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Boles - DRAFT

Scholarship in the Mainstream Marketplace:
How an M.F.A. Shines a Scholarly Life Beyond the University

by David Boles, M.F.A.

Scholarship, I have discovered, is a difficult sell to the mainstream, middlebrow, minds at work in film, television and stage who try to make audience commerce out of the lowest-common-denominator and least threatening method of communicating the human spirit. Since graduating from Columbia University in the City of New York with an M.F.A. in Playwriting in 1991, I have been banging my head against the warring wall of wills between trafficking soullessness and the living art of dramatic literature.

It is that self-inflicted head drubbing that led me to apply for your open Assistant Professorship in Theatre. I appreciate this moment of your eye to make my case that, with an M.F.A. in Playwriting, I have been appropriately trained to fulfill the terms of a university appointment with intellectual dedication, scholarly inquisitiveness and dedicated performance. I will explain why a Playwright with an M.F.A. from Columbia wants to teach and write scholarly books for a living. Let me begin by stating categorically that I will enhance the reputation of Rutgers University beyond the physical bounds of the campus because of my past, present and future performance as a scholar. I realize now I require a Life of the Mind where scholarship and investigation are more meaningful and valuable than serve an industry where the lust for money rules all decisions and corrodes any aesthetic ideal.

In 1987 I arrived in New York City fresh from Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage where I had the sublime privilege to work with Romanian director Lucian Pintilie on his world-famous production of *The Cherry Orchard*. As a young Nebraskan it was an experience of a lifetime to work with such an electrifying element. I knew that the first 22 years of my life in Nebraska dedicated to acting, directing and playwriting were not wasted and had prepared me well for a life in the theatre.

I accepted a Presidential Scholarship from The Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies at Columbia University in the City of New York. My Master of Fine Arts is a terminal degree from that three year program. Columbia and Yale are unique in that their M.F.A. programs require three years of study instead of two. The idea behind a Columbia M.F.A. is to not only teach the technical aspects of the degree but to also imbue a strong aesthetic and to demand a disciplined background in research, invention and scholarship beyond the classroom. Each semester you were evaluated by a performance committee. If you were not progressing appropriately your participation in the Columbia M.F.A. program was terminated. Several people were removed from the system each year. I was honored to be the first Presidential Scholar in the history of the Hammerstein Center to have my scholarship renewed. Theatre

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instead of the conventional 1 or 2 year.

Do not use the students to get ahead your own work

Not to use the students to advance my career as a playwright

history, dramaturgy, producing, production and directing were integral pieces in my M.F.A. studies. Courses outside the department such as *Dramatic Literature* with William Cocco in the Department of English, *The Philosophy of Art & Beauty* with Richard Kuhns in the Philosophy Department and *Dramatic Theory* with Eric Bentley as a special masters' class were important intellectual touchstones in my life beyond Dodge Hall and the School of the Arts.

Every Columbia Playwright was required to research, interview, investigate and write, for a year, a scholarly Masters' thesis that would lead to the writing of a play after graduation. My thesis examined the killing of a small child who was found dead in a ditch by a small Nebraska community. The thesis was awarded High Honors by the graduation committee. Entitled *WHEN A LIFE TREMBLED TO DEATH*, my Master's thesis became the full-length play *THE UNKNOWABLE KILLING OF LITTLE BOY BLUE* which was subsequently produced by the Maxwell Anderson Playwright's Festival in Stamford, Connecticut.

Upon graduating from Columbia in 1991, I anticipated an active career as a Playwright. My work as a graduate student ranged from creating a Leo Tolstoy musical I was paid to write with faculty member Al Carmines called *MASLOVA* based upon the Tolstoy novel *Resurrection*. The musical *MASLOVA* was produced by the Hammerstein Center. During my first semester at Columbia I wrote an original piece for the David Gordon Pick Up Company which debuted at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's *NEXT WAVE* festival and then toured to 16 states and 27 cities across the United States. Under the guidance of director Liviu Ciulei, I wrote a play inspired by Buchner's *Woyzeck* and the *Myth of Sisyphus* called *SISYZECK* that drew parallel, intersecting, lines between the guts binding the play and the myth. I was Peter Stone's associate on the Broadway musical *The Will Rogers Follies* starring Keith Carradine; I served as Arthur Kopit's assistant on *Phantom* (his musical with Maury Yeston) and I also assisted Arthur on his play *Road to Nirvana* starring Sigourney Weaver, Armand Assante and Jon Polito at Circle Rep; and I was associate director for Jim Simpson's (~~Mr. Sigourney Weaver~~) *En Garde Arts* Off-Broadway production of Mac Wellman's *Sincerity Forever*.

