

# Writing in the Disciplines

## Theatre Interview: Prof. James Hoffman

The program opens with Dr. Hoffman speaking about his first memories of “theatre”: Dr. Hoffman is in conversation with W.F. Garrett-Petts and a group of English 309 students at UCC

**Prof. James Hoffman:** I remember when I was young, in my back yard in Victoria, I was always building stuff. I was known as the inventor around the place. And one of the first things I made, I don't know why I did it, was a stage. Out in the back yard. One day I just built a stage about this high off the ground about 5 or 6 feet by 5 or 6 feet, just a platform, and I remember building it and jumping up on it and standing there are thinking, "wow, this is really...." Why did I do that?

**Prof. W. F. Garrett-Petts:** Welcome to program number 6 in our Series, Writing Your 'Self' Into the Disciplines. Today's guest is theatre history and acting instructor, Dr. James Hoffman.

**Hoffman:** I studied theatre because...I started out in English, I'm basically an English person. When I was doing my Bachelor's I was in honors English at UVic. But we always went to theatre, we loved theatre, it was just something we went to. I guess an accident happened: someone asked me to work backstage in a show once and I said, "oh sure, what is it, sweeping up? Oh yeah, no problem." Then I remember the moment, I still remember the moment when I was working backstage in this rather large production at UVic, and it suddenly hit me, I suddenly stopped my sweeping, whatever it was, and looked around and realized, "wow, they're having a lot of fun here, this is a terrific event." I was hooked. I just loved what was happening, what people were doing. It was a rich experience for me. I felt just wonderful. After English I started taking theatre courses. I took more courses than I needed for my B.A. I just started taking theatre like crazy, and working in theatre companies. A lot of summer theatre in UVic. Then I did a Masters in Theatre at UVic. Then I went to theatre school in England to train as an actor, then to New York for a PhD in Theatre. That PhD--by then I had taken mostly practical theatre, you know, acting and directing. And I'd worked in a lot of theatre companies, mostly shows. I did a lot: experimental, traditional, Shakespeare. I worked in a Rep Company for two years, and that's hard. That's the ultimate theatre experience because you're working in a company that stays together for four or five months and they do these three or four plays in rotation. Every night a different show, you know. But in New York I did an academic degree. I did theatre history/research. So that was my academic study--which was like a return to English in a way because there was a lot of essays, lectures, notes, and papers, and lots of writing.

**English 309 Students:** That sort of leads into my question, Jim, which was: why did you feel you had to leave the country to complete your schooling? Do you think you would of had to do the same if you had studied something other than theatre?

**Hoffman:** No. Theatre studies, in Canada particularly (but not just Canada), is a fairly new discipline. It's really a post World War II phenomenon. Previous to that there were really no formal theatre programs at the post secondary level. You studied English, normally, or maybe History, if you were an academic studying theatre. So when I was looking for a Ph.D. there were only two places in Canada I could have gone to: UBC or U of Toronto. And they had very limited resources and programs. UBC was taking only one or two students every year or two. Besides, I felt that leaving the country would really be enriching. What better place to study theatre, in a way, than a huge city like New York, which has lots of theatre. I had studied in London, England for my acting and really enjoyed that so there I went to New York and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I saw tons of theatre, from madly experimental to traditional. And I loved the program. They had some very good people, like Richard Shechner, and he's one of the great people in the movement. So, to sit at his feet was wonderful, just wonderful. Did I answer your question?

**English 309 Student:** Yes.

**English 309 Student:** And that sort of leads into my question, Jim: how important is it, when you're studying theatre history, to actually be there. If you're studying, for example, Shakespeare, is it important to go to England and see the new Globe theatre they've made?

**Hoffman:** It's absolutely important to be there, I'll say that. Now obviously you can't, especially if you're doing a study of a play that was put on in the 1920's, or Shakespeare, you can't be there. But you must try, and I think that's the important difference in our line of work, perhaps, that you must attempt to somehow replicate "being there." And that means you have to find creative means to reenact what happened in that very elusive field called performance. It's extremely hard to capture, impossible to capture, an original performance, even if you were there, but you try. And I think that's what separates us from other disciplines, is that attempt to find a parallel situation or a metaphor or a description, enactment, that participates in the original event. I guess it's like you were fascinated by that original event, the original show that was staged. You have to be fascinated by it and totally intrigued by it. So much so, you want to replicate it in some way. And that way is usually creative. It's less of a science, I think, than other disciplines.

