

Jennifer Schlueter_ Making Fou...nd Text into Theatrical Events

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SPEAKERS

David Staley, Eva Dale, Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Jennifer Schlueter



Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.



Jennifer Schlueter 00:32

Jennifer Schlueter is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theater at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences, where she also holds a courtesy appointment in the Department of English. Her plays, many of which transform found text into theatrical events, have been presented at the Little Theatre in Seattle, Cleveland Public Theatre, LexArts in Lexington, Kentucky, the American Theatre Company of Chicago, the Available Light Theatre of Columbus, Tristan Bates in London, and on BBC Radio 4. She is the Joint Artistic Director of the Forward Company, and she has been honoured with several teaching awards, including Ohio State's prestigious Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching, the Ratner Distinguished Teaching Award, and the Distinguished Undergraduate Research Mentor Award. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Schlueter. Thanks for having me. As I just noted in your introduction, in your work, you transform found text into theatrical events. Give us an example of this and tell us what this means. Sure. So yes, one of the things that I'm fascinated by is a taking material that didn't think it was going to perform, and making it do that. So I love to get into an archive and find stories and texts that can come together to create a theatrical event. So for example, one of my most recent pieces was a play called Patience Worth, which was based on this truly bizarre 28-volume transcription of stories that a woman from St. Louis at the turn of the 20th century would tell while she was sitting at a Ouija board. She would track language around there, and she really believed that the spirit was coming through her and telling stories, so that material was sitting there. But I'm not interested in crafting a sort of biographical drama, I don't really

want to reproduce that kind of work. I'm interested in instead of taking that text and finding out what else it can do. So with a great group of collaborators, including Vita Berezina-Blackburn from over at ACCAD as well as members of my own theatre company, we created what is more of a performance event with language than a traditional play, I would say. Well, and since you say you work in archives, as someone who's in a history department, my impulse would be, I guess, to turn that story into some sort of written account, but you're talking about a very different kind of representation. Yeah, I love hearing language in people's mouths live and on stage that was actually originally intended to be written. So it was intended to be absorbed through the eyes and directly into the brain, so there's some intricacies to language that is spoken that we wouldn't have otherwise. That I think is just gorgeous to hear. But yeah, I'm not interested in trying to reproduce the work of a historian. I'm interested in truth for sure, but maybe less interested in fact. So what's happening in the archive, when we bring it together with this particular group of people in this particular moment, suddenly starts to tell a story that we want to tell, or that we need to tell, I suppose. So I have interviewed a number of scientists on this podcast, each of whom oversees a laboratory. You are the founder of The Lab Series, which you describe as a performance research laboratory. So first of all, tell us something about the lab, and what is performance research? That's great. So The Lab Series is an institution I founded in 2011 in the Department of Theatre, and its little tagline is "a department nurtured student driven performance research laboratory". So what we're doing in what is really a small space that has really limited technical capacity is making room for students to make their own work, to not wait for a gatekeeper to say, here you go, you're welcome to try this now. The other thing that's true, I think, for performance, is that the only way to get better at any art is to do it, to sketch if you're an artist, to practice your scales if you're a musician. But for theatre makers, so many people are required to make an event happen, you don't get a lot of chances to try it before it's ready for the world to see it. So in a performance research laboratory space, we prioritize glorious, brave failure, frankly, what do I want out of the lab series, and we produce at least 16 pieces a year. It's a place for students to try something and say, now I see, here's how I will do it differently next time, and in all those works a research question is embedded. So students come to the lab series not just to produce their one act play that's been in their brain for forever, but to find out, potentially, how best this particular moment can be communicated to an audience. So we take small snippets and try and figure out how to help the students make that work more legible than next time, where they're first embarking on their work, and we are their launch pad. Give us an example of that. What sort of failure? What sort of problem or research question would a student engage in, give us a specific case? Yeah, so I'm thinking right now of a piece called MAPS that an undergraduate named Genevieve Simon produced, maybe four years ago. And it was a solo work in which she wanted to investigate her own autobiography. She grew up sort of multilingual, she was living in Germany for a long time in the United States, and she had a sort of soft, focused idea in her head that mapping was a way to understand that physical experience. But, she didn't know how to make a map dramatic, how to do anything besides hold it up in front of an audience. And so she got in the space with some design driven students, and they figured out three or four different options for how to make a map, something that could be embodied. So the lab series was there to give her support to do those experiments. And then she sort of rolled that work into a piece that she ultimately took out to fringe festivals in New York and elsewhere. Does this describe your own creative process, this the genesis of the plays that you write and produce? I am very much a fan of coming into a rehearsal space with smart makers with an idea that is like 70%, there 71%, that we're not... it's not a whole piece yet. It needs the time percolating with other collaborators and it needs time to undergo experiment to figure out what it actually is. And that's exactly what happened with my piece North, which was based on the work of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Charles Lindbergh's wife, but also a writer and a creator in her own right. It's a piece that we created,

