Report on new Theatre Studies BA degree at St. Norbert College, De Pere, WI.

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Appendix 1: KC/ACTF Report on Hayfever

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PREFACE AND CHALLENGE STATEMENTS:

Stephen Rupsch made an invitation to me in March of 2011 to come to St. Norbert College and do an onsite evaluation of the relatively new Theatre Studies BA degree program. The visit was made on April 7th and 8th. As is the case with visits like this one, I learned a great deal in a very short time and have spent the time since trying to make sense of it all. This report is a compilation of the onsite visit; interviews with faculty, staff, students, and administrators; and examination of written documents like syllabi, university course catalog and the online Web-based university presence. In the course of a two-day whirlwind visit I met many people dedicated to the idea of theatre training at St. Norbert College. This report will describe findings and offer insights and suggestions for use by the department and administration of St. Norbert College.

I understand the BA program, in its fourth year, is graduating the second class in academic year, 2010-11. In terms of real-time assessment it is frankly rather early to have someone in to do an evaluation of any sort as the curriculum has had very little time to “shake out.” It is possible that the two faculty members have yet to teach all posted elective courses in the major sequence. With that said, there are a number of observations that can be reported in relationship to what is in print and what was discernible in a short visit relative to the classroom and production situation. To this observer and in that regard, the Theatre BA Program at St. Norbert College appears to be exactly what it purports to be and at this time the faculty is delivering on stated promises to its major consumers, the dozen BA majors in theatre. Syllabi appear to be consistent with goals of a BA program of this scope and the production program nicely supports the academic portion of the program as a laboratory for performance and production work. However, I believe the program faces some challenges if it is to maintain consistency or grow in any meaningful way.

In case of point I cannot at the current time recommend any substantial alteration to the status quo regarding the curriculum and the co-curricular production program. Systematic support on a number of fronts will be required from St. Norbert College administrative sources to grow the program in any productive fashion. I did discern some bottlenecks facing long-term success of this vibrant, albeit small, academic unit. I believe those challenges to be, in descending order: Staffing, competition from historic St. Norbert College supported community-based performing arts organizations, faculty numbers, budget size, curricular diversity, and lastly facilities limitations. The theatre facility may prove to be the most easily addressed issue facing the new theatre program. This report will endeavor to illuminate the successes and challenges to the overall program and to offer suggestions for strengthening it.
BODY OF THE REPORT: BA THEATRE STUDIES ACADEMIC PROGRAM
AT ST. NORBERT COLLEGE

CATALOG, MAJOR, CLASSES/SYLLABI:

An examination of the catalog shows a rather straightforward array of classes designed for an enriching BA experience in theatre at a residential liberal arts university. The courses cover introductory level courses in performance, theatrical theory and design/production. Students move to THEA 250 production and performance laboratory where they practice show development through production time spent in crew work in the scene shop, lighting, backstage areas and in the rehearsal hall as stage managers or cast members. Students may take multiple enrollments and begin to develop an area of specialization by the senior year THEA 450 capstone course—as an actor, stage manager, or designer. This is highly desirable and should be the goal of any reputable theatre program regardless of whether that program offers a BA or a more specialized and in-depth BFA program of. Theatre is a discipline which requires practitioners to implement course work in a co-curricular setting to produce shows and make live performances. It is in the live performance event that the art of theatre occurs—in the interplay of performers as characters interpreting literary forms and who inhabit thematically charged designed environments for and in interaction with a live audience. That students have the opportunity to develop a theatrical practice is critical for success of the training program and for the individual student’s long-term success in the broader discipline.

At the production of Hayfever—a delightful rendition—I certainly met and spoke with well-prepared student actors and highly effective student designers. The students strongly appear to reflect solid, systematic training at the introductory level in the broad discipline of theatre and also appear to be able to specialize at the upper level. Please see Appendix #1 which is the KC/ACTF response for Hayfever.

The 2010-12 course catalog is short a couple of core course descriptions, THEA 202 and 302. I attribute this to the newness of the degree and the bi-annual publication of the course catalog. I did find those course descriptions online. None of the courses list how frequently or in what semester the courses will be delivered. Given the teaching load, the faculty design and directing course release, it appears that a bottleneck for this program could be frequency of course offerings and diversity of course selections for upper level enrichment. It was not altogether clear from my visit that this is actually the case, but I sensed that the core theatre curriculum is being met, but not a lot more on a regular basis. Two or more additional courses a year would immediately broaden the department’s offerings and bring about an assured course rotation. An additional acting class, specialized design or tech course or a regular offering of Theatre History would go a long way to enhance a solid, but spare, degree program.

