

Fear and Loyalty Collide at RIC: What role do our college theater programs play in a crowded performing arts community?



As a theater performance major at Rhode Island College (1988-1992), I was fortunate enough to experience part of what many feel were the “golden years” of the program. Given the choices to attend Emerson or NYU, I chose RIC, not just as a financial fallback, but also because RIC had the reputation as one of the finest theater programs in the region. I quickly found this to be true. The professors and adjunct faculty were experienced, charismatic and knowledgeable, each with their own style and vision. The opportunities offered us, while perhaps not the most diverse, were still more than most of us could experience elsewhere, and the curriculum was challenging enough where the Bachelor of Arts degree was earned through hard work, both in the classroom and on the stage. The students often had chances to take part in productions with faculty members at other theaters and be introduced to working professionals beyond the walls of Roberts Auditorium. These were heady times, with the promise of alumni such as Viola Davis having barely preceded us and fellow students soon to reach their own dizzying heights on Broadway and in film. I was proud to talk about RIC to my former classmates from high school who attended Brown and Harvard and Duke, pitting my educational experiences within my chosen major against any of theirs.

The climate at RIC’s theater department in 2018 could not be more different from when I matriculated 30 years ago. In 1988, the only opportunities to work outside of the educational environment were the longstanding community houses such as Barker and Pawtucket, which still stand today, or a small handful of places catering to children or the dinner theater audiences. Today, there are approximately 60 companies of various levels across the state, some offering attractive stipends, all clamoring for young talent able to fill casts and serve as technical staff. In this new environment, rich with choice for young actors and technicians, what role does educational theater have? What is the relationship between theater departments and the ever-expanding performing arts market surrounding them? At RIC, sadly, the current culture now appears to be one of fear. There is fear of competition for resources, fear that students will bolt and form their own companies, tired of the lack of choice afforded them by the current curriculum. There is fear on the part of the administration and fear from the students, careful to toe the line and pledge loyalty to the department above all, lest they be subject to the threat of sanctions and blackballed from choice acting opportunities.

While a policy of prioritizing school productions first is not uncommon and often justifiable for an institution whose main focus is preparing students for a career in theater and performing arts, RIC goes well above the spirit of that sentiment by forcing students to sign contracts, forbidding them from

taking roles or technical positions at outside theaters without express permission from the administration. Students are required to sign both non-disclosure and non-compete documents and notify the department chair in writing of any intent to even audition for a role in an outside company.

When this “loyalty contract” was brought to my attention in 2016, I was shocked, as were many alumni, as to the state of the environment, so very different from our experiences at RIC. At the time, I began to prepare an article for *Motif* that focused on this issue, and interviewed not only RIC theater faculty, but chairs and faculty of theater programs across the state in order to get an idea of how common this practice may or may not be. When I asked Bill Wilson of RIC about these contracts, which I had already laid eyes on, he denied their existence, claiming that “there may be some paper somewhere to that effect, but I’m not aware of it.” Why the denial, I wondered? What was the motive behind the deception? Other heads at URI, PC and CCRI responded with varying degrees of support for the idea of prioritizing school productions over outside work, but the idea of making students sign an oath was, to them, beyond the pale. I attempted to interview students, who initially were glad to talk to somebody about this practice, but – and this is remarkable – all eventually asked me to leave them out of it for fear of someone at RIC guessing who they were, even when promising anonymity.

As I was preparing that article, the news suddenly broke that then-department chair Jamie Taylor had been indicted for embezzling more than \$60,000 from the school. I decided that publishing my article at the time would feel like piling on to the troubles within a department to which I owed so much gratitude and of which I had such fond memories.

Now, I have received a copy of the current, expanded version of the old contract and I feel that it’s time to open up a discussion on this matter. I do not intend this piece to be a one-off, but rather a series of articles discussing not only the state of affairs at Rhode Island College, but the overall role and responsibility that our colleges and universities have within the larger framework of a thriving and ever-expanding theater community. I have statements from many people, including former RIC faculty and professionals at other institutions, weighing in on this subject. Space prohibits including all of them in this installment, but a couple of them are worth noting here.

Kevin Broccoli, RIC theater alumni and current artistic director of Epic Theatre Company: “It’s been disheartening to me over the years to watch the theater program at RIC continue to be combative toward many of the other theaters in the community, including ones run by graduates of their program. I’ve found that their emphasis seems to be on isolating their students as much as possible to prevent them from realizing that the program is no longer the one that produced Viola Davis and other successful alumni, but is, instead, a program that exists to prop up a select few students while ignoring the vast majority of others. I hope that one day things will change, but for the moment, things seem to be getting worse.”

William Hutchinson, professor emeritus and former RIC theater department chair: “This kind of prohibitive policy, when suggested, has always caused a dilemma for me. This policy is often found in BFA, MFA or conservatory types of theater programs. It really should not be part of a liberal arts theater curriculum.”

Leonard Schwartz, RIC Theater alumni, artistic director of Daydream Theater and chair of RISE Playhouse: I graduated from RIC in 2000. When I first arrived there, I had some of the most amazing experiences and it shaped my life. We were encouraged to experiment, and I chose it over Emerson. I made the right choice. I was and am still proud of my time there. I’m not proud of what my

school has turned into. I have a copy of the contract ... I have it on good authority that the copy I have was handed to the actress who gave it to me. I know this because they told her she would have to drop out of the show she was in for me. She questioned it. She and I talked it through while RIC faculty were supposed to make a "ruling" whether to allow this exception, because she was cast before that paper was decided upon. It was disgusting, especially because this is the fifth time someone from RIC discouraged an actor to drop one of my shows. Or at least five that I know about. But it's all fine. Nobody ever does. And their reason? 'The RIC theater department is a joke anyway.'

Many others spoke to me, both in support of prioritizing student involvement in their curriculum and questioning the state of affairs at RIC today. The main issue, however, and the reason I feel compelled to start this discussion now, is that a culture of fear still pervades the department. Two years later, I still encounter students afraid to even speak to me anonymously about this topic. A few are holding out, under constant pressure from faculty, to turn in their signatures, under a vague but thinly veiled threat of future punishment.

While I have heard from many professionals in the field (whose thoughts will be revealed as time goes on), I am eager to hear from both students and theater professionals alike. Please send me your thoughts at: info@wbctheater.org or directly to *Motif*. I hope that an open and honest discussion will prompt some enlightened thought on how our colleges and universities relate to our unique and thriving performing arts community. Fear has no place on a college campus.

Terry Shea is the theater editor of Motif as well as president of the West Bay Community Theater and an active member of the RI theater community as an actor, designer, producer and director. He also serves on the boards of the Greenwich Odeum and the North Kingstown Arts Council.