and we staged it in Chicago, to great reviews. But then, we pulled back and revised it and, and revisited it and workshopped it some more, and then we took it off Broadway. And then we pulled back and revised it and look at it some more, and then it went to the BBC Radio. So it's a piece that steps through various levels of development, instead of a sort of one and done model, which is pretty common in my field. So when you say collaborators in such an environment, who are your collaborators, are they actors, are they set designers? All of the above. And they are also people who identify in lots of ways. So in the field of theater, a structure can exist that has people into one category or another, I'm just an actor, I'm just a director, I'm just a props designer. I'm interested in working with people who are doing a lot of different things so that when we're in the room, my set designer, for example, Brad Steinmetz also happens to have a pretty brilliant mind for dramatic structure. So not only is he thinking about the visuals, he's doing the work of what we might call a dramaturg in my field.

D

David Staley 08:12

Give us a definition of a dramaturg.

J

Jennifer Schlueter 08:14

A dramaturg is a person whose job it is to be the sort of guardian of the play and the, its closest friend in the room, so the person who keeps an eye on what the play seems to be doing, what a playwright seems to be after, as opposed to what a given production wants to do to or with that play. So you say you'd like to surround yourself with people who don't fit in single categories. Does that describe you? I think obviously it does, because you know what, as I was preparing to come in here today, I was like, oh, what is it that I do again? Like, I think all of my work is coming from a certain methodological set of interests. But certainly, it's the case that I'm interested in playing that out in different ways. So I am every bit as much engaged in this kind of creative investigation in my own work as I am in The Lab Series as I am in the classroom, as I am in the work that I publish. So I will actually ask this of a number of people as scientists and creatives. So, I'd like you to excavate the genesis of your ideas, where do ideas come from for Jennifer Schlueter? Yes. I think ideas, for me, often come from the thing that I'm not looking directly at. So for example, the reason why my play, *Patience Worth*, why I ever thought to investigate that archive is not because I was actively seeking rich archives about 20th century women, but because I was at the dentist office and there was a *Smithsonian Magazine* next to me, right? So there's things that just sort of sprout up that you sort of hold on to and percolate with. But I also really believe that a lot of... one of the reasons why I want, I am so passionate about working in higher education is because some of my ideas don't come from my students, but they certainly are germinated by them, that being in the classroom with bright young and people helped me continue to push forward.

J

Janet Box-Steffensmeier 10:04

And Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for the Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as top 25 programs with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of the Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at artsandsciences.osu.edu.

J Jennifer Schlueter 10:29

You have organized a Pedagogy of Civic Practice and Public Performance Conference, what are the themes and outcomes of this conference? Yeah, so this was in November of this fall, and it was generously supported by UCAT and UITL. And the goal of this work was to bring together many people that I could see doing work on campus that seem to speak to each other, that had to do with deploying creative processes, like performance, but also like creative writing, or other kinds of art making in public facing ways that were not about showing the work in a gallery or in a theater, that was about using the tools of theater, in therapeutic contexts, for example, or in other kinds of community based contexts. So this two day summit really brought together people from across campus and around the Columbus community to think together about how it is that we do that work, and more importantly, how it is that we could teach other people to do that work. Because for a lot of us, the idea of taking the skills of performance into a hospital room, for example, to work with someone with dementia is an instinctive act, but not a trained act. And there are, there are best practices in this field that I think many of us across campus are holding little pieces of, and I was really interested in beginning a conversation around bringing us together. What transpired from the conference, what sorts of connections, what sorts of results? Well, out of that two day conference, we're moving really directly in the spring semester to developing a new graduate certificate in this very subject area that's going to build on those expertises. But it also has been the sort of foundation for new collaborations and new projects that I think are going to also, I'm hoping, will be playing out through things like the discovery themes.

D David Staley 12:16

Such as...?

