



Research That Reaches Out Podcast

Episode 5: Public Access Theatre with Dr. Frani Rollins

Hannah Nabi: Hello, and welcome to the Research that Reaches Out podcast from Mercer University. I'm your host, Hannah Vann Nabi. Research that Reaches Out is an initiative at Mercer University in Macon, GA that was launched in 2015 as part of Mercer's Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP. We work with faculty and students to help them integrate service and research to address real-world problems affecting our communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels.

Today we get to sit down with Frani Rollins, Assistant Professor of Theatre at Mercer. Professor Rollins earned her BA in theatre from Wesleyan University and her MFA from University of Oregon in theatre design and technology. She's the chair for the Annual National Poster Session for the United States Institute for Theatre Technology and is an active member with Georgia Theatre Conference. Professor Rollins joined Mercer's faculty in 2017.

Professor Rollins is doing some pretty cool stuff in the Theatre Department at Mercer. She was awarded funding from Research that Reaches Out to teach students in her Spring 2020 Theatre Practicum course how to put on a production of free public children's theatre. Unfortunately, like so many other community engagement projects this semester, the production was scheduled for mid-March and was not able to show because of the Covid-19 crisis. The show will go on, however, at an as-yet-undetermined time in the future, dependent upon when we get to go back to campus. And we want to know how it all works. So welcome, Professor Rollins.

Frani Rollins: Thank you for having me.

Hannah Nabi: Before we talk about your class, tell us a little bit about public access theatre. What is it? What should we call it? Why does it matter? And how does it address a real world problem?

Frani Rollins: So public access theatre is really free theatre that's fully accessible to the public. The Oracle Theatre in Chicago really coined this term as kind of part of their mission, and they basically just wanted to create and share art with as many people as possible. And we all know that theatre is not cheap – anybody who's ever tried to get Hamilton tickets knows – not cheap. So the idea behind theatre for everyone is really, really, the concept behind public access theatre. And there are other theatres that follow this model. I'm sure a lot of people have heard of Shakespeare in the Park in New York City, and that's a project that was run by The Public Theatre. It ran, or it's, sorry, it's continuing to run, it started in 1954 and again, their idea was that people need access to the arts

and specifically theatre and, of course, Shakespeare, as we all know, is one of the most well known playwrights that we have. And so being able to provide that free to the community is something that, something we were excited to be able to do and are excited that we've been able to do, but it's definitely nothing that we have invented. This is something that a lot of organizations have tried to bring to their communities and has been very successful.

Hannah Nabi: Tell us why this public access theatre is important. In the terms of Research that Reaches Out language, how does it address a real world problem?

Frani Rollins: Well, I think, personally, and I think a lot of people agree, I mean, the arts are wonderful. They make us feel good, especially right now. I don't know personally what everybody's doing, but I am sure we are all consuming more art in terms of content, videos, music, everything. I'm sure people are just exhausting what is on the internet right now. I don't know how many people have told me to join the new video subscription things and everything, right. So everybody is trying to feed their soul with art right now, and theatre gets folded into that as well.

The wonderful thing that's part of theatre that we don't quite, that's completely different from what we see with things like, you know, Netflix and other, you know, internet-based consumables in terms of entertainment, is that it really is an art that brings in the component of community engagement, and it builds community and it asks people to come together and enjoy together, which is a difficult thing to do in our time. And especially, just to go off on a sidetrack here, I love my students, but one of the assignments that I ask of them is that they need to attend a live performance off campus, typically in one of my classes. And the amount of times I hear the excuse that, "but I don't know when I'm going to go" or "how do I get there," or "who do I go with." And I kind of just want to say, two hours of your life with some people to go and schedule some time to go. But the idea of getting together with people for a community moment is a very difficult thing for a lot of people to do. So in terms of building that community, it's very important.

There are also things when we talk about just the study of art on human beings that we have seen, and not specifically, necessarily for theatre, but art in general. Art in general increases tolerance and empathy, feelings of love and compassion. There's a lot of research when it comes to the visual arts and kind of studying students' levels of empathy before they attend the gallery and then once they actually experienced the gallery. And we realized kind of the compassion and empathy goes up in students. We also, we know when we watch something good on Netflix, our dopamine levels surge when we're enjoying it. And I guess the last thing I would kind of, which is more theatre specific. Again, not like, I'm not a neurobiologist or anything, so I'm just speaking to the things that I get in terms of what I can read about what theatre does. But with something like a complex activity like theatre, your brain needs

to make connections in a way that you don't get when you are passively watching something on TV or on your computer. And so those new connections, when it comes to studying the brain, those connections to different regions of the brain tend to lead toward higher levels of intelligence. That also leads to things like resistance to stress and, of course you know we've all heard the students who have the music training as toddlers excelling in math, language, and reading. Whatever. How you feel about that and what you do with your kids is your business, your own deal. But we all kind of know and we've heard, obviously, just we know inherently what the arts do to us and how we benefit from them, but also we've seen some science that also supports how it benefits us as human beings. Theatre's important.

