

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE

Advisory for Students Considering the Ph.D. in Theatre

Introduction

The Ph.D. in Theatre has a long and distinguished history in American higher education. Holders of the Ph.D. have built formidable records of achievement across the entire range of theatre specializations. Obtaining a Ph.D. means becoming expert in the methods and subject matters of research-based scholarship. This commonality produces capacities for multiple applications of approach and method in various disciplines and careers. Gaining the Ph.D. and using the knowledge and skills it develops means engagement with a world of thought and action rich in history and full of promise. It means both joining and extending an intellectual adventure that illuminates and builds the entire field.

The Ph.D. in Theatre, however, is always in a state of evolution. New ideas are always a factor. Changes in higher education affecting funding, teaching positions for Ph.D. graduates, and the purposes for theatre and theatre study in specific institutions are just a few examples. In this dynamic situation, it is important to be able to ask good questions of yourself and others. If you are considering whether Ph.D. study is right for you, this brief paper presents information you should have and lists issues you will need to address at some point. Ultimately, each theatre scholar makes his or her own way through the sequence of advanced education and career development. This advisory is intended to help you make the best decisions, including knowing what questions you should ask yourself and others before making major decisions.

Thinking About the Ph.D. in Theatre

Fundamentally, the Ph.D. signifies scholarship—as a means for producing scholarly work, as a component of teaching, as an element in the preparation of theatre productions, as a basis for decision making, and so forth. Of course, the Ph.D. is also a credential with practical uses in the job market for college faculty and for other positions that require or respect the degree. It is important to remember that the credential is awarded because an individual has met certain requirements set by scholars and specific standards of scholarship. Therefore, interest in research associated with the theatre is a primary requisite for sustaining the effort necessary to obtain the Ph.D. and to fulfill scholarly promise after it is awarded.

Two questions are critical.

- To what extent are you interested in scholarship and research as your life's work?
- If your interest is high in such work, what particular theatre topics or areas of study are compelling enough to address over multi-year periods, or perhaps a lifetime?

Ph.D. programs and the careers to which they lead are intensive and difficult, but also extremely rewarding to those with a passion for scholarship. Therefore, when thinking about the Ph.D., it is important to consider the extent to which you want to do the types of things holders of the Ph.D. do after it has been awarded.

Thinking about the Ph.D. also involves giving careful consideration to a significant number of choices. We list and annotate many of these below. Like the art of theatre itself, standardized answers are rare. The right answer for you may not be the right answer for someone else. In making choices, it is far more important to seek what is right for you than to do almost anything else. Often, you will not have enough information or experience to make a wise decision. This is why getting good advice is so critical. You will need people to help you think things through all along the way from the decision to embark upon Ph.D. study to choice of institution, to dissertation topic, to the job search, and all the myriad decisions that must be taken in between. Finding opinion and weighing its value is an important function in scholarship. To make the best decisions for yourself, it is important to apply this function constantly.

Making Choices: Education

It is helpful to think of the Ph.D. in Theatre as a large territory and the institutions that grant the degree as single destinations. While the territory contains a number of common features, each destination is different. This means that each individual intending to enter the territory needs to make informed decisions based on personal aspirations, preferences, and perceived needs before deciding on a specific destination. Making these choices wisely involves developing a basic understanding of program commonalities and differences.

Program Commonalities

In general, all Ph.D. programs require that successful candidates for the degree demonstrate:

- The ability to conduct independent research at a high level, leading to completion of a dissertation which is defended before a committee of scholars.
- Proficiency in the tools necessary to carry out this research, including but not limited to computer skills, bibliographic competence, and reading of one or more foreign languages.
- Mastery of general and specific subject matter in the field of study before a committee of scholars.

Program Differences

The achievements and capabilities indicated above are developed in different ways in different institutions. Differences go beyond process, however, and extend to such areas as purpose, philosophy, and content. These differences among over 40 Ph.D. programs in theatre produce a creative and intellectual richness that serves and develops the whole field. Programs are always evolving. The ebb and flow of change adds to this richness, but for the prospective student, these differences and evolutions mean careful attention to any program as it is now and expects to be in the immediate future, rather than what it was in the past.