FACULTY:

To put it in a nutshell the number of faculty supporting this program, regardless of their talent or prior professional preparation is barely enough for the program. In this day and
age, most institutions of higher learning prepare MFA and PhD candidates to be specialists within the broader discipline of Theatre Arts. Those institutions do not as a rule broadly prepare MFA and PhD candidates, eg: faculty who can both design and direct, people who teach acting and are theatre historians who also design, people who are effective stage-crafters and who are also good teachers of acting. Theatre professionals and educators tend to be area specialists within the discipline. This disciplinary standard puts a great deal of stress on small two or three person departments because it is simply difficult to “cover all the bases” regardless of faculty acumen. Stephen Rupsch and April Beiswenger deliver all the required courses for the major on a regular rotation and provide a measure of academic diversity for the BA in Theatre Studies. I don’t see how they can provide more to the curriculum than they currently do and there is little flexibility in the curriculum to offer electives.

It's interesting to note that Stephen’s office is housed with traditional liberal arts faculty and that April’s office is located with the fine arts faculty. In dealing with a small two-person department this was actually a rather humane decision on the part of the Dean, to place the theatre faculty with those in related disciplines. I would caution that should the Theatre Studies program grow at all a concerted effort should be made to collect faculty and staff into a single office suite or wing of a building. Speaking as an administrator of a fully dispersed academic unit many orders of magnitude larger than the program at St. Norbert, it is very difficult to build and maintain disciplinary focus and unity with people spread out all over campus rather than being collected into a single physical location. Two people can coordinate pretty easily, half a dozen don’t do as well and thirty is a nightmare.

I recommend support in the form of qualified adjunct professors, or a rotating one-year full-time visitor. Carefully selected adjunct hires could help with diversity and enrichment if those hires could offer either the introductory tech or acting courses, or a selected upper level elective. If staff members in the area had terminal degrees in theatre—PhD or MFA they would be highly qualified to offer the occasional course to the program. The other suggestion I would offer is a one-year visitor perhaps on a rotation—tech/design one year, acting/directing the next. This would allow the current faculty to teach to their areas of expertise at the upper level, and for the program to plan on a multi-year basis. The down side of course is the potential for disruption and lack of continuity. Both suggestions could free the tenure line faculty for regular specialized upper level elective offerings, an area of potential concern for the students enrolled in this program. It may be difficult to identify qualified people as adjunct professors in the local area.

STUDENTS AND SOME THOUGHTS ON KNIGHT THEATRE:

The students I met with alone and those I met during my response to the production of *Hayfever* were delightful and very dedicated to theatre-making. They allowed that with the development of the new BA major in Theatre Studies “everything had become a lot more organized.” They thought that the new emphasis on education was a very positive development. They professed universal praise for Faculty and staff members responsible
for the curriculum and co-curricular production program. Corey Pinchart, scene shop manager, came in for especially high praise because of his willingness to help support the Knight Theatre and to instruct in the moment. The small group of students I met with professed a rather universal frustration with the structure of their practicum work on productions and how their hours were counted for evaluation. If I understood correctly their complaint was with THEA 250 and how their total contact hours were counted. I believe they contribute in a designated “in area” job, and then are required to put in additional hours helping to build the show or watching rehearsals as their “out of area” job. They purport that their in area hours do not really “count” and only the additional out of area work on the shows results in a grade. Many of them professed to pouring themselves into in area work only to come up short on additional work hours and to receiving lower grades for unsuccessful completion. They did not like that. Whether or not this is true the students feel it to be true. The point is to remove any smoldering resentments. First bear in mind that no actor really wants to help build scenery or sew buttons on a costume. And no one wants to sweep the scene shop when they could be doing anything else. But the work has to be done to get the entire production on stage. I profess to a lack of clear understanding when I perused the THEA 250 syllabus. Between Wednesday Seminars, hourly work crew minimums, positions, mandatory rehearsal attendance, I didn’t really come up with a clear answer myself for delineating all the hourly/position requirements. It could be that a fresh look at the syllabus would serve to more specifically define what the expectations are.

As a theatre educator and designer I fully understand the potential disconnect between the number of hours required for a grade and the number of hours necessary to mount a show. They don’t always neatly match up. The trick is always to be as transparent as possible about requirements and expectations. Perhaps a thorough review of expectations is in order here. At the very least it would probably be wise to identify the successful completion of in area hours as the guaranteed average, C, grade. Then one should identify the steps to achieve a good or B grade, and an excellent, A grade in the course. Clarifying the expectations for achievement and mollify or erase resentments.

