

Tenneriello studies theater in many forms

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

“My background was in a working class/middle class family, and I had a passion for drawing when I was a kid, but we also put on a lot of theatricals. Lots of dramas, playing with things and staging things. So, my exposure to theater was not professional, it was more interactive with my friends and family.” That is how Susan Tenneriello explains how she ended up becoming a theater scholar.

A native of Bayside Queens in New York City, she obtained her doctorate in theater from the CUNY Graduate Center, and today she is an associate professor in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, CUNY.

“When I went to graduate school and I was looking for a dissertation topic, I was interested in modernism and the cross-cultural influences that were happening there, and I became interested in dance. So, I started working on a dancer named Ruth St. Denis, who’s considered the mother of modern dance in America. That’s where I began to merge my different interests, and I was doing this at a time when dance and theater weren’t really intersecting. But now the borders between disciplines have largely collapsed, especially in theater, so it’s a nice place to be,” explains Tenneriello.

This doesn’t mean that her academic approach to theater is stiffly formal—on the contrary. “I tend to think of theater as a living tradition. It has many branches, many different roots. From the second half of the 20th century on, the definitions of theater have become looser and looser,” she says.

One tendency we are seeing more and more in theater these days is physicality in the performers. “I was just in Las Vegas, and we had a tour of Cirque du Soleil’s ‘O.’ This is a water-based theater experience, and many of the performers come from all over the world. In that particular show, they’re also using former Olympic divers. Because it’s so technically challenging, they have these professional athletes.”

By pushing the envelope theatrical producers



Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

Dr. Tenneriello conversing with one of her students.

sometimes play with fire when it comes to the safety of the performers, but Tenneriello thinks they’re well aware of that concern. “They have a lot of protocols in place, and they continually review them. There’s a dialogue between the director and the stage carpenters and mechanics. They’re checking constantly, because just the mechanics of it are very dangerous, with performers jumping and leaping, which is different from Broadway theater.”

But beyond current trends, theater is almost as old as human civilization, so it is valid to ask why we as humans—regardless of culture—feel so attracted to this art form. Tenneriello thinks she knows the answer. “We are performers in our lives. We like to role-play, we like to tell the stories and inhabit all the characters. There’s something about contact. Theater is often defined as a live art, because it requires that

live interaction between the audience and the performer, so there’s an exchange of energies.”

Despite those fundamentals, theater is constantly changing and embracing new technologies. “There are many places—particularly in New York City—that are challenging ideas of what theater is and what it can be. A lot of it is hybrid works, works involving different multimedia, or dance, theater, sound and music. We have places like the Park Avenue Armory, which has been very forward-thinking in terms of its programming and bringing in different types of installation art—massive pieces of installation art that people can walk through.”

Tenneriello is concerned that travel restrictions are impeding a better cultural exchange around the world. “China has held back performers from leaving the country, and now we have visa restrictions

in the U.S., which have held countries back from performing at festivals here. There are restrictions going on, which is troubling not just to the theater community but to our culture at large.”

In many ways, these restrictions are contrary to what theater is all about: to generate empathy between performers and the public. And this is particularly true when it comes to students. “Opening up their minds to empathy and to storytelling and to sharing some kind of human exchange in that moment, whether it’s for entertainment or whether it’s more challenging or it’s political theater or it’s pure fantasy. I think what theater offers them is that we can access both their critical thinking skills and their imagination.”

An area that Tenneriello is also exploring is the opening of the Olympic Games as a form of theater. After all, they are big performance spectacles, but all have some kind of political content as well. Her approach to this topic is from a historical viewpoint. “It is a history of the opening ceremony from 1896 to 2016—that is, from Athens, Greece to the Rio Olympics that was held last year. I hope to go to Tokyo, though, in 2020, where the next summer Olympics will be held. I’m looking at the history and the development of the opening ceremony and how this particular Olympic spectacle intersects with the development of globalism throughout the 20th century into the 21st century.”

Tenneriello knows that the countries that host the games have a political agenda. “The other thing that’s interesting about these Olympic spectacles is that each country has something to say, and the staging of the performance sort of reflects the governing structure of the performance, such as the Nazi Olympics, which was this mass rally that also introduced many new firsts in Olympic culture for these spectacles. There’s a lot of content behind the scenes, so I hope to bring that forward.”

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