

# 20 QUESTIONS

## ON THEORY + ACTION WITH ANN M. SHANAHAN

As part of this issue's focus on what's happening in the academy, *SDC Journal* spoke with Peer-Reviewed Section Co-Editor Ann M. Shanahan, who taught at Loyola University Chicago for many years and is now Chair of the Department of Theatre at Purdue University. She explains how she puts theory into practice in her creative and scholarly work.

### Describe your professional identity in two words.

Scholar-artist, teacher.

### Why did you become a director?

I chose to pursue my MFA in directing because I knew early in my life that I wanted to teach theatre at the university level, and I needed a terminal degree to do that. Of the options—PhD or MFA—I chose the MFA, since it was an applied degree, and of the various designations, directing seemed the most holistic. I suspected this broad, interdisciplinary training would serve me well as a teacher—and it has.

To answer openly, I wanted to know it *all*, to do it *all*—put theory into action and action into theory. I chose to pursue theatre because that path allowed me to study—with my whole self: mind, body, spirit—*everything* for the rest of my life, and teaching in higher education allowed me to do that alongside experts in all fields, and with students who, like myself at the time, see theatre as a way to contribute the most of themselves to the world.

I went to a unique undergraduate program—the Residential College at the University

of Michigan. All three faculty were Brecht scholars, and there was a company in residence there, the Brecht Company, devoted to producing plays by Brecht and those that could be informed by his theories. I jokingly say I was “suckled at the teat of Bertolt Brecht,” which is a somewhat perverse but accurate description of how my training in Brecht's theories shaped me as an artist and how in some ways I've used his techniques against themselves, combining feminist strategies with his to expose bias and privilege and to dismantle these through theatremaking.

### What are some of your favorite projects you've directed?

*Fefu and Her Friends* (three times), *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll's House* (twice), *Orlando*.

### Describe a directing project that changed how you approach your work.

Ten years ago, I was asked to direct *Hedda Gabler* and *Medea* in the same year at a crucial time in my tenure “clock,” as it's dubbed in academia. Directing these two plays together with a view to how this creative activity could inform more traditional scholarship for tenure purposes, I was prompted to draw parallels between the two



plays, written millennia apart. I saw similarities in the stories of two powerful, creative women characters ending in self-destruction, in one with child-killing and in the other suicide (when pregnant). I was struck by how Euripides and Ibsen rendered these similar events on stage, drawing attention to spatial dynamics within the conventions of their respective periods. This inspired a line of inquiry I've traced through every production I've directed (and many I've seen) since of the relationship of women characters to spaces, specifically domestic spaces. This has expanded over the years to consideration of gender and space more broadly, and to development of a theoretical framework for understanding and staging plays with these subjects.

### What do you love about working in the academy and with students? How does it feed you as an artist?

Teaching is a deeply creative act. Teaching forces me to get clear on ideas in order to communicate them; to see gaps in my knowledge, holes in my thinking, and blind spots in my points of view. Teaching in higher education helps me embrace the dialogic and interdisciplinary nature of theatre. My richest experiences lately have been in women's studies and gender studies, with faculty from history, nursing, communication, classics, social work, art history, sociology. I work with a group of scholars who were brave enough to perform Fornés's *Fefu and Her Friends* in a mansion on campus a few years ago.

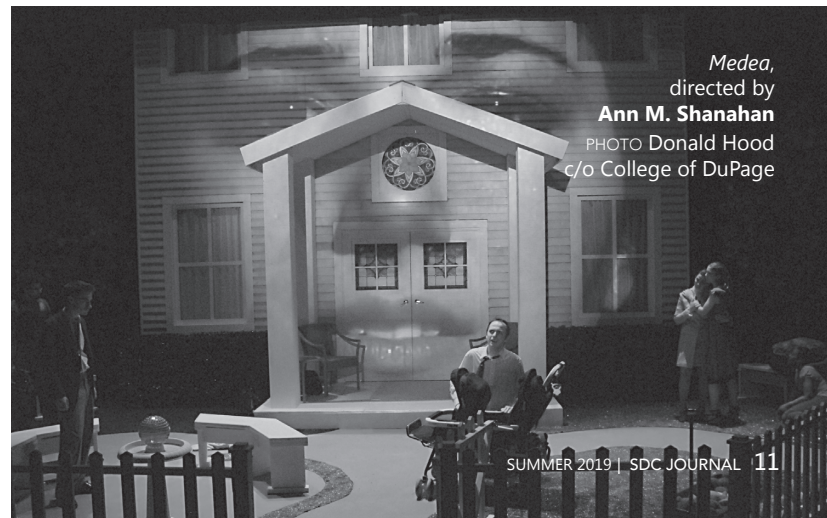
Bethy Poulakis + Eliza Stoughton  
in *Hedda Gabler*, directed by  
Ann M. Shanahan

