

# BERGEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

# MATCHES NEW THEATRE TECHNOLOGY TO STUDENT NEEDS



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PHOTO BY BERGEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A student in the theatre technician program at Bergen Community College adjusts stage lighting.

It's not likely that a graduate who studied scenery or lighting will get a job on or off-Broadway without knowing Vectorworks. It's also not likely that a technical theatre student at Bergen Community College, Paramus, N.J., will graduate without the opportunity to be exposed to it before attending a four-year school where it will be required.

We are 10 miles from one of the most competitive theatre markets in the world – Manhattan. And this means we give students what they need to thrive in their four-year college and in the real world, or we won't survive in the academic world.

The real world, besides on- and off-Broadway, includes our area's popular summer stock, community and regional theatres, all of which can pick from the most talented theatre graduates – graduates who know technology and how to use it.

In order to develop the sought-after graduate, technology is incorporated into the curriculum which means it is an integral part of student theatre productions, ranging from minimal-set plays such as "Our Town" to major musicals like "Peter Pan."

Innovative design software like Vectorworks and other programs, allow the college's technical staff and students to design scenery and lighting with greater efficiency. These two areas – lighting and set design – can be created collaboratively – eliminating the tradition of lighting and set designers working independently. This technology-enabled learning collaboration makes more sense.

## BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

In addition to immersing theatre students in their work through periodicals such as *Stage Directions* magazine and *Dramatics*, Bergen creates relationships with local and national sound, lighting and stagecraft businesses in order to provide a career path to entry-level jobs for graduates, and to stay current with the newest theatre technology.

Bergen Technical Coordinator, Thomas O'Neill, ensures that the college creates relationships with area businesses bring the latest technology to our theatre program. In addition to product, the businesses provide technology seminars for technical staff and theatre students.

"Having a relationship with these businesses is symbiotic. They teach us, and we rent their latest equipment on a show-by-show basis. This means we can incorporate innovative technology in our academics and provide students with a direct application of that technology in a practical setting in the current theatre production," O'Neill said.

"This saves money without diminishing the learning experience because students learn

new technology without creating a major dent in the theatre program's budget," he added.

## MIXING MOTION AND MULTIMEDIA

New presentation software and video equipment improvements have allowed the college to enhance its productions by incorporating multimedia into theatrical design. Projecting still images and incorporating moving images into the set design keeps the college as technologically current as any Broadway show, professional dance company, or mainstream concert.

For example, the creative design method that uses moving images in the 2010 Broadway production of Noel Coward's "Brief Encounters" is incorporated into Bergen's curriculum – most recently incorporated in our student production of the musical "Cabaret."

Multimedia does not have to be used in every production, but it's a great investment for any technical theatre program. It is a way to enhance a set and lighting design and at the same time present a new and exciting element to our theatre students as well as our audiences.

Bergen realizes it has to have a technical

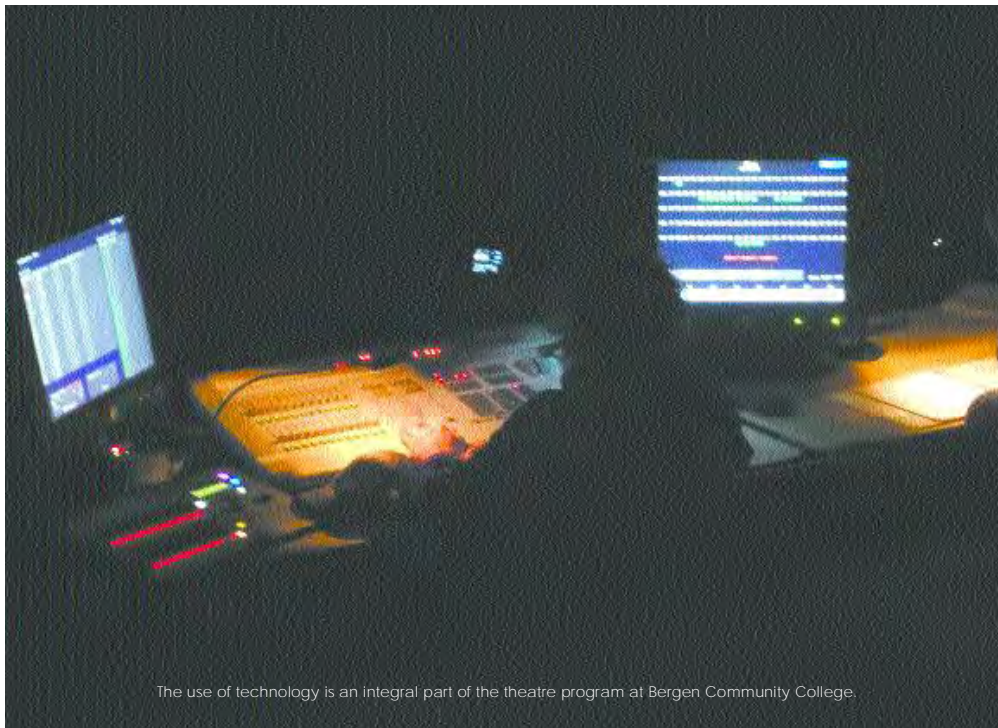
Bergen realizes it has to have a technical theatre program that inspires new theatre designers and technicians. The days of turning old coffee cans into lighting equipment are over.

theatre program that inspires new theatre designers and technicians. The days of turning old coffee cans into lighting equipment are far behind us.