J Jennifer Schlueter 12:17

Such as, for example, I really interested in the work of Amy Youngs, who has been doing work over in the Art Department, using virtual reality to help trees talk to us, what a lovely idea. And her methods, her way of doing this work can tell me a lot even though I'm not a visual artist, so we're interested in sort of supporting each other, but then also pulling pieces together. So as part of this conference, you use the term "practice as research". What does that mean, practice as research? Yeah, it's a relatively new methodology in higher education in the United States, though it's got long roots in the Anglophone world, and in Australia, and in the U.K. It's a way of approaching the work that artists do as research, not simply to substitute to say, well, the play that I write is my research, but rather to say, what is it that art making can help us investigate? So, how can we embed research questions in that work? How can the tools of art making push discovery forward in new ways? And there's a couple of really great books out there about it, but really, that methodology is beginning to boil up in my own department, and across departments of performance in the United States. So you're working on a book titled *The Bravest Choice: A Poetics of Courage for the 21st Century Classroom*. You talk about how critical courage is in student work. What do you mean by courage in this context, and why is it so critical? Well, and the work that I'm undertaking is in collaboration with Dr. Elizabeth Wellman, who's an Associate Faculty member here, who's a brilliant teacher, and one of the things that both of us have discovered is that bringing students into a performance classroom,

into an Introduction to Acting classroom as part of the general education demands courage. For many, many people, public speaking is a horrifying thing to undertake scarier than being burned alive. And so, there's something that performance asks of its students that is grounded in a kind of courage. And we started from that thought and sort of expanding outwards, because we are realizing that in our own work, the most important thing that we can teach, I think, is not a content area. I'm happy that students learn from me when Shakespeare was born and when he died, for example, but what I can really teach them how to do in my classroom is how to work together to make something and to be okay with that pushing them outside of their comfort zone, and to be okay with that not always working out the way they intended it to do that. A lot of what happens in art making classrooms is actually grounded in courage of various sorts, and what is courageous for one student is not what courage looks like for another. So for some of the students in my playwriting classes, the most courageous thing they could do is not to push forward and share their ideas more, but to quiet down a little bit and to hold their ideas back, that it takes courage to make space for other people. So what Elizabeth and I have been doing is meeting with teachers from various fields who do this kind of work. We're undertaking a series of interviews, and we're building a kind of study around that. Maybe it's unfair to say, but is there a courage deficit in our schooling? I think that there is, and some of the research seems to suggest that there is, o that courage, at least, is the thing that is least measurable. I mean, of all the sort of soft skills, it's a tough one to quantify. And I think we know that our students who come through the current school system are really good at taking tests, are really good at trying to do things right, and asking them to actively attempt to not do things right can really rock them. It's one of the things that an arts classroom can offer.

D

David Staley 16:04

It sounds counterintuitive, that failure is actually okay, in fact, that failure is something that we can we can learn from. That's not something that students have sort of been taught, failure is the worst possible thing, right? What are the benefits of failure to an artist to a creator to a maker?

J

Jennifer Schlueter 16:21

Well, I think that on the one level, there's the sort of happy accident, that version of failure where you thought you were making a play about this, but it turns out you making a play about that. And you learn that because the first draft was not well received, that there's that kind of happy accident. But I think more than that, making good friends with failure allows you to stay at the desk longer to stay in the studio longer, to be comfortable with doing work that you know, will not be the final product that someone's going to look at and applaud you for. It breeds tenacity, I think. And that, above all, is what I see my students craving.

D

David Staley 16:58

Tell me about your own experiences with courage, or failure. I mean, there's failure, right? Um, I don't know who said it, that we should all publish our CVs of failure. That if we all circulated the CV that showed all the grants we went after that we didn't get, all the requests that we made that were turned down, then we would actually see what it takes to build a career. For me, it's required a fair amount of courage to find a place for the kind of work I want to do, and

especially the kind of engagement with students that I think is important, within a Research 1 university, it means you get a push to have that work seen as valuable, on par with a book or other kinds of discovery, because I think it actually is part of what we need to be doing here. And that, that has required a fair amount of grit from me.