PHOTO John Flak c/o Loyola  
University Chicago, Department  
of Fine and Performing Arts



*Medea*,  
directed by  
Ann M. Shanahan

PHOTO Donald Hood  
c/o College of DuPage



We wrote about that project as a model of interdisciplinary research. Through this group, I was introduced to bell hooks's pedagogical strategies, based in part on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which aim to reduce hierarchies in the classroom so that students and teachers become equal partners in learning. These methods have impacted my approaches to directing: I'm exploring feminist practices that decenter the director in the process and foster more collective meaning-making than traditional models.

### What are your main passions and interests as a director/scholar?

I've become invested in exploring the relationship of gender to space. I've found that as you track plays with these subjects across time, the dramaturgy almost always leads to "liminal" spaces—in the fictional setting of the plays, between styles, genders, actor and audience. These liminal spaces—liminal coming from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold—is a space between. Borrowing from anthropology (Victor Turner) and "liminal phases," these spaces are potent for change.

### How does your scholarly framework of gender and space inform your work as a director?

As I've staged a number of plays about women and houses, I've seen common motifs. I've developed a series of strategies for pointing out and perhaps even easing oppressions inherent in the play—its time of writing, its fictional setting, and those that arise in contemporary production. I've come to understand the depiction of women and houses—in plays from the *Oresteia* to *A Doll's House, Part 2*—as inherently theatrical, such that the rubrics developed can be applied to understanding spatial dynamics in virtually any play, even those that do not overtly contain women and houses as subjects.

I've also found that, while I can understand plays through this rubric by reading them and by seeing the choices a director makes in production, the theories manifest fully only by physically staging the plays with actors and designers in real time and space. I would argue for this unique symbiotic relationship between theory and practice for almost any line of inquiry in theatre, but I've found it especially potent with these subjects.

### How does reflection impact your work?

Coming recently from a Jesuit institution where reflection is part of a cycle of living, I love that you used that word. What's key here, though, is that the reflection happens in *action*; they are not distinct processes—reflect, then act—but symbiotic: I think *while* and *in* doing. This way of knowing resonates

with the growing field of Performance as Research (PAR), which advances theory-making through performance. It's also why I wanted to work in higher education, because it's here we can do the thinking, experimenting, developing. Stages, studios, and classrooms are laboratories—no less valuable to the world than the lab spaces where my colleagues in the sciences develop cures for cancer.

### We hear you are working on a few books. Can you tell us a little about them?

This year, I've had chapters published in three books: "Making Room(s): Staging Plays about Women and Houses" in *Performing Dream Homes: Theater and the Spatial Politics of the Domestic Sphere*, edited by Emily Klein, Jen-Scott Mobley, and Jill Stevenson; "Pirated Pedagogy: Performing Brecht as Radical Teaching Demonstration" in *New Directions in Teaching Theatre Arts*, edited by Anne Flitsos and Gail Medford; and "Teaching Maria Irene Fornés's *Fefu and Her Friends*" in *How to Teach a Play: Exercises for the University Classroom*, edited by Miriam Chirico and Kelly Younger. I am a volume editor in a new series from Bloomsbury Methuen, *Great North American Theatre Directors*, edited by Jim Peck. I'm editing the book on Meredith Monk, Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson, and I'm writing one of the chapters on Meredith Monk, entitled "Creating Interdisciplinary Spaces." I'm longing to gather the articles I've developed on gender and space into a book-length project.