Other worries voiced were for students who “stepped up” into tech positions and the amount of time they worked on a show because of that dedication. They professed that in general the tech courses felt like a rushed overview and that they weren’t really “prepared for immediate application.” They felt that the Wednesday Seminars in 250 were somewhat hit or miss, but any guests were very welcome and served to broaden their experience and outlook.

Regarding Knight Theatre, using the structure of theatre club as a venue for students to achieve performance or production credit to fulfill the requirements of THEA 450, is a good and inclusive idea. I am unclear about where Knight Theatre events occur. I heard the Webb Theatre, the Walters Theatre, and an older theatre across campus. I would worry about the scale of these productions in any theatre the size of the Webb Theatre let alone larger. Production values aside the time required to produce anything of merit in a performance venue of that scale for a student club is probably too big a drain on student time. Smaller scale, well-produced pieces that could go up in a black box theatre with
relatively short time frames and limited resources should be more the norm for this type of theatre making. The students were talking about a production of the musical Urinetown that occurred during the academic year, and that it was in their opinion, fully produced. I worry about the scale of such productions. The club should be embraced and led by someone from Theatre Studies.

**STAFF:**

Staffing issues seem to me to be the single biggest challenge for the fledgling Theatre Studies program. As I met and started talking with administrators, faculty, staff and students I became increasingly alarmed. Everyone invariably referred to one individual whom they perceived to be instrumental for everyone else to be able to work effectively. On the morning of the second day of my visit I finally met with Paul Mashl, Facilities/Box Office Manager of the Abbot-Pennings Hall of Fine Arts and I was able to talk through some of my concerns. I have a lot to say in this section.

In my opinion based on the interactions and information I was able to put together, Paul’s position is the primary concern for continued success of Theatre Studies. His work affects Music Department programming, it appears to be broadening in scope without additional support staff, and therefore his job should be of great concern to the university. Let me be clear, I do not perceive Paul himself to be the problem. To the contrary I found him supremely dedicated to the performing arts and to St. Norbert College. I discern that his position comes with a great deal of personal stress for him. It is the position itself, or rather the current scope of the position and a corresponding dearth of support staff, that is at issue. Summarily decreasing his job will negatively affect the current success of the Theatre Studies program.

Talented individuals somehow accrete responsibility and job duties. I suspect that this is the case with Paul and his position. But make no mistake it is an important position with a huge influence on successful programming for at least two academic disciplines and historic community-based arts organizations. Because Paul functions as a facilities manager for onstage activities in both the Byron L. Walters Theatre and the Neil J. and Mary M. Webb Theatre I have a good deal of concern for the Music Department as well. In speaking with him about the history of the job, I further sensed that in the not too distant past it had been differently defined and shaped and was perhaps more fully staffed or supported.

Paul’s position serves both degrees and all their onstage activities during the school day, academic year, summer season, and if I can make sense of the online calendar, year-round community based theatrical, musical and Music Theatre productions as well as paying renters. Both academic units run many events monthly, and every activity that happens in both theatres is fully staffed and supported backstage in every regard. Theatre Studies and the Music Department, share the facilities throughout the academic day, and have different spatial and physical requirements. They are clearly dependent on a consistent level of support to “reset” the spaces for specific disciplinary usages
sometimes on an hourly basis. Paul’s position oversees these daily changeovers directly or through the scene shop foreman or student workers.

St. Norbert College appears to support an extremely rich performance calendar throughout the calendar year and Paul Mashl appears to have charge of that calendar. This is in conjunction with running a Box Office that serves those academic and community-based programs. He does this with one 9-month part-time office staffer, a .27-time Box Office helper and a part-time scene shop foreman. The building is also available for rental to outside venues! I suspect that Paul arranges and manages those events as well.

He manages budgets which in part fund Theatre studies and Music Department programming. He has a host of student workers and I assume schedules them and has some responsibility for oversight in their job performance. He was listed as the Technical Director for *Hayfever*—a full-time job in its own right for the period of production. At many universities Technical Directors are either full-time exempt staff members often with teaching duties, or tenure-track faculty. But, Paul has the expertise and his contributions are important for timely production delivery and a level of instructional diversity for Theatre Studies.

Recently Paul implemented a high-powered online professional ticketing program called PCDISS in an effort to streamline his work. His ability to track information has been greatly expanded and Athletics has asked him to sell tickets for some sports. He did manage two remote sports box office events last academic year and that further split his time. Recently due to his Box Office success Admissions requested that he collect online fee payments at the Box Office window in Abbot-Pennings. This seems a major free service for an administrative office and I would suggest that they should at the very least be paying for another .27 staff position in Paul’s box office.