The mainstream world, I discovered to my dismay, was not Columbia University in the City of New York. It was a terrible challenge to keep the dramatic aesthetic shaped within me at Columbia in tact beyond the Morningside Heights iron gates. I wrote several pieces that were well-received but ultimately determined to be "too smart" or "too intellectual" for a mass audience. I vowed to never sell out for money and to never create something that did not live up to the excellence of a passionate mind and an intellectual heart I was given at Columbia. To this day I have been true to that vow to the detriment of my wallet, but I still contend the pinnacles of an engaged mind are more enriching than the pitfalls of an ordinary paycheck. Examples of some of those mainstream projects are:

my yearning to create the great American musical drama based on L.T. novel

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THE UNKNOWABLE KILLING OF LITTLE BOY BLUE: The play was well-received everywhere, but theatrical agents found the play difficult to place because it was "too original" for middle-America. One agent told me he could get me a major production but that it would "take two years" and he didn't have that kind of time to devote to a new playwright. If I had been on the faculty of a university I would have been able to workshop the script with students and been able to bring to light what is an important story that has yet to be told to a wide audience.

RAISING ARIZONA: This was my most direct attempt at leveling my work for the commercial world. I directly procured the rights to musicalize Joel and Ethan Coen's motion picture for the stage. I wrote the Book and Lyrics. We had a First Class Broadway option. Then Garth Drabinsky's *LiveEnt* went under and the show went into a legal and creative morass from which it has yet to emerge. ~~If I had been in a university system, I would have presented the student production of the musical and brought ticket sales and royalties into the university via the inevitable subsequent productions outside the university.~~ *cut*

COMPUTERS FOR POETS: This computer book series was beloved by Microsoft. I took Aristotle's Theory of Dramatic Structure (Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Music, Spectacle) and used it as a template of universal learning and a way into understanding unfamiliar complex ideas. ~~We all have universal rhythms of storytelling born within us that gifts us with the ability to tell and understand dramatic stories. The exploitation of Aristotle's ideal and the application of a Right-Brain, Left-Brain, meme is possible with any difficult task be it computer software, computer hardware or something else. After doing some market research, Microsoft deemed the idea "too intellectual for a mass audience" and did not move forward with their monetary commitment, but they did say they would publish the seven book series under their Microsoft Press imprint if I wrote the series without any upfront money. I knew the series would sell big and would perpetuate into further books in the bestselling veins of the *Dummies* and *Idiots* series of books but I did not have the time to write for free and I would have had to hire other writers on my own dime to get the seven books written in the narrow window of opportunity. If I had been on a tenure track at a university, I would have created a special class where the entire book series would have been written with students. Royalties and credits for the series would be shared with the student authors and the university.~~ *that's when Copote " " " "* *cut?*

TOUCH THE HORIZON: This screenplay was optioned by two studios for development. The idea of the story was a Fighter Pilot who was shot down and parachutes into an Iron Age farm. The conflict of the Old World and the New World was the core of the story and the failure of science and technology to replace the death of the old God was a central cornerstone of the drama. Agents loved the script. Producers, however, never grasped the concept of

how an Iron Age farm would be possible today without modern influence. The Discovery Channel just started a reality series called "Living in the Iron Age" once again proving my idea was ahead of the curve and if I had been a member of a university faculty I would have found a way to produce that film with the help of student filmmakers to bring the story to life. Dr. Grafton Nunes, now Dean of the School of the Arts at Emerson College, told me he would have produced the script himself if he were still producing movies because he felt the script was "substantial, interesting and historically ground-breaking." Dr. Nunes was the Associate Dean of the Columbia University School of the Arts while I was in the M.F.A. program. Before his career as a Ph.D., Dr. Nunes was a film producer. One of his major successes was the film *The Loveless* which gave Willem Defoe his first starring role on screen.) cut?