### What are some of the fruitful intersections between SDC and the academy?

I've been honored to be a part of this conversation since 2014, first with Sharon Ott and then Laura Penn when we met at ATHE conferences and set plans to start the Peer-Reviewed Section of *SDC Journal* along with members of ATHE's Directing Program. SDC had recently done a survey and was looking to respond to the needs of the near-30 percent of its Members working in the academy. This percentage can be explained in part by economic realities directors face today in making a living; many directors and choreographers combine sources of income to include work in higher education, as I have done. However, I think the reasons for the large number of directors teaching connects to the similarities in teaching and directing that drew me to

both fields. Directors are communicators on a grand scale; so are teachers. The most fruitful intersections between SDC and the academy are those that reflect and support this *simpatico*—that don't promote the deadly old adage "those who can't do, teach." My confidence and artistry as a director has grown exponentially since I began co-editing for the *Journal*, joined the editorial advisory board, and became an Associate Member (as did many of my colleagues in the academy). I love knowing that I can apply for an Observership, that outlets to develop artistically are right there, that I can call on this professional community to help work through things—from the practical to deeply challenging issues; I love that I can offer ways to connect students to the resources of this professional community, in career development and as artistic inspiration. That SDC is a labor union, with a roster of Members including all the directors I've observed and admired and whose work I teach, gives meaningful practical context to everything I do. As I face challenges in the classroom or rehearsal hall, among colleagues, even with academic administration—when I experience joys, successes—I think about them now in the context of this community and the long history of our field; I am bolstered and made braver being part of it. What SDC offers by reducing divisions between the profession and the academy is genuinely fruitful in this potent liminal space that many of us occupy.

### "Interdisciplinary" and "multidisciplinary" are currently big buzzwords. What are the advantages of being multidisciplinary?

I think of theatre as the perfect interdisciplinary art, in an embodied, communal form, and in that theatre artists and teachers have a lot to contribute to the conversation. The work I do in women's studies and gender studies is rich because of the interdisciplinary exchanges. The old model of disciplinary silos is not working; our culture is recognizing that we won't solve urgent problems by approaching them from one perspective.



Betsy Jones Hemenway + Ann M. Shanahan in *Fefu and Her Friends*  
PHOTO c/o Loyola University Chicago, Department of Fine and Performing Arts + Room(s) Theatre

However, the academy isn't yet set up to support interdisciplinary work; the means and spaces for this to occur haven't been created. One can exhaust oneself trying to do it within the old pervading structures.

**Have you seen major shifts in approaches to theatre training in the last 10–20 years?**

One shift in the last couple of decades has been a recognition of the value of applied work, the rise of the MFA degree, and, more recently, a reconsideration of the proliferation of programs that has generated. I think we are in the most significant shift I've experienced right now—starting about two years ago. The biggest revolutions are in long-overdue, accelerated advances toward equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).

**How are revolutions surrounding EDI impacting theatre departments?**

Folks are finally looking at the biases inherent in traditional models: who has been privileged and who has been marginalized. Efforts to reduce inequities and biases are thankfully rocking the old systems across the board. This impacts season selection, hiring, training methods, skills taught, casting practices, texts covered, pedagogies, rehearsal protocols, and etiquettes, to name only a few.

**What role can theatre departments play in these big conversations and changes?**

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of theatre, the communal aspects, and especially the involvement of real bodies, the theatre discipline puts us at the front of these conversations and changes. Issues we encounter staging a scene involving intimacy or violence are different (though related) to issues one might encounter reading that material in a work of fiction or an archival document. We face questions and challenges on a more complex basis and can serve as leaders in creating holistic means to respond to them that might be useful across disciplines.

**Who do you think leads change in theatre practices, the academy or the profession?**

There is not one answer to this; it's circular. On the one hand, I've heard the argument that work in the academy is prompting pressures for changes in the profession. This sometimes seems under-laced with an idea that lofty ivory-tower idealism leads to unreasonable demands that can't be met in the "real world." It's certainly true that universities are filled with the artists and audiences of the future, and that those folks carry the zeitgeist of that future better than those of us in middle or late career. On the flip side, I have also heard repeatedly arguments against changes in training methods because of realities of the

profession, because they correspond to the professional norms.

**Do you think directors are suited to take on leadership roles in theatre departments?**

Absolutely, yes. Directors are leaders, and our field intersects with all aspects of the theatre arts and the study of them.

