

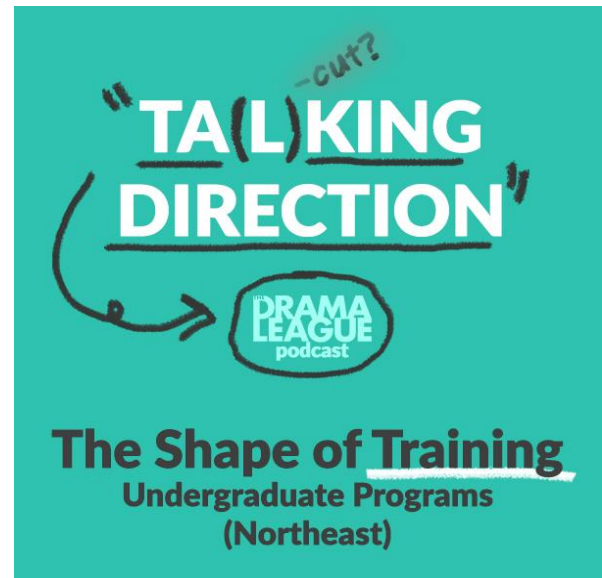


The Shape of Training: Undergraduate Programs (Northeast Edition)

SPEAKERS

- Elizabeth Margid (Fordham University)
- Marcus Giamatti (Temple University)
- Dr. Beth Schachter (Muhlenberg College)
- Jill Stevenson (Marymount Manhattan College)
- Adrienne Kapstein (Pace University)

Everyone Recorded 11/9/20



Gabriel Stelian-Shanks | 00:04

Hi, I'm Gabriel Stelian-Shanks the Artistic Director of the Drama League in New York City. Welcome to Ta(l)king Direction, the behind the scenes podcast going deep into the worlds of theater, film, television and online content to celebrate directors, those visionary artists at the center of the plays, musicals, movie and television shows enjoyed around the world. Each week we welcome acclaimed guests to explore imagination, risk taking, and craft, as well as looking at the past, present and future of the creative industries. Don't forget to like and subscribe wherever you find your podcasts. We're available on all platforms or by visiting DramaLeague.org. Thanks for listening, and for Ta(l)king Direction.

Nilan | 00:49

Hey, welcome back to another episode of Ta(l)king Direction. I'm Nilan, the Associate Artistic Director of The Drama League my pronouns are he/him, and I'm your host today. So we're going to be talking about undergraduate directing programs today. And before we get started with that, we just need to say that we know there are 101 ways to become a director. Some directors are self taught. Some take the apprenticing route, some learn while pursuing an

entirely different career or major and others will hone their skills from a graduate and or undergraduate program. Obtaining a Bachelors of Arts or a Bachelor's of Fine Arts is a popular and trusted option for many aspiring artists. Now, with the changing landscape of the American Theatre, and the new demands on the job of director, it makes us curious about what is being taught at these institutions. You know, how do these programs mold the directors of tomorrow? And what responsibility do they have to their alumni to help them enter the workforce? Now we've reached out to some of the top theater undergraduate programs across the US offering directing as a major to answer some of these questions. Today you will hear from colleges and universities across the north east. So let's meet our guests today. From Temple University. We have Professor Marcus Giamatti. How are you Marcus?

Marcus Giamatti | 02:22

Very good. Thank you. Thank you for asking me to be here.

Nilan | 02:25

From Pace University. We have Professor Adrian Kapstein, how are you Adrian?



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Adrian Kapstein | 02:30

I'm great. Thank you also for having me.

Nilan | 02:33

Joining us from Fordham University. We have Professor Elizabeth Margid. How are you Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Margid | 02:40

I'm well Nilan. Glad to be here.

Nilan | 02:42

From Muhlenberg College we have professor Dr. Beth Schachter. Thanks for joining us, Beth.

Beth Schachter 02:49

I'm excellent and really delighted to have a chance to hear what other people are doing with their programs in this moment of change and adaptation.

Nilan | 02:59

Rounding out our panel today, we have Professor Jill Stevenson from Marymount Manhattan College. Hey, Jill.

Jill Stevenson | 03:07

Hi, it's so great to be here and like Beth, I'm really looking forward to hearing what everyone else is doing and just sharing our experiences.