Paul seems to be managing his life and the Box Office tolerably well. But I worry what would happen if any additional stresses came along or anything were to go wrong. Theatre Studies, the Music Department, the community-based performances, Athletics and now Admissions could simply be screwed by a lack of manpower. I wonder what happens when he simply gets sick? What would happen in case of catastrophic injury? Two academic programs should not be so dependent on a single non-faculty support staff person for regular technical and embedded artistic program support. That is a recipe for disaster. In addition to Paul Mashl’s full-time position there need to be at least two full time--or equivalency--staff support positions. One of those positions should be in the Box Office/front of house furthering the work of facilities management, meeting public, ticketing, and/or as office/secretarial support staff. The other full-time or equivalency position should be that of Scene Shop Foreman--a part time position currently held by Corey. This position should be immediately regularized as it serves both Theatre Studies and the Music Department. The new full time scene shop foreman should be given charge of all backstage endeavors such as Theatre Studies academic programming, building shows, student labor, providing tech support for Music department events, Knight Theatre events, public rentals and the other St. Norbert College historic
community-based arts programming. These moves would go a long way to ease Paul’s job, while better supporting Theatre Studies and the Music Department.

As a final note, someone asked me when I was leaving if I had seen Paul’s office whiteboard daily planner and stated it was “really something.” While I did not see it, I imagine what it must look like. I bet his schedule is broken into 10 to 15 minute responsibility increments throughout the workday in order to keep track of this immense job. A final question to administrators: What would be the job penalty for Paul Mashl cutting back on some of these broad responsibilities now that he has proven he can get them done? Could/should he revert to doing his job as strictly defined? I don’t see how performing arts programming at St. Norbert College could be as successful if he did so. How would academic programs that are now being provided for by him with minimal staffing fare if he didn’t see to things as thoroughly—perhaps overly thoroughly—as he does now? These questions should be very closely examined.

PRODUCTION PROGRAM AND FACILITIES:

The production program of any theatre arts academic unit is a way to describe how that unit makes shows. The faculty and staff were eager to talk about producing at least one more show a year and possibly one more each term. I believe that producing one more show on the scale of Hayfever a year under the current set of circumstances would be highly unadvisable. Because of the volatility in Paul Mashl’s job situation and the uncertainty I sensed about Corey Pinchart’s scene shop position, the staffing to support such a venture is just not in place. Budgets are also not adequate such for an undertaking. A production budget of $11,600 is currently available for the Theatre Studies program to make two fully produced Webb Theatre productions including printing costs, advertising, and performance rights. Each production is allotted $2100 of that amount to mount designs. In this day and age $2100 is not really adequate for a show in a theatre the size of the Webb. Because of what was on the stage, I am bet that the large and handsome stage environment achieved for the production of Hayfever cost somewhat more than the $2100 allotted. Costs for traditional building trades materiel like wood and steel has gone up tremendously in the past decade. To further split that budget would simply bring about diminishing returns. Because it is difficult to discern from the website the level and complexity of all the programming that occurs in the two theatres, I am not certain that time, another valuable commodity, is really available either.

Lack of adequate storage is a huge deficit for the Theatre Studies program. The budget would go a good deal further if pieces could be saved and reused. An strategic stock of staging components with which to construct walls and acting levels can immediately bring about huge material savings in a show construction period. The staff purports that up to 25% of the total budget of a show build could be immediately recouped with adequate storage. Because of long experience in this regard, I know it could be an even higher percentage. Accessible storage is necessary for this to be a viable option. Currently the Theatre Studies program discards most components when they tear down a setting. There is no room available to store sizeable units in the building or remotely on
I was told that the student-run Knight Theatre club has storage in the condemned theatre on campus but Theatre Studies does not have access to that storage or the components. Anecdotally, I was also informed that the last potential remote storage area to be identified was grabbed up by the historic community-based performing arts program and the academic unit had to relinquish its prior claim because college physical plant personnel didn’t realize there was a difference between the two entities and unwittingly gave it away.

I finally saw the prop lock up near the end of my visit and was a little relieved. It is a good start. A range of furniture pieces and house wares is also really necessary to realistically dress a set design and save money in a production.

