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Theater Education in the US vs France

To answer the questions I had about the difference between theater education in the US vs in France, I interviewed a professor at the Lycée Madeleine Michelis about her theater class. I learned the following information in an interview with her:

Theater education in France is not as common in high schools as it is in the United States. Each department of France has one high school that offers a specialty in theater. Which means out of 11,370 high schools in France, 101 offer a specialty in theater. There are a few other high schools in France that offer individual theater classes, however the vast majority do not. Some students at the high school Robert Luzarches (where I went to school the majority of the time) said they wished theater classes were more available to them. Comparatively, in a survey done in the US, out of 1,300 surveyed high schools, 79% offer one or more theater classes. However, just because there is a smaller amount of theater classes in French high schools does not mean the quality of education is any less.

The curriculum in the French high school I visited offered the students opportunities to learn about and participate in many areas of theater. The teacher commonly has a professional actor with a specialty in a specific kind of theater (i.e. comedy, drama etc.) observe her class and offer input to the students about their acting skills. Improvisation is a big part of the theater class as well. The teacher gives them scene prompts in the context of whatever play they are currently studying and the students take over from there. Improv helps the students improve their acting by

figuring out how to play a scene on their own. The teacher also said that improv helps students act from the heart. Acting with heart is one of the most important elements of theater because “le théâtre sans coeur est impossible.” Theater without heart is impossible. The French professor understood the importance of teaching students how to act with emotion and feeling. The verb for acting in french is “jouer” which means “to play.” The exercises the theater students did were aimed to help them understand the playful and intimate nature of theater.

Alongside improv, memorization and performance are another large part of the theater curriculum. Similar to the U.S., French students are required to learn their lines at home and have their scenes ready to perform during class time. The teacher will spend 15-30 minutes watching each student’s scene and giving them advice as they act, then having them start over at certain spots and play the scene in different ways. In my theater class it is less common for my teacher to give notes and suggestions during performances. Due to the high class volume it would be nearly impossible for my teacher to make time to give 15-30 minutes of critique and suggestions to each individual scene. Rather she gives us all a paper with some notes on how to improve our individual acting instead of how to improve the specific scene we perform.

The plays that the French students would study and perform scenes of were commonly written by the famous French playwrights Moliere, Claudel, and they also studied the well-known English playwright Shakespeare. The students would spend a week studying and learning scenes from one play before moving onto a different one the next week. The first week I visited the school they were studying one of Moliere’s most popular plays, *Tartuffe*. The second week I visited they were studying a play called *Le Soulier de Satin* by Claudel. It is not common for my theater class to spend time studying one play. Instead we all pick scenes from varying

plays that have a common genre to them (i.e. drama, comedy, etc.) Then we spend 3-4 days practicing and memorizing our scenes before performing them for the class.

The layout of the French theater classroom and the utilities they have available to them are equally similar and different to my American theater classroom. Both facilities have a type of theater called a “black box.” This type of theater is a big square room with a black floor, walls, and ceiling. It is an easily changeable space that can be modified to fit any scene. The French students practiced and performed their scenes in the black box just like the students in my theater class do. However, the big difference was the lack of a proscenium theater within the school. At Stillwater High School we have a performing arts center that has a black box, proscenium theater, and technological theater classroom all in one building, but at the french school they only had one theater classroom that had an adjoining black box. When I asked the teacher if they put on their own productions and where they perform them, she said they are commonly invited to perform their plays at public theaters within town. The lack of their own stage does not mean the French theater program is without money. The annual budget for the theater department is 15,000 euros. The annual budget for the theater department at Stillwater High School is \$7,500.

Another big difference was how the French school teaches the technological side of theater (lighting, sound, props, etc.). At Stillwater High School we have a class specifically for teaching tech theater and the students in the class all help produce the fall and spring productions. The tech theater class is a big part of the theater education at my high school. The acting students need the tech students and vice versa to have a successful production. At Madeleine Michelis they do not have a class specifically for tech theater, but they discuss and observe the technological aspects of theater while on field trips to plays or in class. The professor wants her students to understand all the parts of what goes into putting on a play but did not

think it was important for them to go into depth about technological theater. When they put on plays the lighting/sound is done by the tech director at whichever theater they are using to produce their play.

There are many differences between theater education in the U.S. vs France. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to observe them and broaden my knowledge on theater as a whole with this experience.

Bibliography

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/theater-alive-and-well-in-u-s-high-schools-new-data-suggest/>

[2012/12](#)

