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On Behalf of Theatre in Rural America

Robert J. Hubbard

Northwestern College - Orange City, rhubbard@nwcsiowa.edu

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On Behalf of Theatre in Rural America

Abstract

This essay is a theatre review with a sense of place: the small-town-rural upper Midwest in the spring of 2008. The author assesses Tim Robbins, *Dead Man Walking*, as staged at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa; Jeff Barker, *Terror Texts*, as staged at Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa; and Adam Long, Reed Martin, and Austin Tichenor, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Abridged*, as staged at Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

About the Author

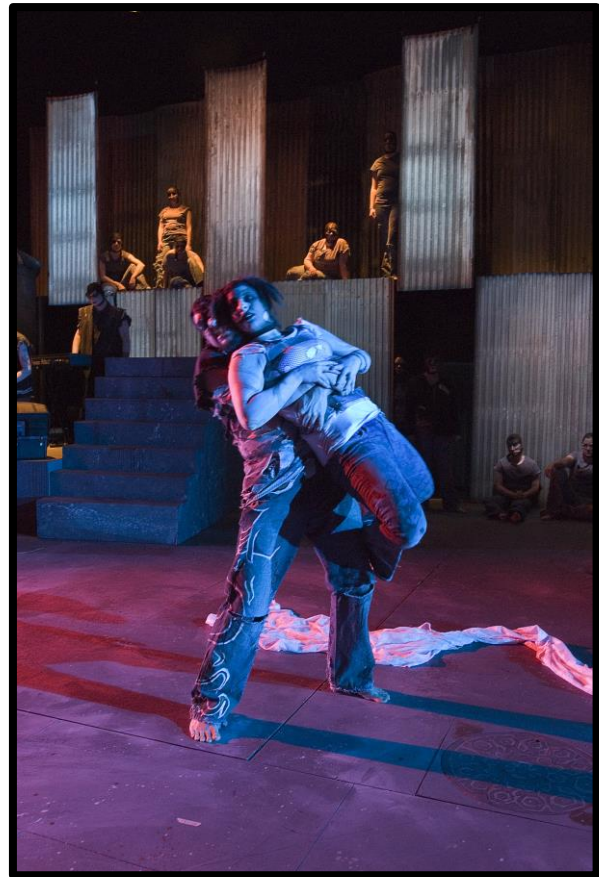
Before coming to Northwestern, Dr. Robert Hubbard worked extensively in both academic and professional theatre as a director, actor, teaching artist, and playwright/adaptor. Among the shows he's directed are an award-winning production of *The Comedy of Errors* and an original stage adaptation of Larry Woiwode's novel *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. Hubbard debuted his original, one-person show, *Dancing with Jimmy*, at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference in New York City in August 2003 and has since performed it in a number of venues. In 2005 he received a fellowship to participate in the O'Neill Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center. He also publishes articles and reviews in numerous academic books and journals.

On Behalf of Theatre in Rural America

by Robert J. Hubbard, Ph.D.

This review essay reflects a thirteen-day window in the spring of 2008.

As a theatre professor at a small liberal arts college in rural Iowa, I live in the heart of America. To many in the larger theatre community, this sparsely populated fly-over country constitutes a mysterious and preposterous cultural prison, a perceived dead-zone of red state artistic starvation. Prior to attending graduate school, I lived and worked in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, by all accounts a thriving arts center with more theatres per capita than New York City. Readers may be surprised to learn that, from my current vantage, I regularly attend more high-quality, challenging, and economically priced theatre than I have in any other place I have ever lived.



Set and scene from *Terror Texts*.
Image from Northwestern College
Public Relations Department.

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So I write this essay to illustrate and celebrate an underappreciated reality of life in rural America: the academic theatre scene. To test this claim, I attended four diverse productions at four different academic theatre programs—all within an hour’s drive of my home. Over the course of only thirteen days during the spring of 2008, I witnessed a piercing social drama (*Dead Man Walking* at Dordt College), an inventive original musical (*Terror Texts* at Northwestern College), a lowbrow political comedy (*The Complete History of America, Abridged* at Augustana College), and a critically acclaimed Irish slasher comedy (*The Lieutenant of Inishmore* at the University of South Dakota). Part review, part logbook, and part meditation on the role of the arts within prairie communities, the following essay supplies one account of the positive impact that subsidized theatre plays have within a democracy.