The Webb and the Walters Theatres are very nice facilities and though beginning to age should be sufficient for both the Music Department and Theatre Studies for quite awhile if properly maintained and attentively upgraded over time. It is also desirable to have a proscenium space—Walters Theatre, and a thrust space—the Webb Theatre. This promotes innovative thinking and spatial use because the theatres themselves constrain physical solutions. Theatre literature is wildly varied and some types lend themselves to one physical theater type more readily than another. Paul and April informed me that their concerns for the spaces are a thorough fly system inspection for the Walter Theatre where a lot of squealing noises happen when operating the fly lines. I heard this myself, and agree that pulley bearings may be shot. I would recommend an inspection of the system as soon as possible. I believe it has been some time since a safety inspection has occurred and in addition the hemp on the lines may be past its guaranteed operational life span.

Paul shared that the theatrical dimming system in the theatres is his primary building maintenance concern in addition to working emergency lights for the auditoriums and exits. The dimmers were installed in 1986 and need to be inspected, cleaned, repaired or replaced. He reports that he has dealt with a small fire in the system in recent years. This could have been caused by a number of things: Accumulated building dust or sawdust in the racks, rodent gnawing on wires leading to shorts, age and wear on the system leading to electrical arcing through dead or damaged electronics, etc. The fly line noise, emergency lights and the dimmer problem are ultimately human safety issues and should be looked into as soon as possible. I would recommend you get inspections and repairs of the facility on the annual college maintenance list quickly. At my own institution Capitol Equipment repair requests are routinely deferred for years before becoming fiscally feasible.

I had thought the Theatre Studies program to be lacking a variable staging black box theatre space. This would have been a near insurmountable deficit. Lo and behold late in my visit while being shown the prop storage room I was ushered through the theatre teaching space—which is a black box theatre! It is even equipped with handicap accessibility. It has not been seen by St. Norbert staff and faculty as a performing space, but rather only as a classroom and rehearsal hall. However, it is rigged with pipes to support lighting equipment and/or masking curtains. In a subsequent conversation Paul
related that individual dimmer packs—essential for lighting control—exist specifically for that space but are currently in storage. They will most likely need to be inspected and reconditioned by an outside firm. An adequate number of curtains to create masked entrances and exits may need to be ordered, and flexible temporary seating will need to be acquired or borrowed from college sources. Lighting instruments and a lighting control board will need to be scheduled from the existing inventory for the main theatres. A separate sound system may need to be purchased. But the point is that a black box theatre is available for the Theatre Studies program with a little planning, foresight and modest monetary support! This is a critical space for a theatre studies major to promote and house laboratory work by faculty and students. This is an easy fix.

When Stephen described to me the required THEA 450 senior projects I thought of a black box theatre. I didn’t think there was one available. A refurbished black box theatre space would provide a perfect working theatre for such laboratory projects. The size of the space would also limit the scale of the project work. I wouldn’t be supportive any additional fully mounted productions in the Webb or Walters Theatre as there are too many difficult constraints. However, a faculty directed, actor-centric rather than design/tech-centric production would be a superb and manageable enhancement for the major. A faculty directed kick off production which patterns the theatre making of “poor theatre” or storefront “found” production ideals would also be a fabulous touchstone example for the academic program as well as the Knight Theatre club. A black box theatre is the most appropriate space for Knight Theatre to produce their pieces. I would recommend a production on the season and in the space as soon as it is feasible from a staffing, equipment and rehearsal period perspective. Don’t miss this opportunity.

By the way the recent upgrades to the scene shop made by Corey and Paul are really magnificent and should go a long way to improving and streamlining both shop instruction and show production. As a staff member, Corey expressed worry about being able systematically to instruct students in the Theatre Studies program in traditional stagecrafts. This change may help that. A separate costume shop needs to be identified, equipped and maintained. The current room would be much better suited as hand properties storage room.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MUSIC DEPARTMENT:

I have only a few observations to add in regard to the Theatre Studies program and its relationship with the Music Department. The two programs share students, facilities and staff. And at this point, thankfully, there is a very cordial relationship on every level that I could discern. I understand that the Chair of the Music Department and the Chair of Theatre Studies meet regularly with the building staff to talk through scheduling, budgets, manpower and shared governance issues. Transparency on every level is critical for continued success. Keep talking and planning together. I understand from meeting with the Music Department that they feel the Fine Arts in general is a rather happy group at the moment. The relationship is to be cherished and nurtured. Music Department faculty professed being very comfortable with Stephen. They see him as a great ally and as a generous collaborator. They are also comfortable with his growing program which does
not pose a threat at this time. A cautionary observation I would make is that as long as the Theatre Studies program remains small and is not a drain on shared resources there will be few problems. A lot of growth, especially unplanned or not openly discussed ahead of time, and a real or perceived resource drain could serve to stress the relationship. But at the current time the two departments seem well placed and eager to work with one another and to support mutually beneficial collaborative projects. This is a great positive for the program so take advantage of it.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT:

COLLEGE SUPPORTED COMMUNITY-BASED PERFORMING ARTS PROGRAMMING AT ST. NORBERT COLLEGE

I confess to a great deal of confusion about this topic, and have struggled about whether to include it at all in this report. But I believe it has direct bearing on Theatre Studies as well as Music Department program offerings. Every St. Norbert College constituent with whom I talked during the visit made reference to it in some way and were usually circumspect if not oblique. I did not meet with the director of the historic community-based performing arts programming.

