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Inside Portland's Theatre Scene

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Inside Portland's

Here's an experiment: take English, theatre, nursing, accounting and communications majors who hail from Oregon, Washington, Illinois and Japan. Meet at Linfield's Portland Campus for the month of January to study contemporary drama. Read the works of 11 modern playwrights, from Henrik Ibsen to Yasmina Reza. See six productions at theaters across Portland. Talk with professional actors, directors, designers, stage managers, educators, marketers and drama critics. Write a review of a new play every week. Discuss.



Daniel Pollack-Pelzner

Daniel Pollack-Pelzner is assistant professor of English at Linfield. In addition to teaching, he leads alumni groups to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and is the scholar-in-residence for the Portland Shakespeare Project. He helped to edit the new Norton Shakespeare and is writing a book about Shakespeare adaptations. He will offer Contemporary Drama on the Portland Campus again in January 2014.

My motivation for the drama course was simple. Portland has a vibrant theatre scene. Linfield has a wonderful campus in the heart of Portland. Why not put the two together? I teach lots of plays in my literature classes (Shakespeare's especially), and I'd seen how much more deeply students could engage with drama when they experienced a live performance – working on a production in Linfield's terrific theatre program or catching a show at a playhouse nearby. A January Term course, "Contemporary Drama," offered a chance to explore theatre outside McMinnville without the toll of a late-night commute back home. So off to Portland we went.

And what a welcome we received. The kind staff on the Portland Campus set us up with a well-equipped classroom, parking spots and rooms in the dorms. Some students chose to live with their families in the Portland area or crash with a friend in town; others stayed in the northwest Portland Campus housing and strolled to our morning discussions in their pajamas. The streetcar (free with a Linfield ID) whisked us downtown after our first meeting to sample Portland's famed streetcart fare. (Ethiopian curry – yum!) And for a \$120 course fee (the price of a single ticket on Broadway), the dean's office helped us score tickets for every student to

six hot new shows.

The plays on our list all tackled social issues – from military heroism and teenage alienation to education reform and the culture of cooking. So our class discussions focused on theatre as a medium that reflects and transforms a community's values. In our morning sessions on the Portland Campus, students debated the ethical ambiguities of *Doubt*, an evocative parable of the fight between teachers, priests and parents for the soul of a lonely boy. They researched the background of *Angels in America*, a witty, devastating exploration of personal identity and collective responsibility in the wake of the AIDS crisis. They acted out scenes from *The Laramie Project*, which powerfully documents a small town's response to a horrific murder. Then, after a lunch and afternoon break, they'd hop on the streetcar or pile into a carpool and head to the evening's show.

I had high hopes for the quality of the productions we saw, but I hadn't expected how much we'd get to experience beyond the performances themselves. Cast after cast stayed to talk with us after the final curtain. Downtown at the Portland Center for the Performing Arts, we discussed the effect of new education standards with the cast of *A Noble Failure*, a world premiere about teachers struggling to connect with students as administrators demanded more accountability. Crammed into the tiny

theatre scene

Shoobox Theater in Southeast Portland, the leads in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, a timely satire of military ideals, told us how they found the humor in Shaw's social critique. At the Gerding Theater in the Pearl District, the sole actor in *I Love to Eat*, a one-man show about the Portland-born food celebrity James Beard, let us taste his homemade onion sandwiches, adapted from Beard's own recipe.

Many of these bonus experiences came from connections to Linfield alumni in Portland. Jeff Seats '77, the resident set designer at Artists Repertory Theatre, showed us the fabulous circus panels he'd created for *The Lost Boy*, a world premiere about the media frenzy over America's first case of kidnapping for ransom. Another Linfield graduate, Bailey Maxwell '12, served as assistant stage manager for that production and gave us a backstage tour after the show. At Portland Center Stage, Mandy Morgan '06 shared how she'd gone from studying psychology at Linfield to managing the marketing program at a professional theater.

"I loved the practical aspect of what we were learning," Hillary Krippaehne '14 told me after the class ended. "We got to meet people and create connections that will help us when we graduate."

Other benefits came from our Portland location. Since Linfield's campus is around the corner from the *Willamette Week*, Portland's alternative paper, the drama critic popped by to offer a workshop on reviewing plays. We met the critic for *The Oregonian* at the lobby of a theatre up the street from his office to talk about drama as an agent for social change. Students who had never written a theatre review before the course got to discuss the craft with professionals

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— and when I passed a few student reviews along to the theatres, the directors told me that they were among the most perceptive appraisals they'd seen. Our students were finding their voices in a civic conversation about the power of drama.

They were finding their feet in the big city as well. For the first theatre outing, I gave students a detailed route map, nervous that they'd get lost, but by the end of the month, they were venturing off on their own to see experimental theatre at Portland's Fertile Ground festival. One student, Alex Everakes '16, chose to spend his afternoons volunteering at a homeless shelter. He had come to Linfield from Chicago in part for the prospect of being near Portland, and now he was getting a chance to explore its urban offerings. After our course ended, Mariko Kajita '15 returned to a leading role in the spring Linfield play; Wesley Allegre '14

told me that after working so hard on his weekly play reviews, he was now getting praise from his anthropology professor for his prose style; and Hillary got back in touch with the *Willamette Week* critic to discuss post-graduate plans. "This class pushed me outside of my comfort zone," Hillary said. "And I am very thankful for that."

The students grew tremendously in their understanding of drama and its potential to inform contemporary debates. They became more independent as they gained confidence navigating a city. And they learned from our alumni about a range of career options that would allow them to draw on their liberal arts training. This is an experiment I'm eager to repeat. 🍷

— Daniel Pollack-Pelzner

