MISSION

The Department of Theatre Arts aspires to be first among centers which develop new theatre works and theatre artists primarily for the profession rather than the academy. We seek to be a source of well trained artists who are in demand in the contemporary theatre and who can take the art of the theatre in new directions. We seek to develop the artistic leaders of the future.

Because theatre is a collaborative art, we are committed to maintaining programs in the six major disciplines required to produce a play: Acting, Directing, Design (including Lighting, Scenery, and Costumes), Playwriting, Stage Management and Dramaturgy. A theatre company is like an orchestra; to eliminate any of these areas would compromise the training in the remaining programs and prevent the department from fulfilling its mission. Students must develop specialized skills in their respective disciplines while learning about all the other fields and how to collaborate with each other. The curricula of all programs are fundamentally intertwined, with actors sharing some classes with playwrights, designers with directors, etc.

The arts are among the great strengths of the University of Iowa and theatre brings together students from every arts discipline to create works for the stage. They learn from each other and present new works of art for the University community. Graduate students in theatre, like those from the other arts disciplines, are also very active in outreach activities around the state.

ADMISSION PROCESSES AND CRITERIA

Student demand is generally high. Acting, Directing, Design, and Stage Management recruit through the University/Resident Theatre Association (U/RTA), which holds national auditions for more than three dozen schools. Through those auditions, students are accepted before they formally apply, so the number of applications to the University does not reflect demand. The main criteria for acceptance are artistic talent, aptitude for new work and potential for growth. Academic success is considered but is not primary, so GREs are not necessary for admission except in the Dramaturgy program. Acting auditions about 700 people and makes about 22 offers to fill 14-16 spots every three years. Two-thirds to three-quarters of those who accept are first-choice candidates. Several members of each class are members of racial minorities. Directing considers about 100 dossiers for four positions every three years. Two or three are first-choice candidates and the others are second choices. Geographical and gender distribution are good but few if any members of racial minorities apply. Design considers about 200 students per year, interviews about 60, and makes offers to 20 who express interest in Iowa, half of which are accepted. Three enroll every year. Because of our location and funding levels, it is difficult to compete for the top-tier students in design. There are at least 36 schools recruiting among those 200 students. Of those 200, only about 9% are racial minorities, and the department has not had sufficient funding to recruit them successfully. Stage Management screens 25-30 students per year to fill two or three positions. Like Design, it makes offers strategically. Half the students
who accept Stage Management offers are first-choice candidates. Diversity follows national averages: women outnumber men 10/3; 2/13 are international students.

Playwriting and Dramaturgy do not recruit through U/RTA. **Playwriting** receives 60-70 applications per year, makes 5-6 offers, and accepts an average of four students. Given Iowa’s reputation as “the Writing University,” and the strength of the program in new play development, it has a high success rate in recruiting a top-quality, diverse student body. The main criterion for acceptance is writing talent, but academic preparation is also seriously considered. **Dramaturgy** screens 6-10 applications and enrolls 1-2 students per year. It competes with PhD as well as MFA programs but always succeeds in recruiting first and second choices. The GRE is required.

**Financial Support.** Nearly every graduate student in Theatre has a teaching or research assistantship. About half are 25% and most of the remaining are 37.5%. None are 50%. Four students a year receive Iowa Arts Fellowships and these are very helpful in recruiting. Minority scholarships are difficult to obtain, in part because the Graduate College schedule for allocation doesn’t mesh well with the department’s recruiting calendar. Most students teach General Education courses: Art of the Theatre, Theatre and Society, Playwriting 1 and 2, and Basic Acting 1 and 2 (a total of over 800 students per year); others teach sections of required courses for Theatre majors (a total of about 200 students per year). A few students work in the scene and costume shops, in public relations, and in other support or teaching fields.

Most students receive some scholarship aid from department Foundation accounts. These range from $600 to $3,500. In 2009-10 the department provided about $48,000 to about 25 students for an average award of just under $2,000. The average theatre graduate student, then, makes about $10,000 from a TA or RA appointment and $2,000 from a scholarship, for a total of $12,000.

**PROGRAM OUTCOMES**

Iowa’s MFA in Theatre Arts is a three-year program and more than 90% of the students complete their degree within that time. Financial support is limited to three years. Theatre students compete effectively for honors and disciplinary recognition during their studies. Playwriting students are accepted into prestigious residencies (e.g., at the O’Neill Playwriting Center) and have their plays produced around the country; dramaturgs present papers at national conferences. During the summer actors are cast in productions throughout the country, and directors, stage managers and designers work professionally.

For decades alumni from the department have taken leadership positions in the entertainment field and have won awards at every level. Overall, about 75% of designers and stage management alumni sustain a professional career. About half the playwriting alumni receive productions or readings at nationally prominent theatres and the other half gets their work presented at smaller venues. Most dramaturgy and playwriting graduates teach at some point in their careers. Employment prospects for actors are more difficult since ninety percent of the membership of Actors’ Equity Association is unemployed. Still, many join small companies and others work in major companies, in film and in television. Some directing graduates freelance, or start their own theatres, some take teaching positions, and some enter doctoral programs. Given the harsh realities of the professional theatre, all these placements are appropriate.
PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Size: The program is a very good size, with about 48 students; an increase to 50-52 would improve the programs in design and stage management, but such an increase would require additional assistantships. Faculty time and resources are stretched thin because every student receives extensive mentoring from not just one but several faculty members.

Comparison: MFA programs in Theatre are not nationally ranked. An informal comparison with other major institutions (Big Ten, Pac Ten, Ivy League and others) might result in the following: Playwriting – the very highest; Directing: Very high; Acting, Stage Management, Design and Dramaturgy: the top third.

Strengths and weaknesses: The department’s major strengths are that it has a unique focus (new work) and is committed to the art of collaboration. We attract students, faculty, and guest artists who share that commitment. Our roster of guest artists consistently includes some of the most innovative and exciting people working in theatre today. Our faculty/student ratio is excellent so students are given extensive individual attention. The Playwriting and Acting programs are particularly strong in bringing diverse students to campus, and the Playwriting and Directing programs are recognized leaders nationally. The Stage Management program is particularly successful at serving the entire production program, and all stage managers work professionally after graduation. We are blessed with an excellent, unusually compatible, and diverse faculty. Thanks to a number of major upgrades in recent years, and despite the recent flood, our facilities for theatre production are excellent.

Our major weaknesses are geographical and financial. Iowa is a considerable draw for writers, but performers often seek a school in a metropolitan area or one with a formal connection to a professional theatre. The funding packages we offer are sometimes too low to make up for our relatively isolated location.

Potential growth and opportunities: We have no plans to increase the size of the existing graduate program. In collaboration with the Division of Performing Arts we hope to create new interdisciplinary courses (and possibly programs) in Digital Arts, Music Theatre and Arts Administration. Such plans are intertwined with the upcoming Campaign for the Arts, supported by the UI Foundation.

CONCLUSIONS

The department’s distinguishing features are: (a) a unique focus on new work; (b) a belief in the importance of collaboration; (c) a long tradition as a supportive home for artists; (d) an outstanding international reputation especially in the field of playwriting. The department will remain strong as long as financial resources are sustained, and will grow stronger if aid packages are increased. It will gain more national visibility as all the arts on campus (including Hancher Auditorium and the Museum) work together to create new interdisciplinary opportunities. There is every reason to believe this will happen as new facilities and resources arise from the devastation of the flood.