For my part, I have spent some time looking at the St. Norbert College website and I cannot easily discern what is or is not academic performing arts programming. I think this is a problem. Every offering that happens in the Webb or Walter Theatres is advertised on an equal footing on the website. This should be clarified.

There is a long history of Music Theatre and other performing arts venues at the college that appears to be sanctioned by the college and unless I am mistaken, it all appears to exist outside the academic affairs chain of command and faculty curricular oversight. From what I could figure out this programming is supported by College Advancement. With viable academic programs in place there seems to be a conflict of interest here.

I suggest that vision dialogues begin to take place about all the performing arts organizations and academic programs which exist at the college. There appears to be a lot to celebrate. There also appears to be a substantial performing arts history and tradition, ongoing, that is not integrated with academic programs and which appears to compete on many levels with academic programs. It is possible that because of the high public profile of the types of stage work being made, the historic community-based performing arts organizations may actually serve to suppress the efficaciousness of academic programs and sadly, as purported to me, some faculty development opportunities may have been suppressed as well. There was talk on many fronts, primarily administrative, that Fine Arts should be its own division separate from Humanities. I think there is a lot to resolve first.

The level of circumspection and reticence expressed by all parties regarding this topic felt unhealthy and I perceived a general air of resignation on the part of faculty and staff that
nothing was going to change or could change. This question poses real challenges for long-term success of the new Theatre Studies program so I felt I should mention it.

**CONCLUSIONS:**

After this final paragraph I will handle the rest of the conclusion as sets of bullet points. I will pull those points from the body of the report. On the whole I found the new Theatre Studies BA degree to be in a good place with regard to core curriculum and in a fair place with regard to diversity of electives and frequency of course offering. Production capabilities both in acting and stagecraft areas are a definite point of excellence. Facilities are good and could be judged rather quickly to be excellent given regular amortized maintenance and some strategic upgrades. Staffing levels, faculty and especially support staff are not adequate. Neither are budgets. These deficiencies may stunt diversity and growth of Theatre Studies. They should be discussed as soon as it is feasible. Students are enrolling in the major and there is increased student traffic in courses and productions. The degree is being accepted at the college and Stephen was identified to me by the President as the “new face of theatre” at St. Norbert College. There is a very good relationship with the Music Department with whom the facilities are shared. There is competition from historic college sponsored, community-based performing arts organizations.

**Challenges:**

- Low faculty numbers means a lack of diversity in the curriculum and a challenge to make regular rotations.
- Modest to inadequate production budget support.
- Inadequate staff support for entire Abbot Pennings Hall of Fine Arts is a no go for Theatre Studies to plan growth and expansion.
- Competition from non-academic college supported, community-based performing arts organizations potentially stifling.
- Lack of clarity in college web advertising about categories of performing arts
- Currently no laboratory theatre facility.
- Aging/unreliable/dangerous lighting dimmer racks in Abbot Pennings theatres
- Noisy flylines
- Little to no storage.
- Inadequate costume shop facilities
- Scale of Student Theatre club production season
- Lack of clarity in THEA 250 expectations

**Strengths and positive attributes:**

- Solid core curriculum.
- Ultra-dedicated faculty and staff in Theatre Studies and Music Department.
- Very good production capabilities and show-making abilities as an academic unit.
- History of theatre making at the college—paves way, no need to invent the wheel.
• Small but excited group of student theatre majors
• Good facilities—Walters proscenium theatre, Webb thrust theatre, ability to carve out/renovate experimental flexible space black box theatre.
• Ability to expand “experimental/minimal” production season offerings in renovated black box theatre.
• Newly redone scene shop
• Student employees active in Abbot Pennings Hall of Fine Arts
• Student Theatre club who make theatre regularly and provide opportunities for seniors to complete THEA 450 requirement
• Great ongoing relationship with Music Department and its faculty.