Hannah Nabi: So your theatre practicum course is designed to be part of the spring theatre production. Tell us about how that works and how you decided to make the production a free outdoor children's show instead of a ticketed indoor show.

Frani Rollins: We actually did a sweet, we followed the model of free Shakespeare in the Park previously. And we had really good success with a lot of things that we didn't quite plan for that made it a very difficult show to do for where and when. But what we heard from people was that they loved it. They loved having access to theatre. And some of the notes that we received about the time and who it was for, the intended audience, really made us think about if we could do this again. And if we did, how do we make this for our community? And so some of those decisions led us to choosing a children's show, which meant that it would open it up to the population, not just those who were interested in Shakespeare, but those who just wanted to be entertained with a good story. And of course, we chose Pinocchio, because I think most people are very familiar with that story, but also the script that we found based itself around kind of a historical time in theatre. Kind of in the Italian Renaissance, there was this movement of theatre called commedia dell'arte which was a lot of physical slapstick comedy, very large movements. So the script that we found also lent itself to our department very well because we have the actors that are able to do that. And the other faculty member in our department, Professor Scot Mann, he actually is the President or, sorry, he was the former president of the Society for American Fight Directors, so he teaches classes in stage combat. So when it came to the slapstick humor, we also have that as a perk to our program. So the script works really, really nicely.

So choosing the script for children, and then in terms of location and time, we really wanted to find a location where we knew it wasn't a difficult place to get to, where parking was free, where there was a large community that was able to walk to the location. Our previous location was a great location, but it was paid parking and it wasn't convenient for a lot of people in terms of residential areas that could walk. So some of the things that we did not quite think out completely in the first round of doing this, we were able to really think through. And as opposed to really focusing on just getting the show done and figuring

out how do we just do it outside, we really thought about how do we make this a production that is for Macon? We don't have a lot of free arts, and definitely not a lot of free theatre that happens in the Macon-Bibb County, or kind of Middle Georgia area in general, so being able to provide this for our community is huge.

Hannah Nabi: It sounds like you thought through everything logistically in terms of accessibility and being really specific about filling a gap for our community. So those are all sort of logistical decisions. How did your course change, if at all, with the the sort of intention of choosing this particular production?

Frani Rollins: What's interesting about this class, and I know you touched upon it briefly, but I do just want to reiterate the fact that this class is a component of the department in the fact that the class doesn't choose the show, the department chooses the show and this class is something that's incorporated into the production. So not everyone that's involved in the show is in the class, and not everybody that is in that class necessarily is part of the show. So what's cool about this project is that it was a really great partnering because we knew that the students that would be registered for this class this semester would all be part of this show, which made it a great fit specifically for this project. And the fact that this class, specifically, which is theatre practicum, is all based on creative scholarship and creative research. When it came to doing our theatre, kind of the component of the public access theatre in conjunction with a class that really is all creative research and scholarship, I think that literally when we go to Research that Reaches Out, it just, it just fit perfectly.

Hannah Nabi: At the beginning of this semester you shared with me some really thoughtful reflection prompts that you'd crafted for your students. And in that conversation, and then just now too, you explained the value of theatre and the arts in helping students build empathy and deepening their connection to, and understanding of, humanity. How have you framed the value of this particular production, and the needs that it meets, and the importance of access to the arts for your students? And how has that impacted their learning in this course?

Frani Rollins: Well, I think specifically for this class – again the class is all about doing theatre – so the students are, their job is, from point A to point B, to get a show up and running. What I think this class specifically got from being able to do this as part of a Research that Reaches Out is that we were able to talk about the things that were going on that, I think the students were doing this, the students were aware of, but they were never able to, they were never able to be able to talk to their peers about the decisions that they were making with their research. So a great kind of example of this is, so the story of Pinocchio, not to give it away, but we have a very, very naughty puppet who goes through a

series of moral and ethical decisions along the way to becoming a real boy. Ope! I gave it away. Sorry!

Anyway, so we watch this puppet kind of make these decisions. As a, as a props designer, trying to make the decision about, what are the props that Pinocchio has while kind of going through this issue or what do some of the other players have as props, really impacts the story, which impacts how our patrons view the story. And specifically when it comes to children who, when it comes to, kind of, symbolism, kids are all about being able to look at something and, if you show them a yellow ball, they will think the sun or they will play with it as such. They can make those connections, very simple connections, very easily.