CARVING CATHER: For 10 years I researched the life of Nebraska author Willa Cather. I brought her to life in the one woman play I wrote for Sigourney Weaver called CARVING CATHER. The response to the script was tremendous, but a production has yet to occur mainly because theatrical producers who would put up the development money say, "Willa who?" Producing a workshop with a famous star on campus would have been an absolute priority if I were on the permanent staff of a university because once the production demonstrates the proof of the idea in a live format, development money for the next production follows. The play is historically accurate and the drama is built from Cather's works. The play adds significant new insight into the her relevance for a 21st Century audience. My B.A. in English is from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln - the very university and department where Cather ignited her mind as an undergraduate - so to major in English at Nebraska is to be a servant to her great literary deeds. I am a Cather liege and, I am told by others in the Nebraska Department of English, that I have served her spirit and intention as she comes to life again from the page. gratifying

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: This modern retelling of the Abraham and Isaac story received two offers of production from regional theatres. Both theatres backed out of the productions because they feared "retribution from subscribers." A university setting would have enhanced the idea and scholarship of the idea of the play without worrying about a subscription audience striking the theatre. A university production would allow multiple instances for discourse and feedback from all sides in the larger intellectual community. ~~retribution~~

Since my most beloved literary projects were not happening fast enough to adequately provide for my family, I moved into writing computer books and articles for periodical magazines like *EYEPiece* (the official publication of the Guild of British Camera Technicians), *Windows Magazine*, *Builder.Com*, *BOOT Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner Literary Quarterly* and *C|Net*. If I wrote or ghosted a computer book I could get \$25,000 up front plus a dollar a book royalty. I did that kind of writing for quite a bit before the Dot Com Crash and 9/11 turned

the industry to ash. I was also paid a dollar a word to write 5,000-10,000 word computer research articles on theory and process to help support my family. The computer periodical opportunities turned to dirt for the same reasons the computer book business burned.

I continue to do editorial work for New Riders, Pearson Learning, Prentice Hall and Bedford St. Martins while still writing and researching my own work.

In order to keep myself engaged in an intellectual community, I started an award winning magazine 10 years ago called GO INSIDE. I am the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher and GO INSIDE has been dedicated to discovering new writers and giving them their first publication. We also are a home to professional writers who seek a place to publish work that has not been accepted for mainstream publication. We presently have over 2.5 million monthly readers while we continue to "Serve the Spirit of Humanity While Covering the Web of the World." Our reputation is international and I have a stable of writers who hail from across America as well as South Africa, Australia, Norway, Poland, Venezuela, Argentina, Canada, Israel, Puerto Rico, France, Germany and Italy. One of my writers, philosopher Andreas Saugstad of Oslo Norway, was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and the nominating committee specifically cited his published work in GO INSIDE Magazine as a major factor in his winning the scholarship. Andreas' award was one of the sweetest moments in my publishing career because he proved the idea of the magazine model had international reverberations of merit beyond mere words on a page.

As I reflected on my life five years ago, I realized some of my most productive and important years were those spent at Columbia University. At Columbia a passion for literature lived within me and inside my work. What I produced there was never called "too smart" or "too intellectual." My work and scholarship in dramatic literature was appreciated and encouraged at Columbia. I decided to keep writing plays and to keep my aesthetic intact while refocusing my energy. By re-entering the world of the mind I found a new and delightful form of scholarship: Teaching what had been given to me. I call this philosophy "The Theory of the Golden Circle of Thought" and I expand that idea in my letter of application. I like to teach where I live, so I was honored to be a part of the faculties of the College of New Rochelle, Fordham, NYU, Saint Peter's College and now with you at Rutgers-Newark. I discovered that by returning to the university I was able to refill and repay my aesthetic debt. I realized my future was sown in teaching full time in a tenured position so I could finally write what I was born to produce: A Deep Analysis of the theory of Dramatic Literature. My epiphany was realizing the mainstream marketplace and the energy of the universe had been urging me to go away from the middle and concentrate on a higher form of communication

*I realized that -- because
finally to write --*

so I could get proper credit and attention for what I had always been writing:
Investigative Scholarship.

With M.F.A. in tow, a scholarly television/live stage production idea and two scholarly books on my mind, I want to share with you two ideas that have been seething within me since 1991: THE WOUNDED & THE MAIMED: DISABILITY IN PERFORMANCE and PUBLIC HEALTH: CRISIS IN PERFORMANCE. I realize that, financially, the only way I can afford to finally write these books is to be on a university tenure track where publication of this nature is required to retain employment. My wife is Deaf and for the past 14 years I have seen her deal with prejudice in public and private heartbreak in the workplace. I have always wondered how disability in drama has been used to enliven the common spirit throughout the Ages. My wife's disability is her brand and her burden and together we have been working on and studying the causes and solutions of all disabilities. My wife's work in the public welfare sector for the past 15 years has brought home important and critical issues with Public Health that influence each of us every day. Few are aware of the ramifications of how a quiet crisis in Public Health can drastically and dramatically affect the overall wellbeing of a community.

