N Rossmore #103  
Los Angeles, CA 90004  
University of Minnesota

[misskarenjean@gmail.com](mailto:misskarenjean@gmail.com)

Teaching theatre provides the unique opportunity for multifaceted study, investigation, and inspiration. Because I believe in theatre's transformative power, I situate the performing arts in my classroom as a means through which greater social, political, and cultural insight can be perceived, expressed, debated, and enacted. With over six years of teaching experience at the college level, in courses as varied as Introduction to Theatre, Dramatic Literature and Theory, and seminars of my own design such as Performing Blackness and Theatre at the Intersection of Now, I have refined my pedagogy in order to create a productive and progressive learning environment that allows for an active engagement with the material while also teaching students the value of being responsible artists, insightful critics, and compassionate contributors to society. I help my students hone their knowledge of theatre history, dramatic literature, literary and performance theory, and theatrical praxis as they develop their critical thinking skills and learn to express themselves through discussion, scholarly writing, formal presentations, and performance. This creates a vibrant framework within which they can strive for excellence in thought and expression. Because theatre at its best is the creative action that results from intellectual and artistic engagement, I challenge my students to think deeply, to create theoretically complex and aesthetically rich theatrical events, to perform with commitment and creative abandon achieved through the confidence of intellectual rigor, and to emerge from the experience of academic challenge as engaged thinkers and citizens in the local, national, and international community.

My artistic work as both a dramaturg and a director has deepened my own theoretical engagement with theatre just as my scholarship informs and enhances the art I create. It is through production, for example, that I first came to understand Pierre Bourdieu's theories of how symbolic violence is internalized by the oppressed to be wielded against themselves and their own self-interest. When staging Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* with a racially diverse cast, the director and I chose to surround the "101 Dalmatians" monologue with scenes of family life. Because so much of that monologue describes the negative effects of segregation, we separated the cast along racial lines. We were surprised to see the black actors enacting scenes of drunkenness and violence; we stopped the rehearsal and I lead the actors in a discussion in which they revealed that such actions were not reminiscent of their own home lives, which were better characterized by positive moments of familial interaction. As I pushed them to explain their performative choices, it became clear that, on some

level, they truly believed black home life to be a site of hardship, abuse, and strife despite the contrary evidence of their own lived experience. Moreover, they also felt that audience members would better recognize and believe these negative images, too. As I explained symbolic violence to them, they not only became aware of how they had internalized the negative stereotypes that circulate in US American society regarding people of color, but also they realized that they were in danger of perpetuating these stereotypes through their performative choices; we changed the staging to present a more positive family scene, one rooted in the direct experiences of the cast members.

It is learning and teaching moments such as this that fuel my particular approach to making the power of theatre evident in the classroom, by blending theoretical and practical approaches to theatre so that critical thought comes alive and artistry flourishes. By creating learning opportunities that combine academic thought with artistic expression, I teach my students to view theatre as a vitally important tool for critically examining social issues, emphasizing the power of representation in constructing cultural systems of thought and the unique ability of theatre to deconstruct these systems and offer the chance for social change. Above all, I demand that my students become responsible artists and thinkers, that they take ownership of the artistic choices they make and are held accountable for the intellectual opinions they express.

To foster this level of responsible thought and artistry, I engender a classroom in which the following conditions thrive: diversity and difference, dialogue and debate, theoretical inquiry and interrogation, and artistic expression through constructive critical collaboration.

¶ Diversity and difference - I believe that it is crucial to create a syllabus that resists normativizing racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Instead, I try to balance canonical texts with those written outside of the dominant position. It is important that these texts are not so few that they function as tokenism; instead, I look to create a syllabus that avoids marginalizing alterity. Moreover, I ask my students to mark their own positionalities, to confront the privileges they may have been afforded or, conversely, to express their own differential subject positions. I feel that such an approach is productive and progressive, for I believe that it is through the honest and often painful

grappling with difference that new, non-hierarchical webs of knowledge can be constructed.

¶ Dialogue and debate – Dialogue and debate result organically from the diverse texts I assign. I do not promote a false happy multiculturalism within my classroom; rather I create a safe space in which students are free to explore the contentious issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality together as a collective, in which individual and often contrary perspectives are not simply respected, but encouraged, because the free exchange of such opinions betters the quality of education for all. I feel that rigorous debate functions as a crucial process that deepens my students' understanding of theatre as a social act.

¶ Theoretical inquiry and interrogation – A dramaturgical sensibility characterizes my approach to critical theory, wherein there is a balance between the art and the mode of inquiry. Theory is vital because it provides different languages and methodologies through which art can be interrogated.

¶ Artistic expression – In my classroom, I require that my students create performative pieces collaboratively. I workshop with them to ensure that they learn both from me and from each other. Because I believe that it is both unrealistic and unethical to theorize about theatre without ever creating it, I strive to engender an environment in which my student are able to explore the craft of theatre, simulating the sort of negotiations that occur in the theatre space without the pressure of mounting a complete production. More importantly, I enable my students to breathe life into critical theory by guiding them as they discover their own processes for manifesting their intellectual inquiries on the stage. I believe that the creative, yet critical, raise the collective bar of all my students, allowing them to accomplish more together than they would individually.

A teacher's education comes as much from her students as her own mentors. While completing my degree, I have sought out various teaching opportunities while receiving excellent pedagogical instruction and guidance. With each class I teach I

emerge more engaged, excited, and able to lead. Because my students have ranged in age from grade-school children to graduate-level adults, I have gained invaluable experience in crafting sophisticated concepts so as to be accessible and exciting to my students. Moreover, I have learned through experience how best to formulate activities, exercises, and discussion that instill in students an ownership of the ideas we explore together. Through these experiences, I have learned the value of constructing a classroom environment in which education that is personally meaningful to students motivates learning, which in turn energizes learning. Instigated and led by an excited, interested teacher, this becomes a chain reaction that fuels us all to achieve unexpected levels of understanding, inquiry, and performance.