Suggested actions:

• Hire additional adjunct faculty support for a two plus course enhancement annually.
• Hire full time scene shop supervisor.
• Hire full time front of house staff support.
• Add $5000 to Theatre Studies production budget annually and immediately.
• Renovate and bring online the Black Box theatre space on lower level of the Abbot Pennings Fine Art building to expand actor/director-centric theatre making and promote that to students as a REALLY cool thing.
• Inspect/repair black box dimmers, plan lighting instrument and lighting cable stock, inventory and order if necessary curtains for the space to create backstage crossovers and masking.
• Embrace Knight Theatre and help to carefully steer their direction.
• Be clear about what is on the web.
• Identify storage areas in building, or on campus, or in remote area to ease budgetary crunch—manpower will be eased as well because of less need to construct everything every time.
• Work to get Walters and Webb Theatre facilities inspections and upgrades on annual college deferred maintenance schedule.
• Move community based performing arts to a college “community theatre,” ie: a renovated St. Boniface.
• Provost/Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts host a performing arts summit and retreat for long term academic visioning of performing arts at St. Norbert College.
APPENDIX #1

KC/ACTF Show Review Narrative: Hayfever

On April 8, 2011 at 7:30 pm in the Webb Theatre on the Campus of St. Norbert College I experienced a lovely production of Noel Coward’s Hayfever. The Webb Theatre is a thrust auditorium reminiscent of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. There is a vestige proscenium, limited backstage and raked seating on three sides of the apron. The theatre is relatively modern and well appointed and maintained. I was courteously greeted by ushering staff and shown to my seat. A nice preset lighting look was projected on the realistic interior and period properties. The maid Clara was quietly bustling about setting properties in a fashion which made her job in this upper-middle class household very apparent. As I glanced about during preshow, I saw a lighting grid overhead with lighting equipment seemingly well-placed to create the basic lighting looks. A sound score put the audience squarely in the 1920’s and sounded as if it were emanating from original period record players or radios.

What unfolded as the lights came up was delightful. The production was very well directed by professor Stephen J. Rupsch. The actors were uniformly well-prepared and made consistent use of a variety of English dialects appropriate to that character’s social class. Upon questioning during the feedback session it came out that they had been coached by a guest artist in dialect work during the rehearsal process. As a matter of fact the dialect work was so well executed by the cast that it is possible some audience members might have struggled for sensibility of the text—extremely authentic sounding and fluid. Unlike other student performances I have witnessed where people make up a “stage dialect” and struggle for comprehension and consistency of application, the actors in this production employed very well defined regional English dialects and consistently applied them to character work.

As a group the actors were fully committed to their roles. Actors in this production had obviously worked with the director to bring full life to their characterization. Those characterizations were appropriate to the style of literature and to the life of the individual characters. I never lost track of who was who or what the objective of an individual character might be in the production. And collectively the cast told the story in a powerful and connected way. I was enthralled and wanted to see what would happen next. Everyone was fully committed, made appropriate choices and played actions that furthered and fleshed out their character’s spine. The performance was also very funny—a true delight in a comedy!

Particularly and most consistently well played was the role of Judith Bliss by actress Amanda Cormican. I will recommend her as the respondent’s Irene Ryan choice. The director makes his Irene Ryan choice as Cory Estreen who played the role of Simon Bliss. I easily concur with this and point out that the performances of the entire Bliss family of characters was both well cast and well played.
As a respondent I have marked four areas in the “strongly agree” category on response form under the acting heading. As stated previously the entire acting company was fully committed to their performances in every aspect that one would expect. Movement, voice and dialect, physicality, memorization and characterization were all superbly prepared and consistently committed to. There were no obvious lapses or areas of under preparedness apparent in this production. While St. Norbert College has a rather long history of performance training in the region, the theatre degree is a fairly recent curricular innovation for the school. Director Stephen Rupsch and Scenographer April Beiswenger have proven to this respondent that they are running a tight ship and delivering a high quality fundamental theatre education for their majors given the overall quality of this production. Kudos.

It was particularly easy for the educated eye to see the director’s hand in this production in wholly positive ways. To this respondent but more importantly to the average audience member the director’s hand translated to a polished performance and an assurance in the production aspects of this production. This piece had a clear conceptual approach and performance arc. It was played especially well in the first act from beat to beat. I appreciated the use of the character of the domestic, Clara, ably played by Danielle Kapolnek, who fussed about the stage in the preshow and intermission intervals cleaning and re-setting the playing space for the upcoming action. This was clever stage devise on a number of levels—habituating the audience to that kind of action throughout and helping to telegraph the use of the space throughout the performance. I would venture to say based on the strength of performance by the company that the rehearsal and production preparation for this play was adequate and time was very efficiently used.