THE WOUNDED & THE MAIMED: DISABILITY IN PERFORMANCE will be an intricate analysis of a set of important, historic, plays with a disabled character at the center of the drama with an investigation into the shared shards of humanity and experience each play shares in the universal rhythm of storytelling. The scholarly research textbook will also investigate the core of the historic shunning, social stagnation, cultural discrimination and economic prejudices at play in the dramas in their time and our time. The Disability book is appropriate for use in a Theatre program, a Rehabilitation program and a Social Sciences/Humanities program. Some of the plays and the disabilities analyzed are:

Oedipus Rex (Maimed Feet)

Richard III (Physical Deformity)

Children of a Lesser God (Deafness)

Of Mice and Men (Mental Impairment)

Goya (Deafness - original Center Stage play directed by Stan Wojewodski)

Johnny Belinda (Deaf/Mental Impairment)

The Miracle Worker (Deaf/Blind)

Butterflies are Free (Blindness)

The Phantom of the Opera - Broadway Musical (Facial Deformation)

*The Elephant Man
Porgy (Wheelchair)*

The second book, PUBLIC HEALTH: CRISIS IN PERFORMANCE, will be an analysis of important plays throughout time with a critical Public Health issue at the core of the drama. Dr. William Halperin, MD, the UMDNJ Chair of the Department of Preventative Medicine, expressed interest in co-writing this book with me. The scholarly textbook will delve into the spiritual, health and

social welfare issues bubbling at the center of the dramas and the sinew of human terror and pity they all share. The book will also serve as a reflexive sounding stone for the crises in Public Health that formed public policy then and now. This book will well in a Theatre program, a Public Health program and a History program. Here are some of the plays and the Public Health Crises the book will investigate:

Oedipus Rex (Anthrax Plague)
Enemy of the People (Water Contamination)
Angels in America (AIDS)
All My Sons (Lottery Killing)
The Visit (Psyche Infection)
Firebugs (Arson)

Cyberstrata (War/Peace)
Oh, What a Lovely War (Society)

The John Hopkins Press, Prentice Hall, Bedford/St. Martins and Applause Theatre Books have all expressed an interest in publishing the tandem books.

Dr. Halperin is also interested in co-writing with me a series of television/live stage productions inspired by Berton Roueche's book, *The Medical Detectives*. Each production would deal with a crisis in Public Health: Rota Virus, Anthrax, West Nile Virus, Legionnaires Disease, Swine Flu, etc. The hook of the drama of the idea is the personification of the disease so, for example, Anthrax is a living, breathing character with intent and devotion to killing. The conflict of the chase is a Public Health investigator who tracks the Anthrax across time in an attempt to fight, cure and eradicate the disease. The productions would be entertaining, medically accurate and provide fresh, factual, information for the public in a new mode of educational transmission. My plan for this project is to use Rutgers acting students, UMDNJ experts in the field of medicine, and the NJIT professional ITC television studio to capture the live stage performances on videotape so the performances can be preserved and sold on DVD and aired on New Jersey Public Television. The only sticking point for this idea so far has been the issue of paying me to write the first seven episodes of the series. UMDNJ, NJIT and Rutgers do not presently have the budget for script creation. In conjunction with Dr. Halperin, I have been in contact with the National Library of Medicine in order to secure a grant for production of the series. Dr. Susan Sparks, facilitator of the National Library of Medicine grant's program, provided an encouraging response to our inquiry. The National Library of Medicine prefers to provide grants directly to members of a full time faculty member instead of adjunct faculty. If I were on a full time teaching line at Rutgers with tenure at stake, this project would more easily be made into a viable reality.

I appreciate the moments you have given me to make my case that, with the help of my terminal M.F.A. degree, I have blindly continued on with my Columbia inspired work of scholarship in the mainstream marketplace. It is imperative that I earn a Ph.D. to retain the Rutgers Theatre position, I will

earn one. I have learned that even if the masses do not want to buy what you are selling, that doesn't mean your literary works do not have value and a place in a community. With your insight and assistance I will be able to bring to full bear the roiling potential of my academic scholarship to Rutgers and prove that a university culture is not only a place where history is made, dreams pressed onward and future generations of thinkers are inspired upward, but the university culture also must continue to be the thriving, molten, corpus for the preservation of aesthetic ideals and the proposition that art can move worlds beyond the human. It would be my honor and pleasure to join you in that vital mission at Rutgers-Newark as a part of the tenure track faculty in Theatre.

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the word "influence")

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but the university culture is also the thriving motor of progress and
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