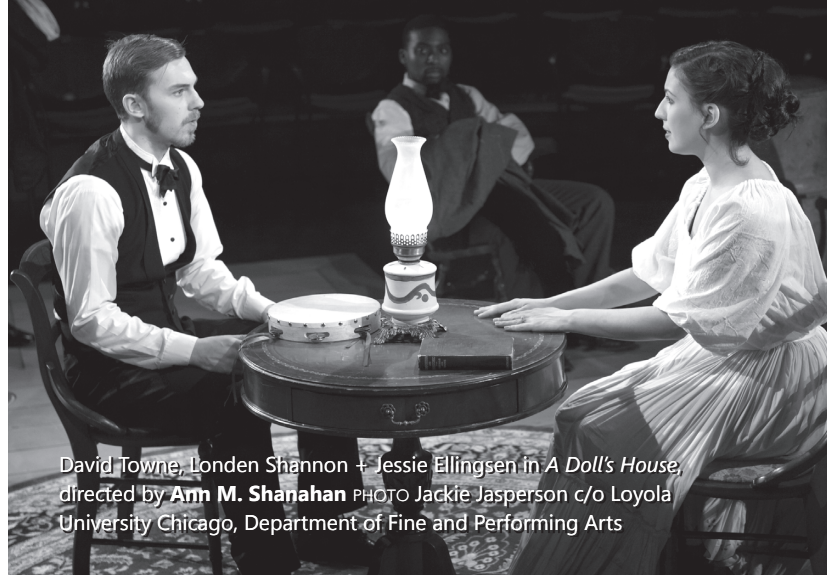
**Speaking of leadership, congratulations on your new position as Chair of the Department of Theatre at Purdue University. What are some of the challenges and opportunities that this new role brings?**

Thank you. The new position is really thrilling—overwhelming at times, but engaging and exciting always. After coming from a liberal arts-based institution in Chicago, it's exciting joining the faculty at a Research 1 institution known primarily for engineering and agriculture—as they sometimes say, here "in the middle of the cornfields in Indiana." But the seriousness of the research is exciting, and in some ways that's augmented by the location. The university supports research and creative work as part of its mission and in recognition of the need for support because of the location.

Purdue's theatre department has a great reputation nationally because of the work of colleagues such as Anne Fliotsos (Founding Co-editor with me of the *SDC Journal* Peer-Reviewed Section) on women stage directors, and Rick Thomas, my colleague in sound design. But even local folks aren't familiar with the department, in a school so well known for engineering. The challenge and the opportunity is to work in the tradition of my colleagues to position the arts as one of the areas in which we can realize Purdue's mission of "moving the world forward" in a culture prone to seeing the arts as the "sprinkles on top" instead of foundational to any great endeavor.

**Do you have any reflections on being a woman in a theatre leadership position during this moment in time?**

I am grateful to be taking on a position of leadership at a time when the culture understands the need for equity, at least in philosophy if not yet fully in practice. I feel prepared to navigate multiple demands by



David Towne, Londen Shannon + Jessie Ellingsen in *A Doll's House*, directed by Ann M. Shanahan PHOTO Jackie Jaspersen c/o Loyola University Chicago, Department of Fine and Performing Arts

my experience living in the world for 51 years, identifying as a woman. I hope that my experience navigating the systematic biases and individual blindspots to privilege by folks historically in power gives me the insight to recognize my own as a white, cisgendered, middle-aged woman. I draw daily on role models I've watched over the years who give me skills in the "shape-shifting" required of women in leadership roles. I also have to say that shape-shifting is sometimes exhausting, and one of the most valuable ways I draw on the examples of role models is in observing how they take care of themselves and each other.

**What will you miss about Chicago?**

I miss ready access to the professional theatre and the artists working in it. Writing this, I realize too that many Chicago directors are PhDs or coming out of performance studies programs. Activism, collectivism, physical theatre, and scholar-artists are more common in Chicago than in some regional theatres or in New York. Living there for 27 years, I was really shaped by those aspects of the theatre culture, and it's only in leaving that I see that so clearly.

**What are some of your hopes for your students and for the future of undergraduate and graduate theatre training in the US?**

I hope that the training methods and mechanism that correspond with equitable practices and access are the unquestioned norm; that students are trained as I was to see theatre as a powerful tool to change the world, to expose biases and privileges, and to dismantle inequities where they find them. I hope that students will continue to use this training in theatre to examine theatremaking methods themselves, and that all students will feel free to be fully themselves and to engage with honesty and love with the material and methods they encounter and generate. **sx**