**English 309 Student:** So to understand theatre you have to understand all aspects of theatre?

**Hoffman:** Well, ideally, yes. I think you have to show that you are intimate with at least some aspect of theatre. I think we're very suspicious of people who analyze, discuss, and interpret theatre, but who haven't done it, who have never kind of "been in it." I've heard papers and I've read papers by professors, for example, that we darn well know have never done practical theatre. They've only ever seen it from the outside, they've been audience members only, and their disciplines are really outside of the field. We're a little suspicious of those kinds of people. I was at a conference in Ottawa a few years ago, and there was a fellow, a professor from Carleton University, and I know he hasn't ever done practical theatre. So whenever I hear him give a paper I'm a little suspicious -- "what does he know?" Most of us, and I know most theatre scholars in Canada, most of us have come out of practical theatre; we've all acted or directed or

done something like that, and we still often do it. I still direct a major show here each year. So I'm still "doing it" and I've done lots in the past. So I feel I have an in, I feel like I've got some possibility of understanding it, if that can ever happen.

**English 309 Student:** So how do you integrate that understanding of all aspects of theatre into your teaching, and teaching students about writing students in theatre.

**Hoffman:** Well, I use a lot of practical stories from my experience. I think one of the main things about my classes is that I can cite my own experience of shows I've either seen in New York or London -- or worked in. For example, I was recently talking about Michel Tremblay, the Quebec playwright, and I was showing my class some slides of the show, because I've directed a Tremblay, an interesting, I think, production of Tremblay. It's a play called *Bonjour la Bonjour*. And I was showing them slides of that show and discussing the choices I had made in my interpretation, which I think is a fairly radical one. So I can bring that to the class and share it with them, which I think is perhaps "special" and not just academic perspectives. I had a personal investment in that show.

**English 309 Student:** Going back to the writing in the field because that's what we're trying to focus on in our course, coming from an English background, I'm wondering if you can identify something in the writing about theatre that would parallel the block quotation form in English, or the tables and diagrams in business. Is there some physical aspect of the writing that would identify it as theatre writing?

**Hoffman:** Interesting question. I guess, if I understand your question, more reliance, perhaps, on primary sources. I guess really, to replicate that original enactment, the performance, one has to rely more so on primary sources, whether it 's tickets, programs, oral history interviews, anything that takes you back to the original performance as much as possible. So you rely a lot on quotations, perhaps pictorial events, photographs are very useful. I just had a wonderful paper from a student who did a paper on a passion play here in Kamloops around the turn of the century. The priests who taught at the residential school across the river--and I didn't know this until recently-- had a regular passion play in which the first nations people acted Christ being nailed to the cross. You know-- the whole passion story of the crucifixion and Easter and the Resurrection, and they had them form those tableaux. This student found pictures in the archives here. They're photographs of our first nations people here, put up on the cross and playing all the roles from the bible, so she had a great time discussing those photographs and interpreting what happened there, and more importantly, what happened in the minds of those people. That's very hard to do, but there's that attempt to replicate what happened then. It's important to make an honest attempt to replicate what was going on in the minds of the people, in that kind of creative explosion that happened then. And we try to replicate that in our writing now so that even the reader of the piece also feels that explosion in some way.

**English 309 Student:** What would you feel are the main differences between an English paper and a theatre paper?

**Hoffman:** I guess a more creative approach. I would look for creativity in the paper-- a kind of uniqueness. Theatre's very hard to get at, it's such a complex thing. When you think of a show like Phantom of the Opera, you've got costumes, you've got design, you've got lighting, you've got a script, you've got a theatre, you've got architecture, you've got a particular audience, you've got tickets, you've got a whole culture there, a whole social thing happening there. I think to interpret that, to give some meaning to that, to replicate that... first of all, it's an impossible job. It's only going to work if you're highly creative. You've got to find a kind of creative "in," like a good lead in a journalist's story that kind of hooks and somehow works for you, somehow gets you into all that mess, that chaos, that confusion of signs, and somehow makes sense of it, and more importantly, replicates it for us, so we can go back to it and get some sense of what it was like and how we should understand it now, and that takes immense creativity I think. You can't be formalist about it or even too scientific and structured. I mean, there will be structure, and there will be a logic, but it has to be, I think, very creative. And it has to involve some personal investment; we have to feel that you aren't coming at it only from the outside. You're interested in becoming an audience member yourself or at least a participant in some way. And here's how you're doing it; here's your creative way of going back and becoming a participant in that. Here's my personal take on it.