J Jennifer Schlueter 17:47

You are exploring the podcast as a new or, actually, an old frontier in performance. As someone with an obvious interest in podcasts, what can you conclude about the podcast as performance? I'm relatively late to this party, obviously, because the podcast, it has been a sort of phenomenon in the United States, I mean, for the last, you know, decade or so. But the long history of radio drama stretches past us and the long history of radio as a form that reaches directly into somebody else's ears and heart and soul has been sitting there in front of us for so long. So for me, I'm really compelled by the ways people, like Josie Long with Short Cuts, are taking a form that we thought we knew how it functioned, and instead turning it towards...she says her podcast, which comes out of the BBC, is interested in found sound and short encounters. The work of the Kitchen Sisters, for example, they're collaging together material out of archives, but also in a very present tense way. They're weaving these gorgeous sound tapestries that we can all access for free now, as long as we have an iPhone somewhere available to us and an access to the iStore. So, I'm interested in how live performance can move in that direction. Theater is a handcrafted product, it takes an immense amount of time, and that's one of its beauties. But, I'm interested in finding ways to take that same work, put it through a microphone and get it out in different ways. Well, maybe you could explain for us the differences between performance or a play that you've done for the stage, and I listed in your introduction a lot of these, but then also you've done a radio play for BBC Radio - what are the, what are the differences or the challenges between those two different forms of theater? Oh, yeah. One of the things that I learned by sitting in the booth, watching the actors do the work of North for the BBC, was that I was able to get the small sounds, the tiny things that you have to find a way to make very large onstage and make them legible. The stage relies on gesture to tell stories and the technical...

D David Staley 19:56

Physical gestures, the movement of my body.

J Jennifer Schlueter 19:58

Yeah, and the text is right in the middle of that. But for a radio drama, we could go in to just the sound of the voice and achieve the same ends, but in a just a profoundly different way. And that just sort of opened up a ton of things for me as a maker. But also, I had a lot of misconceptions going in as well. I thought, how on earth on the radio are people going to know that these characters are walking through a door, how are they going to know that? And I got to see what true expertise looks like because they just do it, they just do it, you open the door, and you can hear enough to know the story. So, I simply learned how close things are, as well. Writing for radio, I assume, different for writing for the stage?



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David Staley 20:40

So what's next on your research horizon?

J

Jennifer Schlueter 20:40

The next thing for me is to get this new graduate certificate built, and then I'm currently undertaking an adaptation of a young adult novel called *Wildwood* for Grand Street Theatre in Montana. *Wildwood* is a novel that was written by Colin Meloy, the lead singer of the Decemberists and illustrated by his wife. And he grew up in this beautiful, beautiful town in Montana that now is taking the books and we're turning them into a sort of series of plays. So I'm doing my first real young adult play right now, which has its own kind of learning experience. Yes, because writing for radio is something closer to writing for television or film, in that you are encouraged to, and you can easily move locations with a blink of an eye that... you can't do that on stage, that's not what the stage is for. So that kind of flexibility of time and space, suddenly, the doors were really, really, really open to a lot of things. And the ways sound can evoke emotion in ways that the stage simply can't. Have you done that before, have you taken a book and sort of translated it into a play? I have, I've done a couple of adaptations in the past. In one case, I adapted a book called *Annelie in the Depths of the Night*, and in another case, I adapted a play, *The Coast of Illyria*, which was written by Dorothy Parker and her young friend, Ross Evans. I adapted that into a streamlined play form that we produced here in the Department of Theatre.

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David Staley 22:10

Tell us a little bit about that process, of taking a novel and translating it into a play?

J

Jennifer Schlueter 22:17

Well, the two forms are so different, right? So in a novel, the beautiful thing about fiction writers, and I'm just not one of them, is that they are delighted to spend time describing everything that can be seen and felt. They're such tactile things, novels, and the theater tells its stories through dialogue, and it compresses time and space. So part of my job in adapting from what is like a 500 and some page novel to what's going to run for about an hour on stage is to find ways to distill the essence of that book, to find its sort of spine, its core, and build everything out from that. But the other thing is that the job of adaptation is not simply to take this thing and find an equal version of it in this other form. Part of it is to say, how does this source material best function in the theater, or what are things that the source material is offering that it doesn't pursue, that the theater could, in fact, amplify? There's a whole lot of birds in the book, they're everywhere, and I'm right now in the middle of finding ways to make birds and bird sound and feathers, a tactile part of the stage world, when they really aren't a part of the book, if that makes sense.

D

David Staley 23:29

How is that going to happen, how are you going to make that tactile? Or are you still working that through?

J Jennifer Schlueter 23:34

Definitely still working that through. But I think one of the ways that we can do that work really well on stage is in projection, but I also think that we're gonna find ways to drop some things into the audience, so.

D David Staley 23:45

Jennifer Schlueter. Thank you.

J Jennifer Schlueter 23:47

Thank you so much, this was fun.

E Eva Dale 23:49

Voices is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler.