Introduction

For the past several years, the Theatre Arts Department’s work with program review has focused on one principal assessment tool – the department’s Senior Projects. Conceived as capstone experiences for majors, the projects are meant to both coalesce the work done by students during their careers at Westmont, and also transcend it, by demonstrating individual conceptual faculties and methods of work evidenced in a project of the students’ choosing. These projects are an integral element of our program, and an important tool to track, evaluate, and assess student development and learning. Though they cut across all aspects of our department and several of the department’s goals, they are directly applicable to the department’s primary goal, which reads:

**Theatre Arts students will cultivate their own individual creative spirits, and display the necessary imagination, technical expertise, and courageous self-discipline necessary for effective, dynamic work on the stage.**

For the 2006-2007 academic year, the department turned its attention to another integral component of the department’s program, also directly applicable to the primary goal stated above. The department’s “Fringe Festival” is designed as a year-end festival of student work that is largely conceived, developed, performed, and generated by students. It gets its name from a particular orientation to contemporary theatre that might be described experimental or alternative, and is concerned with new approaches to the art form, be it in content, method, style, or form. The department is particularly interested in encouraging the generative nature of the art form as well as the interpretative, and the fringe festival provides an excellent vehicle for the student’s original ideas, concepts, and imagination.

II. The Fringe Festival

“The Fringe,” as it has come to be known both in and out of the department, is conceived as an interdisciplinary performance festival. It involves several different kinds of work: student generated performance pieces, plays, short films, and dances; faculty-generated pieces that emerge from specific Theatre Arts courses, such as Theatre Arts 11 – Acting II; and Theatre Arts 31/131 – Dance Performance; and student-generated pieces that emerge from Theatre Arts courses, such as Theatre Arts 125 – Directing for the Theatre. Several main features characterize The Fringe: It is a multi-performance, multi-venue festival that allows for students to explore the range and scope of contemporary performance; it provides opportunities for faculty to explore non-scripted or “devised” theatre; and it has the reputation as one of the most exciting programmatic features of the department. It also stretches the department’s resources to their absolute limits. Of the many reasons to use The Fringe as an assessment tool, the faculty thinks it important to solve some of the structural and organizational weaknesses of the project, while still
maintaining the energy, vitality, and exuberance of the process, as well as the performances themselves. These structures include faculty oversight guidelines, technical support, administrative support, promotion of the festival, and outcomes in performance that reflect the passion, energy and hard work of the process.

**Fringe Festival Spring 2007**

This past Fringe Festival included 17 pieces, 5 venues, and 65 student performers, directors, choreographers, and designers. Principally created to allow students to create their own pieces in a mentor-student learning environment, The Fringe explores and celebrates student creativity, originality, and imagination, while it tests the students emerging knowledge of the theory and practice of the modern stage. A quick sampling of 2007 Fringe pieces includes “Redemption History,” created by Zak Landrum – a ritual theatre piece that explores the promise of Jesus’ coming, and his time on earth leading up to his crucifixion; “String,” written by Casey Caldwell, and performed beneath a tree on the Westmont campus; “Through the Streets of Grass,” choreography created by senior Megan Griffith; “Don’t be fooled by me,” created collaboratively in Mitchell Thomas’s Acting II course; “The Beat,” choreographed by Erlyne Whiteman and “Sinatra Suite,” choreographed by Victoria Finlayson, both danced by students enrolled in Dance Performance courses. As envisioned by the department’s faculty, The Fringe presents opportunities for students to create work that is demonstrably “original” in form, content, and style. These projects encourage students to experience the generative nature of the theatre artist, which is important in a discipline that fuses both creative/generative and interpretive/analytical functions. Therefore, The Fringe exemplifies several significant department principles – that theatre education be integrative, synthetic, and holistic; that it teach theory and history while it engages in artistic praxis; and that the generative faculties of the theatre artist be tested, encouraged, and shaped to a similar degree as the cognitive and interpretive aspects of the discipline. The Fringe provides material for that, and the department is committed to using The Fringe as an important teaching tool far into the future.

For the last several years The Fringe has been the culminating set of performances in the department. It has generated a great deal of interest in the department, in the college, and in the greater Santa Barbara area. This festival has begun to characterize the nature and scope of the department more and more, and the faculty find that students prepare and plan for doing a performance “on The Fringe” for great amounts of time. This report is an effective way to analyze the success of The Fringe, and offer opportunities for the department to provide better guidance and oversight to students as they create work for the festival. This report focuses on the work the department did on the Fringe for the previous academic year, and provides a working set of principles that can help future development and enhancement of this very important part of the program.

To date, the guiding principles of the Fringe have been provided by the following document:
Mission
The Westmont Fringe festival encourages artists and audiences alike to approach live performance with a feeling of spontaneity and willingness to take risks, promoting fresh ideas, imagination, and fun. Based on the model of fringe festivals around the world, the Westmont Fringe offers a unique opportunity for faculty and students to challenge themselves to experience life and live art in a fresh new way, and celebrates a free-wheeling and daring approach to theatre making. The festival provides a venue for the creation of experimental theatre, dance, film, and performance art within the Christian Liberal arts setting.

How to get involved
A one-page proposal describing your project must be turned in to the festival committee by Friday, February 16, 2007 for acceptance into the festival. The proposal should include your purpose or intent for developing the piece, how it fits with the fringe mission, and why you are excited about it! (application form on other side of this sheet)

Guidelines
The nature of the festival is original, experimental performance. Feel free to explore alternative performance spaces, adapt text from a non-dramatic source, and to take risks! In thinking about your projects, keep in mind that due to the sheer number of pieces involved you will have minimum technical support.

There will be a showing of your work to the festival committee during the week of April 2-6, 2007, to help encourage the work and to get a sense of the final piece. Final acceptance into the festival is at the discretion of the committee.

Further questions? Contact Erlyne Whiteman or other faculty members.

Fringe Festival Proposal Form
Due: February 16th

Title: _________________________________

Approx. Length: ________________________

Faculty Mentor (advisor): _______________________________

Please describe the specific needs of your project. (what you know)
This includes music, costumes, lighting, video, technical support, props, alternative performance spaces, stage managers, actors, dancers, musicians, etc.
For consideration in the festival please make an appt. with Erlyne Whiteman by February 16. Please bring this completed form and a one page written proposal to the meeting and be ready to discuss your ideas and vision.

Looking forward to working with all of you!

Erlyne Whiteman, John Blondell, Mitchell Thomas, Vicki Finlayson, Darcy Scanlin and Jonathan Hicks

At the year-end departmental meeting, Theatre Arts faculty discussed the success and failures of the just-completed Fringe Festival. In order to help this discussion, Professor Mitchell Thomas created a questionnaire that was completed by participants in the Fringe in which students responded to 7 questions. This questionnaire was augmented by numerous discussions that occurred in many classes in the school year’s waning days, including end-of-the-year reflections in Dance Performance, Acting, and Directing courses. The following represents the questions on the survey and in bold demonstrates the averaged responses of the students (based on 16 completed, anonymous surveys).

**Fringe Festival Survey**  
**Theatre Arts 2007**

Thank you so much for participating in this year’s festival! It was an explosive year full of interesting and creative work by everyone involved. This last year the festival nearly doubled in size, which was exciting but places new demands on how to organize such a large project. Getting as much feedback as possible from festival participants will help us to develop and refine our structures and processes in order to facilitate the best work possible for everyone involved.

1) How would you rate your overall Fringe Festival experience? (1 lowest, 10 highest)

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<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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27% gave a 9-10 rating  
53% gave a 7-8 rating  
20% gave a 5-6 meeting

A sampling of comments:  
“I felt the shows needed to be previewed before inclusion in the fringe, there were just so many different levels of quality.”  
“The artistry was amazing. The publicity was a little crazy.”

2) Please rate the quality of your experience in the following:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Artistic  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

Comments:

13% gave a 2-3 rating
14% gave a 4-6 rating
53% gave a 7-8 rating
20% gave a 9-10 rating

3) Please list the 3 greatest strengths of the festival:
   A.  
   B.  
   C.  

Sampling of comments:  creativity, innovation, enthusiasm, glorifying to God, breadth of pieces, experimental nature of pieces, community displayed, fun, strengthening artistic ability, building relationships, number of student directors, diversity of styles

4) Please list the 3 things that need the most improvement:
   A.  
   B.  
   C.  

Sampling of comments:  rehearsals, time management, communication, organization, advertising, space conflicts, more time, too many classes involved, budget restraints, ticketing, more faculty advising, underdeveloped pieces, more costume support.

How many pieces were you directly involved with? ______________
(This includes tech, performance, etc.)

27% said 1
40% said 2-3
33% said more than 3

Do you think your class work and grades suffered as a result of your participation in the fringe? If yes, do you think this is acceptable and why?

53% said yes
47% said no

Please rank the following items in terms of importance from 1 to 6 with 1 being the most important, 2 being next important, etc. (Ranking in bold)
I would like more money for a bigger budget.

I would like more faculty input, advice, or guidance on my piece as it develops.

I would like more rehearsal time.

I would like more performances of my piece.

I would like all pieces to adhere to the same length and cast size limitations. (Set-up/performance/teardown time of 30 minutes or less / cast of 5 or fewer)

I would like more emphasis on taking the work to the greater SB community.

Recognizing that rehearsal space availability and tech time scheduling are significant challenges for a small theatre program, do you have any suggestions that would help us ensure an equitable and well-organized process for everyone involved?

Sampling of final comments: take more time to plan in the fall, move it downtown for space, better communication with directors of pieces, start earlier, excited about growth and potential of fringe, the pieces need more review and critique.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO FILL OUT THIS SURVEY!
Please return to John Blondell in the Theatre Arts Department.

Additional input was available from an external source when professional reviewer Felicia Tomasko of the Santa Barbara Independent reviewed one of the evenings of the festival. The review was uniformly positive and described the evening’s performances as “I was on the edge of my seats….an evening exploring the different manifestations of the sacred within the mundane…powerful.”

The faculty then met as a group to discuss the responses to the questionnaire, and to collectively interpret the results of our survey, the review, and our own experiences and observations. Fundamentally, faculty were unanimous in their opinions regarding the many successes of the Fringe:
- The festival allows great opportunities for original student work.
- Is helpful in teaching students to be independent and self-directed.
- Provides opportunities for young artists to meet the challenges of conception, process, and execution of original pieces for the theatre.
- It is a terrific introduction to the Theatre Arts Department for many students, and provides effective foundational work in collaborative, devised theatre and dance.
- Finally, it provides an effective introduction to kinds of work that might eventually “grow” into Senior Projects.

The faculty was amazed at the artistry of the students, the ambition of many of the departments’ majors, the huge number of participants, and the high levels of success
that the majors enjoyed in terms of acting, directing, dance, choreography, and performance art. Though the department agreed that the Fringe was a huge and evident success, they also agreed that there were many problems, including:

- Limited technical support from students involved in the performances and general dissatisfaction with the technical support available.
- Communication lapses between faculty and students, which resulted in un- or under critiqued pieces.
- Too many upper division performance-oriented theatre arts courses offered concurrently, thus overloading our upper division majors and causing suffering grades.
- Suffering grades from students involved in too many performances.
- Not enough rehearsal time in their respective venues.
- A time crunch at the end, which resulted in overcrowded spaces and thinly, stretched human resources.
- A technical director who was overloaded with work and responsibility;
- Limited production values in terms of scenic and costume design.
- Poor marketing for the festival as a whole due to organizational strains.

Following reflection and discussion, the department decided to implement the following general principles in the upcoming year to improve the fringe festival:

1. Students interested in creating work for the Fringe Festival will begin a yearlong process, commencing in the fall and developing through the academic year. This will encourage greater faculty input, a longer and more intensive developmental period, and greater possibilities for student learning and success. Students will also be strongly encouraged to develop infrastructure for their pieces, which include stage management and scenographic support from fellow students.

2. In mid-November, student proposals for the fringe festival will be due, which will then be vetted by faculty for potential inclusion in the Fringe Festival. This requires the student to structure ideas a full 3 months earlier than the previous year.