Nilan | 03:16

After asking how the colleges and universities of our guests were operating during this time, we found out that Temple University was completely remote, while others were experimenting both with remote and in person social distance learning. So let's begin by each of you telling us what kind of director you're molding in your programs. The American theater at large produces interpretive artists, arts education leans hard into reading comprehension, and articulation of other artists, ideas and works, creating and artists with strong interpretive skills. Whereas if we look to South America, Europe and Africa, we see an directorial focus in arts education in creating generative artists, a

director using found or self created methodology to great device pieces of art. Now we know both artists can be wildly successful. So what kind of artists is your program producing interpretive or generative? Adrian, how about we begin with you?

Adrian Kapstein | 04:26

So in our program, we have two separate degrees but are very linked, so the BA Acting and the BA Directing program were part of a bigger Pace Performing Arts, which is actually eight different degrees. We're the only BA Directing who take three years of directing their first year; they take all the acting classes with the actors, and also the same performance ensemble classes in their senior year. Directors and actors work together in a culminating class of this performance ensemble series where they create original adaptations of short stories and small ensembles. And they call it the night original work. In the Now festival. So a sort of festival with original pieces and like I said, simultaneous to that the directors then as with the actors, or take getting an interpretive training of text based work throughout, so, for us, it's a really interesting dance. And sometimes it can be confusing in a very short time for students. And sometimes it can be really enlightening. But to sort of given the perspective of what it is to be, you know, working from a previous pre-existing script, or building that script, what is an ensemble director's role versus, quote, unquote, traditional directors role? And I find that what's really exciting, I mean, there's many exciting things, but one of the things that's so exciting is just the doors that working in the generative way opens to so many facets of the of storytelling, you know, so even those, even those who are training as actors have the opportunity to see what it is to build a story and those training as directors have the opportunity to understand what it is to not be the only voice in the room, what is it to give space for other voices? What is it to facilitate the creation from the actors? Anyway, so yeah, it's a sort of an exciting mix of trying to weave those two entry points to theatre making,



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Elizabeth Margid | 06:42

Yeah, I can speak, this is Elizabeth from Fordham, I can speak to this also. The affordance program is somewhat similar the directing program and pursuing also those two tracks, the first year, students all from all the different tracks, because Fordham does have a directing /playwriting performance and design track, all have a full year course called collaboration that's team taught by two professors and all the students. And it does focus on generative work on collaboratively created work. And so the students begin by sort of developing those skills for how to work together and in fact, devise and create original material. And so then the directing students in their second year would really sort of take two courses, one, which is in fact, a course that focuses on original creation and generative work, using some of some of the work from tectonic some of the moment work training, but but blended into a number of other approaches and exercises. And, and then the students also the directing students also take a class, which begins with a text that they study for the full semester, and in fact, work on building toward production approach and scenes and design and all of that. So essentially, the second year of their training is following both those paths. And I would say that, I would agree that the training that they're getting in the generative work, you can sort of see how that creativity and sense of collaborative spirit really bleeds into all the other work they do even when they're working. You know, beginning with an ex fam tech..

Nilan | 08:23

Yes, Jill from Marymount, please take it away.

Jill Stevenson | 08:27

This I'd like to build off of that, the word collaboration has come up a lot and that's something that we really, really reinforced in a lot of our courses at Marymount. Our directing concentration is one of five concentrations in our BA. And we also have producing, management, theater history, writing for the stage and a theater, new media concentration. And then we have BFA in acting, musical theater, design, and tech. And so the students have a lot of

opportunities to work with each other. And also, our curriculum requires them to take courses and a lot of different areas. So every student regardless of any of those BA, BFA takes the elements of the directing course. So they all have that experience directing and they can see what that work is, so that they can bring that to their own craft and whatever area they're doing. And like other people who've spoken, I've said our directors also take acting so that they are with the actors that first year and they're also learning the language and the processes and things along those lines. But the students are required to take design courses, stage management courses. And really we try to emphasize collaboration and community building so that then when they are working and are doing scenes that are 20 to 30 minutes short plays for their directing three classes that they will produce in our box theater. They're working with students, stage managers, costume sound lighting designers, and they're working with each other and they continue that. Some of our directing three students also collaborate with our advanced playwriting students. So that they are part of a kind of the generative, they're seeing how playwrights create work. And they're part of that process, even if they're, you know, they're as a director. So, you know, in addition to other things, such as we have a lot of 48 hour play festivals, we have a campus up at the Bedford Hills women's Correctional Facility, and we do some shared work between those campuses, there are opportunities for the students, you know, as you said to be both generative. And then also that kind of more traditional approach.

Beth Schachter | 10:51

This is Beth. And if this is a reasonable moment, I'll jump in because we actually have moved in a complete overhaul of our curriculum. Even before the pandemic curriculum, we moved away from concentrations, which we did have into kind of what we hope is a more flexible, collaborative and maker approach. So that you can still certainly have a sequence that moves you through acting directing, to become someone who has techniques and tools and interests in both the interpretive you know, version of directing a play, as well as the ensemble or group generated,



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project or devised event. So we actually are looking at more the sort of performance studies undergraduate umbrella, as opposed to what we used to have, which was a slightly more traditional mainstream theatre theory, history, and dramatic literature focus. We're also using this moment to try and respond to both the changing world lately, and our students' concerns that we are more actively, clearly and centrally anti-racist. So we are trying to do all those things. And we, the faculty, and some guests, artists often do what we used to call Mainstage. But we have turned the digital season over to the students who I think are doing an amazing job. I had a student who did love and information in a wonderful way through zoom and I had another student do the very disturbing Copic white plague, which seemed really redundant when you were watching it in a terrible way. I guess also just we have extended ourselves into new courses. For instance, I'm teaching for the first time ever something that we're calling virtual directing and devising. I'm co-teaching with Harrison Houben, who is one of my lighting design collaborators for the last decade. And we're working to figure out how to engage live gnus not necessarily the synchronous or live, but the experience of lightness through in this case, largely uzume kind of set of parameters. And we just had some wonderful workshops with a guest artist, Tara on Medinah John. And she really pressed back against things that students might think about our obstacles and tried to help them recognize opportunities around them.

Nilan | 13:42

Marcus, how about you,

Marcus Giamatti | 13:44

At temple, it's really it's just it's really great to listen to everybody because I've been a temple for a couple of years. And when I came in the directing concentration and directing program for whatever was worth was basically defunct, had been in had sort of fallen apart, and I was sort of handed the task of putting it all back together again. And I've been doing that over the last couple years, which is a really interesting position to be in, in a place in a university,

of its size, Temple is and with incredible diversity there and in every sense to sort of rebuild it from the bottom up. And it gave me a chance to really look at it because I've spent the 35 years most of my life as a working actor. And I directed and I've worked mostly made my living in television. So it's coming from everything in a very different perspective. From a business perspective, the way modern technology and being able to have your phone in your hand. You can make a film, you can direct a film, you can act in a film all all different kinds of things like that. And what was so important to me and rebuilding it and what's really heartening listening to all of you talk about this is that sense of what I found when I was looking at a directing program, one of the most important things was being able to create the common language of active participation, but also who you are, as an artist, what I learned so much on the professional world was in why you tell stories, and how you approach it, and how you craft things, was a way that I really wanted to integrate building a directing program at Temple and it was so important to, to make sure that everybody was doing everything. So we make sure that all of our actors are taking the directing classes and all the directors are taking all of those classes with them as well. And technical classes designed lighting, stage management. And really, to me, to be able to direct is the way to learn how to direct; being able to do it is the way that you can craft and hone your vision in your voice. And I kind of looked at it, building on like a three tiered basis of understanding the craft and division both visually and the vision for why you tell a story and how important it is to procure your qualities of being a leader, and how you create an environment. And how you create an approach because one thing I discovered a lot, and I taught in California too, and with a lot of young directors, I discovered was that the lack of confidence in being able to do it the way they see it in the way they want to do it. And doing it in a right way or a wrong way, was something that was a stumbling block in helping them to procure who they are as people and as artists was a place to leap off. And that's that's really not here, nor there of what we do literally is a program because we do a lot of the same things, but sort of



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philosophically for me, it was how can we support all of that and be able to bring in build a new program.

Nilan | 16:58

We're watching the American Theatre confront years of tyrannical and unethical practices during this pandemic, especially in regards to racial bias and gender equity. have these conversations landed on your college campus yet? And if so, what are you doing as leaders to implement these ideas and procedures for your students? Beth, let's start with you, you look eager to jump back in.

Beth Schachter | 17:22

I think that might have been from my conversation about our efforts to centralize the anti racism of our curriculum and focus on both a more diverse set of texts, representations opportunities, and also to, of course, continue the work which we have done at least ever since I've been there, which is almost 20 years of, you know, being well aware of the issues of white privilege of the questions of access, and also of the the, the overall in the words of like somebody like Adrian Kennedy, the Deathly whiteness of the sort of canonical euro, European American set of dramatic literature texts, which are often you know, and have been part of our mainstream curriculum, which is partly why also a more performance studies umbrella allows us to try and both work with more global material and also struggle, as certainly I do with how I can engage with that material and even teach it when it is not my culture, it is not my art, and I want to share it and try and support it without, you know, expropriating it. And I think, you know, Muhlenberg has never been a place with a tremendously diverse student body, the theatre and dance program department which is the biggest major oddly enough, at this college has always had more diversity 18-20% people who would identify as other than white. And so we're, we're seeing that as well, in the production season. I just literally just this last weekend watched performances in what the students called the marginalized voices Theatre Festival. And it was entirely their work. They created it, then you figured out how to stream it. They edited and chose pieces

and had like 80 or 90 people each night for each of these were sort of, you know, very festivali kind of lots of short pieces. And I think that just you know, we're getting First of all, we are getting out of the way for people who are ready and enthusiastic and passionate about taking some of that space, and we are also making sure that the material, which we're working from and with, is as diverse as possible. I was the chair previously, and I certainly made that effort. But it was inadequate lately. So we're working on that.

Nilan | 20:14

Jill, go right ahead.

Jill Stevenson | 20:16

I would love to, to echo what you just said, Beth, about getting out of the way. We have really been working to do that as a faculty ourselves at Marymount, and this summer, we had quite a reckoning with our students, we made the mistake of putting up one of those very kind of no statements of ally ship and our students of color, and many of our white students said, that's not enough, we need a different kind of culture, it's not enough to just put words up on the internet. And we had a series of town halls in which we really heard from our students what they needed, including the white students who were trying to figure out how to make space and how to confront their own whiteness, and privilege. And so we had already been doing a lot of curricular work over the last two years in revising the curriculum and pedagogy, but we did it with great acceleration this summer. And we've moved to doing things like much more content to lists, scenes contents, list work in the first year of acting in the elements of directing class, so that students bring more of themselves in their own experience to inform and construct the material. And we have moved very strongly towards diversifying the content. So for example, in our directing three classes, students have to submit three proposals for play choices, they might want to direct and two out of the three must be a playwright who is female, and or bipoc or identifies as LGBTQ a plus. And that was the case last year, and this coming semester, we agreed that all of those choices needed to comply. So we've



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really, we've done work, but I think a lot of it is exactly what Beth said, which is getting out of the way, giving the students agency turning things over to them, and really figuring out how to have authentic dialogue. And we're a very large program as well. And it's a struggle, but we've made good progress and we will continue to make more.

Elizabeth Margid | 22:57

This is Elizabeth, from Florida, and I would say yes, our experience has been very similar to the ones you've been describing. And also, you know, over the last few years have really tried to make a large push to diversify a student body, the faculty, the curriculum, the opportunities, etc, and have made some headway on these issues. But indeed, as Beth was saying, you know, not enough. And also the summer had students really confront us with by they created a BIPOC Student Committee and really confronted us with a list of, of demands and issues to really they wanted to have us make a great deal more progress on again, including doing a better job of diversifying curriculum of creating more opportunities, how we handle representation, all of those issues. And, um, which was, you know, it was definitely a hard period for us to really begin to figure out how we were going to work and how we were going to address these issues and progress. But we've really made I think, a lot of progress. And as you said, getting out of the way, letting the students take the lead in a lot of these initiatives helping educate us. And also, we are going to be doing the anti racist training with art equity, starting in the spring, and I think that's long overdue. In fact, all of Fordham is going to be doing some anti-racist training and I think the university has had some issues with, you know, accusations of various racist practices or in sensitivities. I'm sort of proud to say that just recently, the university has actually put this work of dismantling racism at the very top of its strategic plan, which is a major shift in universities, goals and culture. So I'm positive we're heading in a good direction.

Nilan | 24:55

And Marcus.

Marcus Giamatti | 24:56

it's so great to listen to you guys too. You know, the funny thing too, is that because we're having similar issues at Temple with things, we had a big forum in the spring, before COVID happened with the students in a similar way that that you guys are talking about. And what's so interesting because temple is, you know, they call it diversity University, it's so diverse, yet there seems to be. So we seem still to have to strive and work so hard to create opportunities within that, when there's so much at our fingertips there. But from a director standpoint, it's there aren't that many students who want to have diversity, who want to be directors, and I find that interesting, a very, very, very small amount of people want to actually direct? And I don't know whether that is where that all stems from? Do you know what I mean? Do you guys find that too? Or is it just the numbers sort of in the way things pan out? Or do you? Do you guys see that too, that we want to see as diverse leaders too, that are that are leading and telling the stories? Or is it because we're not creating enough of the opportunities for giving him the kind of material as a form, I find that one thing that is always really interesting in this huge diverse student body, yet there's very, very, very, very few people, I could probably count them on less than one hand that actually want to be directors.

Nilan | 26:31

I just want to take a second to respond to the comment Marcus just made about diverse students, not having enough of them who want to be directors, I think that is solely the responsibility of the institution that is recruiting them. And what I want to say at large to this idea is that historically, people of color, marginalized people find success in opportunity amongst their own. We have black leaders, we have queer theaters, we have Latin theaters, we have Jewish theaters, we have Asian theaters, and the artists that support those theaters, and move up the ranks of those theaters and learn craft through those theaters are doing so amongst their own because they are not finding transparent opportunities outside of those institutions. What we must do to attract those students is figure out how



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we can build sustainable, equitable trust and opportunity to create a sense of security that those diverse individuals feel that they will learn and prosper at these institutions. But I have more to that answer. Let's jump back into the podcast. Thank you for that. Marcus, you are actually speaking to a question I was going to ask. I'll begin by saying the American Theatre at large invests a lot in playwrights, right. So I believe artists of the future know that that is a viable option. Let's look at high school programs and the investment is in acting. So they know that that's a viable path. Also, when we look at what has happened, really in 2020, in the field at large, I think a lot of pressure of changing on the landscape is on the back of the directors, because the directors are the leaders. They're the first collaborator for the audience inside the room. They're the first collaborator for what type of actors and designers get brought into that room. They have tremendous influence and, and decision power inside of a room. They are the capstones of what the culture is of a project. And with that being said, it makes me worrisome because why aren't we really spending our time putting an emphasis on the importance of this job. So it makes the work you do that much more important as you are the first people who get to cultivate and attract these new directors of tomorrow into your program? Jill, go right ahead.

Jill Stevenson | 29:17

You know, I was going to say that we have a lot of although we have a, you know, a handful of students who come to us for directing, you know, that's how they apply. We get many more that we pick up as they continue on their track through the curriculum. And this is one reason that I'm very happy that we require every student in all the majors in the theatre department to take an Elements of Directing course. Because many of them realize that, oh my gosh, I really like this or I want to know more about it. So you have a lot of playwrights that then add directing actors who add directing. You know, I have a lot of theater historians add directing. So I think it's, you know, as you said, there's no real models for that, I think pre college? And it seems perhaps, I don't know, maybe beyond, it seems very intimidating. But just getting into the room and doing the work is the thing

that, you know, turns many people on to their love affair with directing. So, you know, I think it's really needed to incorporate more practice of it as soon as possible and an artist development.

Adrian Kapstein | 30:34

This is Adrian and I, I think that goes back to your initial question Nilan about devising, right? And that sort of collaborative space where people can in any minute, in a collaborative room, you're a director, and then your performer, and then your designer, you know, and just sort of the exposure to that ability, the discovery that I can do this. I might love this drill question Marcus. Marcus also makes me think of, I mean, I think this is a very obvious thing to say, but just maybe a little bit of a self-perpetuating place we've been in, which is, where are the role models? And if there are no role models, you know, whose shoes fill? Yeah.

Nilan | 31:14

Marcus, how about you?

Marcus Giamatti | 31:16

I went to school in a time when you know, Lloyd Richards. And August Wilson was the Golden Age, you know, it was very empowering for a lot of people. And there were a lot of questions dropped, dropped by the wayside there because of the examples that those guys set. And there was a lot and it's just in a place, I'm purely throwing it out there more as a discussion thing than anything else. Because I'm just interested in what people think in a place where there is so much diversity. There's so little people that want or feel the confidence, I guess, or the recognition to feel okay to be leaders and I and I don't. And I wonder whether they don't feel as represented in the material in the curriculum, or I don't really know. But it's interesting to me to see coming into it from this direction now. And yes, there are a lot of people that there are people that pick up over the course of time in the arc of taking the classes and all that different kinds of things. But I have very few people that come to me that want to be directors from that angle.



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Adrian Kapstein | 32:20

And I mean, I think that also goes back to high schools to is someone

Marcus Giamatti | 32:24

Yes, yeah. You know, totally.

Adrian Kapstein | 32:26

Yeah. The exposure there. The opportunities, the accessibility, right, yeah.

Marcus Giamatti | 32:34

Yeah, I think you're right.

Beth Schachter | 32:35

This is Beth. And I think that's a very crucial point, which is about socio economic divides, and access. Are these folks who've been able to go see a show at whatever large professional or even semi professional company is in their area? Have they been to New York, and if they've been to New York, have they seen anything below 14th Street, you know, or up or up in, you know, with some of the companies uptown that are doing more diverse work, I also think it's an invisible art to some degree. And the less access you have to it, the more invisible is in other words, if you have not seen a whole bunch of different kinds of shows, and have people to talk to about that, I can totally understand that you wouldn't even know where its parameters are. And I just think Lastly, it is a among all the crazy, you know, performance related careers, it's really an elitist one or has been right, because in order to assistant direct for a while or in order to intern in the past anyway, that has almost entirely been an unpaid series of positions.

Nilan | 33:58

Jill, go right ahead.

Jill Stevenson | 34:00

I also think this, the students that I'm seeing just have a much more entrepreneurial idea of what directing is. So

they don't want to come out and be a director, they want to be an artist that can do it all because they don't trust that anybody's going to let them in the room they want in there, I'm going to make my own work, I'm going to work you know, with my friends, as we get out of college, we're going to start our own company, I'll learn how to produce you know, so I think they also so many of them, and I kind of I think maybe I put actors in a different category, but so many of these students come out and they just realize they're gonna have to do so many things that it's not that they want to be a director, they want to create art, they just want to create and they know there have to be loads of skills there. Which is very realistic. I I find that to be very smart.

Nilan | 34:55

Marcus, how about you?

Marcus Giamatti | 34:59

Absolutely, and I think that's what I see, too? And I think you're absolutely right, is that what can happen in the process of it as it becomes more result oriented in that sense? And, and and what I see lacking or or being lost is that responsibility to the story and sort of the process of the craft in between, because you're absolutely right. But that's, and I think that's part of the pressure to that happens now with with trying to get it and it's even harder than it was for those of us that are ancient now, that 2030 years ago, you know, when it was hard back 3025 30 years ago, it's even more because you have so much accessibility and so much technology and everything else going on with it now, and, and there was a time I think, in New York, you guys probably can relate to when people would go see off off Broadway shows, and there would be something really cool going on. And I'm not so sure how much those opportunities really happen as much anymore. And people take the time for it.

Elizabeth Margid | 35:58

I this is Elizabeth, you know, what I'm wondering, though, is if you know, given where things are in New York, now we're going to be heading back into a sort of a period where there is more opportunity, I have a lot of optimism that we're going



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to, we're going to be heading into sort of another, you know, period of off off Broadway creativity back to the cafe Chino in the 60s. And I just want to build on what the others have said about, you know, our curriculum really encourages the students to be self starters, to work collaboratively to be sort of entrepreneurs, and indeed, in the best sense of the word in that of making their work and getting it out there and working together. And what Beth was saying about the shift in their program towards thinking of their students or creating a program that's more about them being makers, then siloing, I think is also something that Fordham increasingly is interested in. There's a lot of conversation about that. And I think the fact that they're getting so much cross training in their collaboration classes and other courses, I think is leaving them to feel that the best path out toward the profession is working together to sort of make their own work. And I'm really excited to see where that's gonna go in the next five years. You know, we see sort of where we come to the other side of the COVID, the COVID years, what's kind of what's on the other side of that, in a kind of renaissance of New York theater making, I'm optimistic.

Nilan | 37:22

Thank you, Elizabeth. That is a beautiful thought to end our discussion at professors. Thank you so much for joining us today. That is all the time we have. And hopefully this dialogue around equity, diversity and inclusion at your programs pours out into the community. As you are molding the future, the future must meet and serve the needs of that community. If you're interested in learning more about these programs, please check out the description of this podcast for like,

Gabriel Stelian-Shanks | 37:51

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profit, lifelong home for stage directors, and the audience's who treasure their work on stage in films on television and across the internet. During the pandemic were providing essential services to help Theatrefolk and their families who are suffering from economic and health struggles due to COVID-19. If you'd like to join us in this effort, visit [Drama league.org](https://drama-league.org) and click donate or become a member. We'd love to have you as part of the Drama League family. Thanks again and we'll see you soon.