Basic Orientation

The majority of Ph.D. programs in theatre are centered exclusively on the development of scholars. However, a number of programs are centered on the development of scholar directors. Rigorous scholarship is a hallmark of both types. The major difference is the extent to which scholarship is applied to or combined with the preparation of theatrical performances. Choosing one orientation or another involves an educational choice, not a career choice. Graduates of both types of programs have developed careers as scholars, directors, and practitioners of many other theatre specializations.

Philosophy

Scholars develop specific interests and points of view. Since Ph.D. programs are led by scholars, various interests and points of view produce philosophical differences among programs. These philosophies are exemplified in decisions about content, process, and value. For a prospective student, program philosophy is most efficiently revealed by looking at published statements of purpose, reviewing the publications of faculty and recent graduates, and if possible, asking questions about program philosophy in the application process.

Disciplinarity

Theatre is a vast world in and of itself. Theatre is also connected to everything else, often in multiple ways. For example, history and theatre inform, influence, and generate each other. Theatre uses all subject matter; both in the stories it tells and in the technical aspects of production. Because no one person or program can encompass the vastness of theatre and all its connections, choices must be made. How much weight is to be given to theatre, and how much to one or several of its myriad connections? How disciplinary is the focus of the program? How multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary? These questions are important because theatre can be the center from which connections are made, but theatre can also be the subject of research and scholarship from the perspectives of other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, English, architecture, linguistics, and so forth. The primary question for you is not which particular focus or mixture is best in general, but rather which approach to disciplinarity is compatible with your intellectual interests, goals, and projections about future work?

Theatre in the World

Among the arts, theatre and literature use language as a primary medium. Most works of theatre become universal to the extent that they are translated into other languages. Yet, much about theatre transcends language; therefore, theatre is both local and global. The vast range of intellectual and artistic content necessitates choices about focus and about the weight given to the local, the global, and their relationships in various Ph.D. programs.

Specialization

The theatre field contains scholarly specializations. Theatre history, children's theatre education, analysis and criticism, performance studies, and aesthetics are a few of the many designations used. Each specialization works with theatre content and draws from other disciplines in ways significant enough to distinguish it from the others. A choice among basic specializations often governs the number of program choices available, and often, the specialization chosen is a career choice.

Intellectual Technique and Approaches to Research

Scholars become proficient with intellectual techniques associated with discovery, analysis, interpretation, integration, synthesis, application, evaluation, creation, and so forth. Depending on their areas of emphasis and specializations, they learn to approach art as process, product, educative force, communication, psychological phenomenon, physiological phenomenon, therapeutic, social expression, heritage, subject matter for other disciplines, and so forth. Again, the number of possibilities requires choices, and Ph.D. programs vary with regard to their emphases on specific intellectual techniques and approaches to research. For example, statistical, historical, philosophical, sociological, or artistic methodologies may or may not be featured. While to some extent, the choice of specialization

and dissertation topic prioritizes techniques and approaches to some extent, there are still many specific technique and approach decisions to be made by individual professors and students.

Structure

Ph.D. programs vary with regard to structure. Some programs are built around a clear set of curricular requirements. Others are more individualized. Some require a significant self-direction, even from the beginning. While the goal of all programs is to produce a professional able to work independently, the progression to independence can be quite different among programs. Prospective students need to consider the extent to which they are ready for or compatible with the structure of the program.

Preparation for Teaching

Most holders of the Ph.D. in theatre are employed as professors in higher education. However, Ph.D. programs vary with regard to the formal effort they make to prepare students for teaching. It is not unusual for students entering Ph.D. study to have teaching experience or to gain teaching experience through an assistantship during Ph.D. study. Beyond these, institutions differ on the extent to which preparation for teaching is addressed. Philosophies range from considering Ph.D. study as a time to focus almost exclusively on the development of scholarly competence to the provision of teacher development programs that include course work, critiques, guest lectures and consultants, and so forth. Distinguished scholars and teachers disagree about approach and method, and successful teachers graduate from all types of programs, but for each prospective Ph.D. student, a choice among institutional philosophies on preparation for teaching is made by design or by default.

Access to Resources

Historic collection building and new technologies have produced major research libraries and capabilities in institutions that offer the Ph.D. However, collection content and speed of access vary depending on areas of specialization, specific subject matter, and the extent of the need for material in other disciplines. It is important to know how the collections, connections with other libraries, and access of institutions that interest you can support your studies and your dissertation.