Death Penalty Drama

My first stop on this rural theatre road trip only involved a fifteen-minute drive from my home in Orange City, Iowa. The Theatre Arts Department at Dordt College in nearby Sioux Center produced Tim Robbins’ stage version of *Dead Man Walking*. As a fan of the film, especially Sean Penn’s riveting performance, I admit to some fear over news of a stage adaptation. Then I heard Sister Helen Prejean, the real life protagonist of the death penalty drama, speak at a theatre conference the previous summer. Her passion, humor, and conviction for this new incarnation of her powerful story excited me to attend Dordt’s Friday evening performance.

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As a play, *Dead Man Walking* used a financially foolish yet socially conscious business model. Rather than focusing on professional theatre, Robbins offers his play exclusively to colleges, universities, and high schools. He does so free of charge provided participating institutions engage the issue of capital punishment on their campuses. In keeping with this requirement, Dordt College supplemented its production with post-show discussions, a special chapel service, and a full college forum on the social justice of the death penalty. First piloted at Jesuit Schools in 2006, the *Dead Man Walking* Theatre Project quickly spread to academic theatre programs across the nation. At the time I write this essay, the official website identifies forty-three recent or current productions.

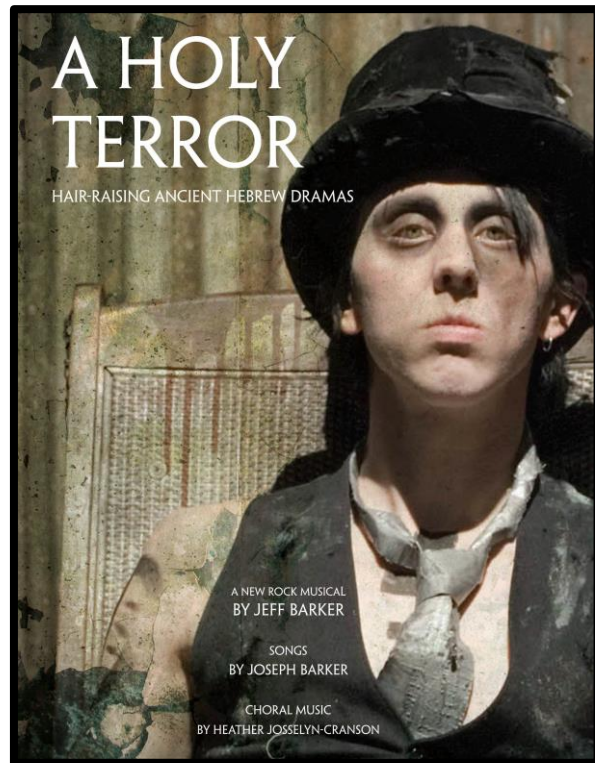
The Dordt College production took place in the barn-like Te Paske Theatre, a large thrust stage that Dordt shares with a local high school. The vacuous space made the creation of intimacy difficult and effective lighting nearly impossible. Even so, visiting designer Eric Van Wyk’s ominous scene design subdued the technical limitations of the space. A tree branch draped with the clothing of convicted killer Matthew Poncelet’s victims loomed over a cold, monochromatic unit set. Van Wyk’s design communicated the institutional cruelty of death row without diminishing the human cost of Poncelet’s heinous crime. Director Jeri Schelhaas, a Kennedy Center Gold Medallion Recipient, demonstrated her skills for coaxing realistic and subtle performances from young actors. In particular, senior Jonathon Shaffstall impressed as the volatile Poncelet, especially in the scene in which he humbly confessed the true nature of his vicious crime. When the

lights dimmed for the final time, an abiding sense of forgiveness and redemption enveloped the silent and moved audience.

R-Rated Bible Stories

The second production on my rural theatre road trip took place the following evening at Northwestern College just six blocks from my home in Orange City, Iowa. In the interest of full disclosure, I teach theatre at Northwestern College, although I was enjoying a sabbatical leave when I wrote this essay. In my absence, and completely without my assistance, Northwestern’s theatre department produced the original musical *Terror Texts* in their beautiful Theora Wilcox England Proscenium Theatre.