## NEW, HOWEVER, DOESN'T ALWAYS REPLACE OLD

Although most of us don't have to use coffee cans anymore, before we throw out lighting components such as the Mini-ellipsoidal Zoom, which is 30 years old and is replaced with a Source Four, we need to realize that education

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The use of technology is an integral part of the theatre program at Bergen Community College.

PHOTO: BERGEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## Theatre, from page 3, col. 4

is about recognizing technology transition, and this means students need to know both. If they go to a theatre with either one, they need to be ready to work.

Applying this concept to the unseen lighting components, O'Neill noted that, "compared with even a few years ago, modern dimmers are modular and computerized. DMX cables carry the digital signal. Cue changes are either automatic or controlled with a single switch."

"We don't need previous generation lighting boards that required a light board operator to set up the next scene and cross-fade into it," he continued. "However, a graduate may encounter any of these antiquated lighting system components in a small off-off -Broadway or community theatre."

Moving forward while looking backward is essential so students can engage productively across timelines to meet the needs of employers and the expectations of audiences.

### HEARING'S LOSS IS TECHNOLOGY'S GAIN

Whether you blame it on ear buds, 600 watts pumping through the sub-woofer in the back of the SUV, or age, technology allows audiences with reduced hearing capacity to enjoy live theatre in a way not possible even a few years ago.

Although O'Neill explains sound basics are pretty much the same as they were 50 years ago, microphone and speaker quality is not. Technology, most of it relatively inexpensive, has moved quickly to fill the hearing gap that will only get wider as a large percentage of the audience population grows older.

The cleanness of a digital signal, radio-frequency headsets that can not only provide high quality sound to the hard-of-hearing, but

also carry simultaneous translations, and digital mixing consoles with line arrays, means a person can hear the singer over the band, or the whisper in the wind.

The theatre-going experience is enhanced, often unconsciously, through this improved sound technology. How do we know? The seniors aren't invoking their stage whisper to ask, "What did she say?" to the person next to them.

### SOCIAL MEDIA MEANS FRONT-OF-HOUSE TECHNOLOGY IS FREE

Our audiences have increased steadily over the past five years, and although there is no way to map increased attendance to social media, we know it is indispensable. A sell-out performance is only possible with word-of-mouth communication – especially on a college campus.

But word-of-mouth today is also word-of-mouth.

Fan pages, uploaded rehearsal and opening-night photos and videos, likes and dislikes, hot or not, comments, reviews, tweets, and old-fashion e-mails give us the freedom to advertise free. If we don't use social media extensively and creatively, we are not serving our community.

When there is even one empty seat in the theatre, it means someone who wanted to see our show didn't know about it. That's our fault. We could blame it on the lack of an advertising budget in the past, but today, we can only blame it on our inability or unwillingness to embrace the technology that gives us social media.

At Bergen, we collaborate with graphic design students to create posters and the public relations department to help with conventional as well as social media. The poster, although indispensable, is powerless if it's only taped to a wall and not converted to a PDF for emailing or linked to social media

sites.

And while we all want a glowing review from the *New York Times*, often a simple electronic "thumbs-up" from the right campus influencers is a more powerful attendance inducement among our target audience.

### OTHERS SEE WHAT WE CAN'T

We don't really know where technology will take us. People who look at the world very differently transform oblique ideas into reality that can serve us.

Every time we think "everything's up to date in Kansas City," as Will Parker sang in "Oklahoma!" we learn "it ain't necessarily so," as Sportin' Life sang in "Porgy and Bess"

The culture of a college like Bergen invites creativity, innovation and discovery. Our job is to be the stewards who welcome technology, even when, like Twitter, it originally seemed like the wrong answer to an unasked question. We need to nurture the students who will use and modify technology in ways we won't always understand. We need to be active teachers and passive observers as the combination of technology, their work, and our guidance, provide the bridge to a better, more productive life. ▲

*Contributing to this article were Thomas O'Neill, BCC technical coordinator and Louis Tharp.*

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## Community College Week

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE COVERING COMMUNITY, TECHNICAL AND JUNIOR COLLEGES, SINCE 1988

Published by Autumn Publishing Enterprises, Inc.

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE WEEK (ISSN 1041-5726) is published biweekly, 26 issues per year, by Autumn Publishing Enterprises, Inc., PO Box 1305, Fairfax, VA 22038, (703) 978-3535. Single subscription: \$52 per year; two years: \$90. Canadian and foreign rates furnished upon request.

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AT FAIRFAX, VA 22030

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:

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