3. In March of every year, faculty will schedule mandatory viewings for students to show their works-in-progress, and Fringe Festival participants will be selected by a faculty panel. This early selection of the festival pieces will allow for more effective promotion of the festival as well as enable the technical director to work more effectively with the planning and execution of the tech process prior to production. This mandatory showing will take place a full month earlier than the optional showing of the previous year.

4. Develop the Fringe Festival in the larger context of student work created by Westmont students in the arts, and expand Fringe to include Santa Barbara venues, allowing Fringe to grow into a larger celebration of the successes of student artists at Westmont, harnessing and combining the joint energy of the theatre, art, and music communities.

5. Based on the proposals, require pieces that need greater support to assemble student crews that include a stage manager, scenic and costume designer, and technical support.
This will relieve some of the responsibility of the technical and design faculty while giving the student more responsibility and experience in production management.

6. A re-orientation from spring to a fall offering of some of the upper division theatre arts courses that focus on performance (TA 111, Acting III / TA 125 Advanced Directing), so that the majors feel less overwhelmed by the demands of both performance oriented class work and the Fringe.

In addition, the department will create the following:

- An expanded mission statement for The Fringe Festival and how it fits into the work of the department.

- A fuller description and set of guidelines that can help students and faculty as they prepare for inclusion in the festival, and for guidance and oversight of it, using both the existing Fringe Festival and Senior Project guidelines as templates.

- A shared drive of data materials administered by the dept. secretary that will include dept. reports, external reviews, fringe festival information, and senior project guidelines, and other materials used to assess the program.

These tools will be created during the 2007-2008 school year, will help guide students during this year’s “Fringe Season,” and will provide valuable information for the department as it continues to refine this important, and promising, feature of our program.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the theatre arts department believes that it has made substantive, measurable progress toward both our ability to assess our development of dept. goal #1 and our assessment efforts that measure the level of our success. The department has documented its work with senior projects (capstone) during the 04/05 and 05/06 academic years, and will be completing a similar cycle of 06/07 and 07/08 in the development, refinement, and expansion of the Fringe festival. Due to the large subjective nature of evaluating dept. goal 1 (which focuses partly on performative elements of the major), the department feels comfortable targeting these two core activities of our majors because we are able to assess the work in a number of different ways: external reviews, audience feedback, student self-evaluation, and full faculty evaluation. So, as we move forward the upcoming academic year will focus on the following:

- Implementation of the six recommended changes in the fringe festival as described in this report, as well as development and refinement of Fringe mission and guidelines. (fall 2007, spring 2008)
- Develop the criteria for success, benchmark, and assess the goals and methods of the respective faculty and courses as we move into the development of department goal 2 and college wide goal 1. (spring 2008)

Below, we have listed our current status as well as the projected timeline of the remaining dept. and college-wide goals. This would put us on target to complete a full program review and assessment within the next five years.

1. Westmont College Theatre Arts students will cultivate their own individual creative spirits, and display the necessary imagination, technical expertise, and courageous self-discipline necessary for effective, dynamic work on the stage.  
   **(Presently Implemented)**

2. Westmont College Theatre Arts students will display a deep and broad understanding of the history, literature, and theory of the European theatre tradition, and contemporary American theatre practice that has derived from it.  
   **(Implemented 2008-2009)**

The college-wide goals of our present plan as are follows:

1. Westmont College Theatre Arts students will cultivate tools for effective written communication, and will display abilities to describe, evaluate, differentiate, synthesize, analyze, and interpret, toward a deep understanding of the received historical, theoretical, and practical development of theatre and drama.  
   **(Implemented 2008-2009)**

2. Westmont College Theatre Arts students cultivate tools for effective oral communication, and display flexibility, nuance, power, clarity, and the thoughtful understanding necessary to communicate fictional characters through language.  
   **(Implemented 2009-2010)**

3. Westmont college students understand their place in a diverse world, and through the department’s Globe Series and its Theatre in Central and Eastern Europe Mayterm, students display cross-cultural communication skills, flexibility, empathy, and awareness of people from other cultures.  
   **(Implemented May 2009)**

4. Christian Orientation Standard to be reconceived.  
   **(Implemented 2010-2011)**