Though a director, actors and design staff can always use more time, this performance simply did not feel like an opening night. Action was very polished and the environment was fully and carefully delineated. A single criticism about pacing and tempo comes about as a combination of director choice and a cueing error moving out of the intermission into the second act which served to slow down the pace at the top of that act in comparison to Act I. I am sure that the production team cleaned that for the second performance. During the show response I remarked about a small lapse in continuity of action. This revolved around the gramophone and business to turn it on. That went very well, but the actors had not been staged to remove the needle from the record at the conclusion of business. This was a very picky observation, and one necessitated by the fact that all other action actor business had been so very carefully planned. For example the scenographer April Beiswenger provided a staff call button that through actor business worked for every character but that of Richard Greatham. It became an ongoing visual joke that the call button did not work when he pressed it or it worked after the fact. The actor Kevin Gonring built that into his characterization of Richard to great effect and ongoing hilarity.

The design aspects accomplished by or advised by April Beiswenger went a long way to define and to heighten the impact of this production. Student lighting designer Debra Smrz and student sound designer Ryan Penkal had been well prepared and created imaginative and effective designs. Ryan’s sound preparation was notable for its absolute
adherence to a period soundtrack in every regard. There was very little underscoring of
the ongoing action during the performance, but sound was embedded as needed. For
example the soundtrack appeared to emanate from the Victrola during a scene. But
preshow, especially intermission and post show soundscapes put the audience squarely in
to the 1920’s and within the oeuvre of the playwright/musician Noel Coward himself.
Notably one musical selection during intermission featured Noel Coward singing. Ryan
also carefully added appropriate period “noise” like hissing and popping to all the
musical selections so that they sounded as if they were actual phonographs or the radio
playing. The lighting design served the play in every regard, helping to establish the
temporal flow of the production in addition to providing appropriate aspects of mood and
time of day. The lighting design adequately lit the actors. But more importantly Debra’s
design responded to the play’s action and the character interactions. The design also
made its way around the hanging scenic pieces which lined the thrust stage to do so. This
tells me she understood the physical theatre, directionality of instrumentation, throw
distances and design impediments. She spoke to this during the feedback session and my
initial take on the effectiveness of her design was confirmed. She knows her way around
lighting and clearly articulated her understanding of the obstacles she faced and how she
crafted her solutions.

April Beiswenger designed both scenery and costumes for *Hayfever*. The scenic design
made great use of the space providing clear sightlines to the action for the entire audience
as well as providing a solid historic and visual anchor for the production. At center the
interior space was defined by a wall and grand staircase replete with switchbacks and a
larger railed landing. These features were utilized to great effect by the director in
moments when the Bliss family of characters staged “theatricals”—scripted excerpts from
period stage plays in which the character Judith had starred and the Bliss family
periodically and “spontaneously” presented to one another. Resplendent with woodwork
and inset period tiles, the space also featured period stained glass, parquet and tile floor
sections which helped to define rooms in the relatively wall-less environment. Playing
overhead in conjunction with the tile solarium floor were wood-framed stain glass panels
rimming the thrust which helped to define a sense of enclosure in an otherwise open
staging. All furniture props were carefully chosen to evoke a sense of period and culture
as well as the affluence of the Bliss family.

In discussion during the feedback session, April related some of her challenges,
preparation and choices in regard to period costuming. Of all the design aspects I must
admit that costuming was the most hit or miss in the production. Many looks came
through a rental package. Some characters were dead on, and on average the men’s looks
were consistently nailed. Helped along with hair and facial treatments the men looked as
if they had walked right out of period advertising. Nicely done. The lady’s silhouettes
were somewhat less successful overall than were the men. Though there were notable
exceptions such as the clothing for Myra Arundel, especially a period panted look which
the actress’s slender height set off very well. I remember remarking in the feedback
session that she greatly resembled Wallis Simpson. I also remember thinking that Mrs.
Simpson might have appeared in such a sporting look in Monaco after the abdication.
The faculty and staff at St. Norbert’s cover a lot of responsibilities for each production
staged. I do want to stress that it is primarily through comparison to the other very successful design aspects that the costuming appeared less successful. It was not a detriment to the overall production effectiveness.

During the feedback session I tried conscientiously to comment on the work of all individuals in the company--students, faculty, staff, actors, designers and technicians. I will say again that this production was a joy to watch and ultimately easy to respond to in the moment. I admit to feeling a particular sense of trepidation as this was the opening night of the production. But I endeavored to sensitively negotiate the response process to leave the company with the well-deserved sense of accomplishment they had earned through the performance that night. Congratulations on solid work and a great opening night performance.