Scholarships and Financial Aid

Most Ph.D. students receive scholarships or financial aid in some form. Doctoral education is expensive for students and for institutions. The variety of assistance is vast, and prospective students are advised to look carefully at the specific aid programs at each institution.

Foreign Students

American Ph.D. programs welcome foreign students. However, fluency in spoken and written English is critically important.

Connections

Entering a Ph.D. program expresses an intent to join other theatre scholars in the quest for knowledge and understanding. Connections with other scholars are made primarily through studies of their work. However, Ph.D. programs may encourage personal connections in a variety of ways. It is

useful to understand a department's approach to helping you connect with other scholars and scholarly efforts, both in terms of your peers and your seniors.

Time to Degree

Most institutions impose a time limit of seven years for the completion of doctoral programs. However, it is not necessary to take this much time. When looking at a specific program, it is useful to know both the shortest and the longest amounts of time, and how long most graduates have taken to complete their programs.

Pre-Dissertation Requirements

Programs vary with regard to specific requirements. Any Ph.D. program can be expected to be rigorous, but rigor is applied in different ways. It is important to consider requirements for course work, languages, research tools, or other demonstrations of competence. For example, in some institutions these are standardized, while in others, they are more tailored to areas of specialization.

Dissertation and Completion Requirements

Approaches to examination and dissertation vary among institutions offering the Ph.D. It is important to know in advance the specific requirements and timelines of programs you are considering. Dissertation protocols vary with respect to the backgrounds of advisors and committees. Examination policies also vary as to content and schedule. As is the case with any educational program, it is important to understand all of the requirements for completion before you begin.

Advisors and Mentors

The match between the Ph.D. candidate and his or her dissertation advisor is critical. Intellectual and personal compatibility facilitates wise choices. Shared purpose enables an efficient interplay of information and analysis that hones scholarly abilities in the candidate. Advisors can also serve as mentors or ensure that mentoring continues from the Ph.D. program into the early stages of a career. Prospective students should look carefully at advising and mentoring in institutions to which they are applying.

Making Choices: Career

All Ph.D. recipients are trained as scholars. Most do not make their living through scholarship alone. Almost all pursue scholarly endeavor as a part of or in conjunction with other work such as teaching, dramaturgy, curatorial service, or administration. Of course, Ph.D. graduates may develop unique careers or apply their knowledge in other fields. Although norms reflect common practice, career possibilities are all but endless.

Teaching

Most Ph.D. candidates hope to become teachers of undergraduate or graduate students. Careers in college and university teaching are influenced by a number of internal factors such as the number of positions open in various theatre specializations in a given period, the evolutions of scholarly disciplines that create new disciplinary areas or perspectives, and the importance given to specific kinds of scholarship at particular times. Teaching careers are also affected by numerous external factors such

as the evolving structures of higher education, changing funding patterns, general economic patterns and priorities, and overall perceptions about the value of a particular field such as theatre.

Many of these factors are beyond any one individual's control. The statistics for one period do not necessarily predict what will happen in the future. For example, if there have been a significant number of recent hires in a particular theatre specialization in the previous five-year period, it may be several generations before that number of positions in that specialization open again. It is instructive to be aware of the following facts:

- There are over 3,800 postsecondary institutions in the United States, about half of them, two-year colleges. There are between 40 and 50 Ph.D. programs in theatre. Therefore, the likelihood of a Ph.D. graduate in teaching in an institution with a Ph.D. program in theatre is relatively small.
- Different types of institutions with different types of goals and objectives for theatre seek specific individual characteristics when hiring faculty. For example, smaller institutions may prefer faculty members who can do a number of things in theatre well. This may include productions. Large research universities usually emphasize and reward focus in a specific area of scholarship.
- The job market is always changing, and in the early years of the 21st century, a generational turnover in faculty positions is expected. Positions are always open, but in some years, more positions are open than others.
- Salaries for professors vary widely. For 2002-2003*, the *average* salary by rank for theatre professors was approximately \$71,000 for full professors, \$53,500 for associate professors, \$42,500 for assistant professors, and \$34,800 for instructors. The *highest* salaries reported were approximately \$127,700 for full professors, \$87,600 for associate professors, \$60,500 for assistant professors, and \$48,000 for instructors. The *lowest* salaries reported for these ranks were \$44,500, \$37,600, \$27,800, and \$18,000, respectively. Entry-level positions for new faculty are normally at the instructor or assistant professor rank. It is important to seek current information about salary levels and prospects, especially if this aspect of your future is an important consideration in choosing to enter a Ph.D. program.