Terror Texts served as the newest installment of what director Jeff Barker refers to as “The Ancient Hebrew Plays Project.” Inspired by a recent theological theory that the stories of the Hebrew Bible were originally conceived as dramas, Barker dedicates



Program cover from *Terror Texts*.
Image from Northwestern College Archives.

much of his energy as a director and playwright to bringing these stories back to

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theatrical life. To be frank, *Terror Texts* shares little in common with Sunday school pageants or Veggie Tale treatments. Living up to its billing as “an evening of horror,” audiences witnessed more beatings, rapes, and murders during the two-hour production than in the entire *Scream* film trilogy combined.

The word eclectic best describes the *Terror Texts*’ mixture of original music. Accompanied by an onstage rock band, the cast belted out gravely industrial songs from the stylish mind of composer and lyricist Joseph Barker. Gregorian inspired choral music composed by musical director Heather Josselyn-Cranson furthered the sense of ritualized violence. Barker and Josselyn-Cranson’s powerful musical fusion reached its destructive height during “The Rape of the Concubine,” a riveting, disturbing, and tightly packed sequence that comprised the entire second act.

Unlike *Dead Man Walking*, undergraduate students, not faculty, designed all of the visual elements. Perhaps this explains the authenticity of the neo-grunge landscape. Illuminated by Drew David VanderWerff’s spooky lighting, Vaughn Donahue’s metallic set consisted primarily of corrugated metal, chain-link fencing, and a moving stair unit with a toilet comically topping the landing. Brady Huffman’s disquieting costume and make-up designs, replete with duct tape, frayed denim, tattoo art, and horrible scars, enhanced the post-apocalyptic feel of the visual saga. Other highlights of spectacle included actors rappelling from catwalks, choreography with hip-hop undertones, and a vibrant mosh pit that enveloped the entire front row of the audience at the close of act one.

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Cheeky Comedy

The first week of my rural theatre road trip ushered in death-penalty drama and Biblical horror; seven days later, I continued the trek in search of irreverent political comedy. After a seventy mile drive to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, I arrived at the beautiful campus of Augustana College in time to catch the Sunday matinee of *The Complete History of America, Abridged*. Capitalizing on the enormous international success of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Abridged*, playwrights Adam Long, Reed Martin, and Austin Tichenor employed a similar formula of comic abbreviation. But unlike the literary parody of *Shakespeare Abridged*, this newer effort functioned more as political satire.

A three hander, *History* employed minimal design, relying instead on the comic timing and high energy of its young cast. In roughly one hundred minutes, these enthusiastic college actors raced thousands of years from pre-historic Plymouth Rock to the invasion of Iraq. That the uneven script brimmed with too many unfunny puns and awkward comic rhythms made their job more difficult. But overall the enthusiastic trio succeeded. Director Ivan Fuller kept the text fresh by injecting several new lines drawn from recent news headlines. In a playful, perhaps unintended coincidence that would have made Aristophanes giggle, an actor actually named *Sean McCain* lampooned then-president George Bush near the end of the play.

As is the nature of political satire in the Greek Comedy tradition, lines of decorum got crossed. This is part of the fun and the challenge. Some audience members visibly

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wincing during the endless barrage of genital jokes, more than earning the “recommended for mature audiences” warning printed in the program. Likewise, the abundant anti-Bush missiles fired during the performance drew moans from still smiling members of the conservative South Dakota audience. For my part, I confess to some offense taken over the play’s comic treatment of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination. In this calculatingly tasteless sequence, an actor playing arguably our greatest president ducked under a black trench coat and placed a balloon bearded with magic marker where his head should be. When the actor playing John Wilkes Booth ritualistically punctured the balloon, bright red confetti sprayed the audience. Suffice it to say that nearly everyone else in the audience laughed hysterically.

Irish Splat Slap Stick

The stage violence was less cartoony and far more realistic on the final stop of my rural theater road-trip. My journey completed itself at the University of South Dakota’s opening night performance of Martin McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. While the first three productions took place at small, private liberal arts colleges, *Inishmore* performed in the context of a sizable public university with extensive undergraduate and graduate programs in theatre. During the fifty-minute drive to Vermillion, South Dakota, I observed the prairie landscape transform from the cornfields and hog confinements of northwestern Iowa to the wide open cattle country of the Missouri River Basin. From this

quintessentially cowboy landscape, I then witnessed a gory Irish comedy about torture and terrorism.