So as a props designer, let's say you are designing what the donkeys look like, which for people who don't know the story, at a certain point, Pinocchio decides to follow these people to Toyland so Pinocchio never has to go to school again. But ultimately, when you go to Toyland, you become a donkey. So depending on the type of donkey props or accessories that you choose for this person – and it's a very fun conversation to have – but ultimately, if you make decisions about the donkey, if you go on Amazon and you buy some political donkey props, the ears, the nose, maybe something that has some political, you know, red, white and blue band on it, all of a sudden you're almost making a political statement on stage. Where, depending on the age of the students, depending on the political affiliations of your patrons, they may interpret it in a certain way.

The same thing goes with, let's go with, at a certain point Pinocchio's father gets arrested. And the script, you know, basically Pinocchio claims that his father has beaten him. So how do you, what does the officer look like? What are the officers carrying? You know, is it something where you have a weapon and nightstick and it's a very aggressive type of police officer, or are we talking about something that's more cartoon and more friendly and something that has a little bit more of kind of a gag. Not necessarily a gag, but something a little bit softer and a little bit more of a friendlier visual aesthetic for the officer. And again, depending on who your patrons are, they are going to interpret some of these very small details in ways that can really impact how they view the story and the interactions between the characters. The last thing I think that the students talked about, which I never really thought about until we went through this and actually talked with them about it, we were talking about casting. And Pinocchio talks – it's basically Pinocchio figuring out what his family – how does Pinocchio find his family. Originally, he has kind of the person who found the log that turns into Pinocchio, that basically cast the log aside to Giupetto and then Giupetto becomes the father of a puppet. So it's not, it's not a birth-blood relationships. It's almost like, almost an adopted relationship. And what does it mean to cast a minority as the father or as Pinocchio? Or what does it mean for both of them to be minority cast members? Or what if the entire cast is white, and what does that say about family and family dynamics throughout the show?

You know, these are some of the decisions that I think we make as we're going through the process. Knowing the implications of those choices, but to be able to have that conversation with our students about, you know, so if this is how we cast these roles, how do our patrons see that relationship being created? Let's say we have four minority cast members and the one white cast member is the one who plays the officer. How will our patrons and, especially when we talk about patrons, you know, under the age of 12 who are viewing this, who see the one authority who can arrest people is the white guy with, with a minority cast. Again, it's not the biggest thing in the world. But when we talk about, especially when it comes to children's theatre where they make connections like that, we have to be mindful, I think, or at least have the conversation so if that is a decision that's made, how do we make sure that the things that that children are going to kind of piece together in terms of what they know, how do we make sure that those connections are made in a way that's most socially responsible?

Hannah Nabi: That's fascinating to hear about that whole process and the intention of that with your students and hear about how they think through those issues. That's got to be such a privilege to help help teach them how to do that.

Frani Rollins: Well, it's one of those things where, especially a lot of – not a lot of, the majority of – the work that we do is on Mercer, you know, on Mercer campus, for Mercer students, Mercer faculty, staff, those that tend to take in the arts, if not regularly, are exposed to it much more often. I think our students don't necessarily have to think as deeply about what the impact is because the circle of people that they tend to produce for are very like-minded. And so being able to open it up to the public, you know, you really need to be mindful of, this isn't a show that's going to fill with a whole bunch of 20-year-olds, which tends to be kind of our, that's our bread and butter. You know, we do a lot of great shows, but we do an *Evil Dead: The Musical* and we pack them with a whole bunch of 20-year-olds that have a great time, you know. Doing that versus something for the community outside of Mercer, we really have to be mindful of that and talk about that.

Hannah Nabi: I know you pursued quite a few partnerships in different sectors for the show. Who did you reach out to and what was that process like?

Frani Rollins: Well, the first person, I mean, the first people that we actually talked to about this was Research that Reaches Out, with with you all. Between you and Kathy Kloepper, fortunately we have a really good relationship. And so being able to hear about her work and what she's working on when she heard about, you know, she also came, and I believe you were there as well, for *Shakespeare in the Park* and seeing the work that we do and the work that you were doing, it

just seemed like a really good fit. And I think the Theatre Department often doesn't go outside of the Theatre Department, so having that good relationship with you all, and really having you say, you know, the work that you're doing really fits what we're looking for, allowed us to really pursue working with you all on this.