**These statistics are based on the Higher Education Arts Data Services (HEADS) 2002-2003 Theatre Data Summaries, and combine data reported by all respondent institutions of varying size and type.*

- Like any other profession, higher education is full of challenges. Individual professors work in, with, and through difficult conditions. Resources, the values of those who provide resources, and making tenure and promotion are usually subjects of intense debate.

Students considering the Ph.D. in theatre are advised to give most careful consideration to the nature of a career associated with teaching. It is important to gain a sense of what the profession of teaching is like and whether the normal expectations of individuals in that profession are understood. In many cases, teaching, service, and associated responsibilities take significant amounts of time, patience, and intellectual application. Scholarship, teaching, and service can be compatible and mutually reinforcing, but each can also be quite different. Each professor must manage these relationships successfully.

Other Careers

Other careers pursued by Ph.D.s in Theatre have their own cultures, sets of requirements, and habits of mind. Curators, librarians, dramaturgs, specialists in precollegiate theatre education and training,

and administrators in the arts and academe join professions shaped by the general nature of their task, as well as its relationship to theatre. Scholarship plays varying roles in each of these careers. Prospective Ph.D. candidates interested in these areas should investigate carefully the nature of the work and the number of positions normally available. It is best to seek guidance from a successful professional in one of these areas. Internships are invaluable in getting a sense of what it is actually like to be in that field.

The Ability to Work with Stasis and Change

The Ph.D. in theatre enables in many ways. It provides a respected credential. It signifies completion of a rigorous program. It indicates scholarly capacity and achievement. Prospective Ph.D. graduates will bring their degrees and the knowledge and skills the degree represents into a world of stasis and change, both of which are hard to predict. For this reason, one of the most important capabilities of individuals prepared to be scholars at the highest level is their ability to work with stasis and change and the relationships between them over a lifetime. For example, in many ways the basic structures of Ph.D. programs have not changed appreciably for many decades. Yet, this relatively stable structure houses vast dynamism. New perspectives, different content, evolving technologies, and changing approaches to theatre itself are some of the forces generating this dynamism.

A Lifetime of Productivity and Service

The same forces and perhaps others will be at work during the careers of those now contemplating Ph.D. programs. Although you have many choices to make, best decisions include consideration of readiness to deal with a variety of conditions and possibilities. This is the case because Ph.D. graduates of today will work in a tremendous variety of institutions and organizations. They will face series of predictable and unpredictable conditions. There will always be opportunities to advance one's work and career, but perhaps not along traditional paths. For all these reasons, the Ph.D. in theatre is part of a larger adventure in intellect and its application. By applying intellectual rigor to choices about and within programs, careers, and matters of change, you will make the most sensible effort to make productive decisions that lead to a lifetime of productivity and service.

The above advisory statement provides information and advice for prospective Ph.D. students, and is not an accreditation standards statement. NAST standards for Doctor of Philosophy degree programs are published in the NAST *Handbook*.

Links:

- NAST [List of Member Institutions](#)
- ASTR American Society for Theatre Research
The primary organization for theatre scholars; most Ph.D.s in theatre hold membership in this organization.
www.astr.umd.edu
- ATHE Association for Theatre in Higher Education
The primary umbrella organization for theatre professors in higher education.
www.athe.org
- CGS Council of Graduate Schools
The membership includes all graduate schools in all fields. Useful for general information about graduate study.
www.cgsnet.org

Recommended: *The Graduate School Funding Handbook* by April Vahle Hamel with Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

To pose questions or obtain more information about NAST, please contact:

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF THEATRE

11250 Roger Bacon Drive, Suite 21
Reston, VA 20190

Telephone (703) 437-0700

Fax (703) 437-6312

E-mail: info@arts-accredit.org

Web Site: <http://nast.arts-accredit.org>