Lieutenant proved to be the most graphically bloody production I have ever seen...and also one of the funniest. The plot revolves around a psychotic, self-appointed Lieutenant in an Irish Republican Army splinter group seeking revenge for the accidental death of his beloved cat. The term “black comedy” does not adequately describe the way in which the play farcically portrays torn off toenails, poked out eyeballs, and mutilated kittens. Under Eric Hagen’s understated direction, the actors conveyed the ideal style for a McDonagh play—somewhere between Quentin Terantino and W.B. Yeats. Amidst the comic violence, dialect coach Pricilla Hagen succeeded in helping the young cast relish the surprising poetry pulsing through McDonagh’s word-drunk dialogue.

From a technical standpoint, the production soared. Karl Hermanson’s textured scene design elegantly shifted between a dank torture room, stony outcroppings, and a filthy Irish hovel. In the wrong hands, the graphic violence of *Lieutenant* could prove a logistical nightmare. Special effects/makeup designer Cameron Stalheim and technical director Scott Mollman earned themselves a special place in hell for the authenticity in which they littered the stage with severed limbs and splattered the actors with perfectly timed exploding blood packs. The production ended with the stage literally soaked in red. Through the aesthetic of Irish irony, the comic exaggeration ultimately led perceptive audience members to reflect on the senseless of violence.

Final Thoughts

For reasons I don't quite understand, negative stereotypes often accompany college and university theatre. I once argued with a professional drama critic who would not cover college theatre in her middle-sized market because she said it was “boring, academic theatre” with “inexperienced actors.” So instead, she primarily reviewed community theatre and traveling road shows. Both of these popular forms of entertainment deserve coverage, but not at the expense of college and university theatre. I wish I could have forced that critic to share a ride with me as I attended these four *academic* productions. “Boring” describes very little of what I saw and, while the performers may be “inexperienced,” they acted circles around what I usually see in community theatre; indeed, many of them could hold their own with seasoned professionals. (By the time this essay was published, many of them are.)

Reflecting on the overall experience, a few general observations stand out.

First, this academic theatre was not safe or tame theatre. What is safe or tame about agonizingly watching a realistically staged execution (*Dead Man Walking*), a fat king farcically assassinated on the toilet (*Terror Texts*), a free-for-all political attack on U.S. foreign policy (*The Complete History of America, Abridged*) or an Irish terrorist methodically sawing limbs off the corpse of a recent victim (*The Lieutenant of Inishmore*)? I witnessed all of this and much more in the academic theatre. I did not set out to see shocking or subversive works; I simply went to what was playing nearby within a two-week span. And all four well-attended productions took place in what

pollsters know to be one of the most politically and culturally conservative regions of the nation. To me, this experience typifies an almost utopian synthesis of art, freedom of speech, and democracy.

Second, highly trained theatre artists guided every production. Many of the directors and designers whose work I so admired possess as much or more advanced training as theatre artists who regularly work in the “professional theatre.” To be curt, the artists in academic theatre *are* professionals. As artists/educators, their wisdom and creativity touches the future. Those who *can*, teach.

My final observation deals with accessibility. A person living in a major market could certainly attend four productions in thirteen days, although I doubt many regularly do—other than drama critics. But, depending on ticket prices, such a sojourn could easily cost hundreds of dollars, and that is not even close to Broadway prices. I never paid more than \$10 for a ticket to see these four plays at four academic theatre programs. As any student knowledgeable in theatre history should know, most of the monumental, culture-changing events in the history of theatre have taken place in the *subsidized* theatre. From the Greeks, to the Italian Renaissance, to Shakespeare, to Wagner, subsidy breeds good art. Even though each production I visited was well attended, I feel safe in arguing that none of them would have happened if the audience, and not the academic institution, paid the full cost of production.

If this humble essay has started you thinking more about theatre in higher education, good. How can you participate? You can study theatre in college and be a part

of this important artistic tradition. Or, you can simply support a show at a college or university near you by attending a production. The American College Theatre Festival (<http://www.kcactf.org/>) divides the country to eight regions, each with its own website. The website for your region probably lists upcoming productions in your area.

If you find yourself visiting or living in an underpopulated prairie of rural America, take comfort and pride that you can partake in an on-going rural theatre Renaissance.