After working with you all, which was super easy, we looked into renting the space. And again, we thought that Tattnell Square Park would have been perfect. Not only is it close to our building, which when it came to some of the downfalls of what we did with Shakespeare in the Park, one of them being getting to and from the park which was, it was fine, but, but it was not ideal. And there were a lot of things that we wish we had. We wished we were closer, and Tattnell Square Park is a wonderful location. And not only is it, you know, right there where Mercer is, right where our building is, but it's kind of in a central residential area where there are lots of kids. We've got Alexander II right there. So in terms of an ideal location, so we, of course, we looked there. There's also – so again, Professor Scot Mann, who is in the Theatre Department, he was there, he's been at Mercer for a while and around, and he was there when they started kind of revitalizing the park. And they put in this raised performance area, kind of on our neck of the woods, kind of the north east corner of the park. And it's kind of sad – Scot talks about how they really hoped that a lot of things would happen in that performance kind of space area, and very little happens. And so it just felt like a really good place to do this.

So looking out and seeing, how do we get the park, and reaching out to Macon-Bibb County Parks and Rec and basically reaching out and saying this is what we would like to do, are the, are the dates free and they said, you know what would actually be really wonderful, if your students could come to some after school programs and talk about theatre. Maybe teach them a couple of things. And so with Macon-Bibb County Parks and Rec, we, they basically asked us if we would mind working with after school programs and, in return, the rental fee was waived, which was a really nice perk.

Hannah Nabi: Did your students get to go work with any of the after school programs before Covid-19 shut us all down?

Frani Rollins: Mmm mmm. Unfortunately our students never got to actually make it to any of the after school programs. But we did have one student who actually signed on, not as an actor or designer, but she became our education coordinator. And so she reached out to all of the local schools, and she also contacted all of the local daycare centers and coordinated the effort to kind of get posters and flyers and quarter sheets and stuff out to all the local daycares as well, which was really, really helpful.

Hannah Nabi: Y'all also had on the flyer the Situation, was it the Situation Room?

Frani Rollins: Yeah.

Hannah Nabi: What about that?

Frani Rollins: So The Situation Room is, it's an escape room. So The Situation Room was with us when we did Shakespeare in the Park last year, and so when it came to us doing another public access theatre event we decided, you know, who better to contact than The Situation Room. At the very least, they were amazing to work with, and they always had some really great ideas. You know, they came up with some great stuff. Obviously, not in terms of the production of the show, but supplemental stuff to the experience that we really valued for Shakespeare in the Park. And so we reached out and we said, you know, this is what we're doing and you guys always have great ideas. What do you have? And so The Situation Room said, well, if you're interested and if Macon-Bibb County Parks and Rec is okay with it, maybe we can offer dodgeball archery after the shows on Saturdays. And we were like, yes!

And what we also liked about this was Pinocchio is a really short show, about 45 minutes. And so if we're thinking about a parent – and what's nice is I'm a parent, too, so I feel like I can have a little bit of perspective on this – you know, if you're going to take your kids to the park, and maybe bring some snacks, and you want to sit through the theatre thing, and it's only 45 minutes long, you know, Saturday on a weekend is great if you know my kid's going to get another half an hour to an hour of, you know, running around in the park. Yes! And it's free! Yes! I'm in! So it was just great. And it was a great idea.

Hannah Nabi: That's cool. I love that you pulled together municipal and business and nonprofit partners on this. You've got everybody covered. And I hope everybody can, I know you've got tentative dates set for the fall and spring, depending upon what on-campus classes look like, so I'm looking forward to seeing how all that works together. That's really cool.

Frani Rollins: And then I do just want to mention, because we are talking about partnerships, I also do want to throw in that Quadworks jumped in at the end, so I do also want to give a little shout out to to Quadworks and and some of their stuff too.

Hannah Nabi: That's awesome. And for those who don't know, Quadworks is Mercer's campus activity board for students in the Macon campus.

So our conversation is coming to an end. And as we close, I'd like you to leave us with your thoughts on why your theatre practicum course and this production of Pinocchio is Research that Reaches Out.

Frani Rollins: This course is about doing research, creative research. And theatre reaches out, and it reaches people, so when it comes to us being able to tell this story so that our patrons can talk about it, they can incorporate its lessons into their everyday lives. They can start understanding things about their own lives and situations, potentially from a different point of view. You know, all of the research that our students are doing leads up to kind of that crescendo of what our patrons do with that research. And so I think, when it comes to the mission of Research that Reaches Out, I think Nailed it! In a very theatrical way. Let's be honest, right.

Hannah Nabi: Well thank you, Professor Rollins, for taking the time to share this great project with us. We're looking forward to seeing the production of Pinocchio once it's rescheduled.

And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of the Research that Reaches Out Podcast at Mercer University. You can check us out on our website at QEP.mercer.edu and subscribe to our show at [SoundCloud.com](https://www.soundcloud.com)