

STAGING CLEVELAND

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

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**Theater Artists Are Comfortable
in the Halls of Higher Education**

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100 TIMES MORE

For Christopher Bohan, visiting assistant professor of theater at Case Western Reserve University, teaching at the college level changed his life and his acting career.

“I really had no intention of teaching,” he recalls of his first decade in theater. “I just wanted to be a professional actor.” When he decided to pursue his MFA in his early 30s, he chose The Hillberry Theatre program at Wayne State University in Detroit, because it was strictly performance-based with no adjunct teaching requirements.

Then, while studying at the Moscow Art Theater School in Russia, Bohan and his wife Kristie met an actress from Philadelphia who convinced them to try the theater scene there, after he completed his degree in 2007. They found Philly to be a vibrant theater town, and he enjoyed working as an actor there and even started his own company, Red Square Theatre. But he needed additional employment to supplement his income. He notified his undergraduate alma mater, Lehigh University, that he was in town, and soon after they contacted him about teaching acting. The pay was good, but the complete enthusiasm and lack of ego of the students was even better.

“I had 16 students that had never done theater before but were 100 times more eager to work hard, engage in the story of a play and figure out who their characters were than the professional actors I was working with,” Bohan informs. “After my first week of teaching, I got home from work one night and said to my wife, ‘This is what I want to do.’”

In 2012, he learned of a faculty opening at CWRU, and started in the fall of 2012. He now teaches Acting 1 & 2, improvisation and movement classes, performs at various theaters and enjoys time with his family because Cleveland is so affordable and livable.

“The reason I’m still in the classroom is because it’s what gets me up in the morning,” he declares.

TEACHING IS A PERFORMANCE

Teaching at the university level offers theater artists a substantial full- or part-time income that can help subsidize their theater earnings. According to the analysis within a recent CPAC study, “not only does the category of *Art, Drama and Music Teachers, Postsecondary* represent the largest number of workers in the theater in Cleveland, it is also the most lucrative from a financial standpoint, with average wages of \$71,000.”

Primarily a playwright, actor, poet and writer, Mary Weems, PhD, found an effective way to integrate her theater skills with teaching. She started teaching after earning her master’s degree in English with

an emphasis on creative writing at Cleveland State University in 1996. That summer, she co-taught her first class in creative writing, and then taught English composition part-time at CSU until leaving to pursue her doctorate in the fall of 1998.

While attending the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Education Policy Studies Department, she helped start a social issue-based theater program. “The faculty was satisfied with the plays they were presenting, but not with the student moderation afterwards,” Weems explains. “So, they hired me to design and teach a course that would help students become better moderators.”

Upon completing her doctorate, she returned to Cleveland, where she has taught at John Carroll University for six years and as a visiting professor in cultural studies at Ohio University for one year. To encourage her students’ creativity and more active engagement in the subjects, her midterm exams required the students to pose a question pertinent to the material, write a response, and then perform it for the class.

“To me, at best, teaching is a performance,” she says. “I don’t lecture. I’m more a facilitator or the learning experience.”

I HAVE TIME

Unlike Bohan, Michael Geither had always wanted to teach, but just couldn’t find a college position after graduating from the University of Iowa’s Writer’s Workshop. He ended up working as a research coordinator at the Cleveland Clinic. Geither enjoyed working in the field of medicine, and he was just about to pursue advanced education to become a Physician’s Assistant when a job opened in the English Department at CSU, his undergraduate alma mater, in the fall of 2003.

“I’m fortunate that job came up when it did,” says the well-established playwright. “I would be happy being a PA, but I like teaching a lot more, and quite honestly, having four months off each year to write is not bad.” Now a tenured associate professor, he has also taken a one-year sabbatical to write.

Like Bohan, however, he thoroughly enjoys the ability to spend time with his wife and two young boys that his job in higher education allows. “I love my job because I have time to do my own writing, then I have time to spend with my kids, so it’s been a great life,” Geither says.

BEING REAL

Over at Tri-C Metro, Jimmie Woody, an acclaimed Cleveland actor, serves as an adjunct theater instructor and directs shows at Tri-C. In fact, he got his job there in 2004 after playing Hamlet in a Tri-C production of the play and was asked if he would like to teach. He now teaches Acting 1 through 4 and Acting for the Camera 1 and 2. He’s also assisted classes at Kent State University, his alma mater, and CWRU.

Woody says the thing he enjoys most is the broad mix of students who attend his classes. “At Tri-C, we get a really diverse group of individuals that are pursuing higher education,” he states. “So the fun thing for me is I might have a classroom with a 16-year-old all the way up to an 80- or 90-year-old, predominantly African-American, but nice mixes of people.”

In the acting classroom, he focuses on being “real” with his students, who often expect they will be on the road to fame and riches after taking one class. “I tell all of my students, if fame or money comes, great, but you want to find a profession that you love what you do, whether you’re paid a lot of money or a little money or no money at all.”

He also emphasizes the fact that you can benefit from learning how to act in multiple ways, not just playing Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Having the confidence to present publicly can help students advance in any profession, a lesson he learned while earning his MFA in acting at Columbia University, where doctors and attorneys took beginner acting classes to improve their public speaking and leadership skills.

One of the other aspects of teaching he enjoys as a theater artist is his ability to grow creatively while giving back, which he’s always done, even back to working with kids at the Jackie Robinson YMCA on 135th Street in Manhattan while at Columbia.

“Being able to cultivate myself as an artist while still giving back as a teacher is very important,” Woody concludes.