**English 309 Student:** Can you give us an example of how you've done this in your own work?

**Hoffman:** In my own work? Well, one example would be a very personal piece I brought here. I went to a conference in New York, a theatre conference, which really excited me. I knew some of the people giving it. It's my old NYU crowd. So I had to go back there. I felt very personally involved. It's my old university for one thing, plus I'm very interested in the field of performance studies, and there were some great people there that I really respected. It was great just to hear them, see them, talk to them, see some great shows. Then I wrote this piece, which is very much in the first person. It's very much: "I went to New York, here's what I saw, it was great a great conference, I was really challenged by hearing so and so, I was really challenged by this workshop." I mean, there were acting workshops which I took part in. So it was everything from academic papers to...I was crawling on the floor doing a kind of a crazy Shakespeare thing with this avante garde director, which was really kind of wild. I had to report on that for Canadians because I thought it was exciting. But I also used that conference to reflect on the situation in Canada. It made me think, on the plane coming home, about Canada, and why don't we think about this or here's a challenge for us to rethink how we do things like conferences, how we run our association of theatre scholars in Canada, and why are we kind of static right now, why aren't things more exciting like some of the things I saw in New York.

**English 309 Students:** Sort of moving on from that, speaking about creativity in writing, or in theatre history, how open is theatre history to alternate ways of writing itself, not necessarily presenting the writing, but in actual writing structure?

**Hoffman:** Immensely open. History's almost a bad word in our field now. We changed the name of our journal, in fact. Our main journal in Canada was Theatre History in Canada or "THIC" as we used to say. A few years ago we met and changed the name. We now call it Theatre

Research in Canada, "TRIC." It's gone from THIC to TRIC. So we prefer the word "research" to "history," which sounds a bit fusty and too structured and too formalistic, perhaps. So, to answer your question, we are entirely open to a variety of methods. Biography is becoming more and more important, even autobiography--the idea of mentioning where you come from when you write, putting yourself in the story. There is a wonderful article recently by a scholar at the U of Guelph, who wrote an interesting piece on military theatre in Canada, "military ceremony as performance." He comes from a military family. His father was big in the military and the family moved around the country. He used that, he put himself in that story. Sort of, "I grew up in this environment and I attended a lot of this kind of thing and now I want to consider it as theatre performance in Canada, what it means in terms of our nation." But he was very much in it. So that's an example of a more creative, non-traditional approach to writing.

**English 309 Student:** So do you feel that that extends to students in theatre research?

**Hoffman:** Oh sure. When I assign a topic...well I don't assign topics. I have people come to my office and we talk. The first thing I try to do is find out what their interests are, their personal interests/investments are in theatre. We talk, maybe over two or three sessions, and we come out with a topic from that--an essay topic. What I hope is that they will suddenly, in the course of the interview, say, for example, "oh you know um, I always loved costumes." The minute they say that, maybe they've worked in costumes or something, you know, bingo, you've got it. Then we hook onto that and we try to find a topic where they can research costumes in a particular show, or company, or an actor, and do a paper or an essay on that. Maybe they've always been fascinated by a particular playwright, and they've read something that has totally intrigued them. I'll try to locate that, and bingo, we go with that in some way. We try to find a good way of approaching that.

**English 309 Students:** So it's a collaboration between teacher and student?

**Hoffman:** Yeah. I can collaborate with them to a degree and put in my two cents as well, and recommend things they look at--critical approaches. So yeah, I'm in there too. I don't want to be the prof who just puts the list on the wall where you sign up for a topic and we don't talk except after the fact. I want to be involved too because I'm very interested in the construction, the writing of theatre in Canada, particularly because I'm one of the people writing it. I'm very interested in the next generation which is you, and how you construct it. I want to work with you in constructing our theatre record.

**English 309 Student:** Do you ever get students to help you with articles?

**Hoffman:** My own articles?

**English 309 Students:** Yeah.

**Hoffman:** Yeah. Well, since I've come here, I have a work study student assigned to me. I've had that person, for example, help me develop data. They collect data, for example, from the Western Canada Theatre Company, which I then use in my own article, my own writing. I've done that. For example, we've constructed a performance calendar of Western Canada Theatre Company. A performance calendar represents all the shows they've done: the dates, the director of the cast, the name of the show, the playwright, where it was put on, where you can find reviews of it, from the first show to recent. That has been done. So if I'm writing an article about Western Canada Theatre Company I can use that source of data.

**English 309 Student:** You obviously value creativity a lot in the writing that your students do, do you feel that the university setting limits the creativity that students are able to express in their writing or do you think that its low ground for creativity?

**Hoffman:** I think, ultimately, it does limit it, yes. I feel the limitations of their training here, which I guess is largely English, literary or historical. Those are the kinds of people I get, English and History, I would say mainly, maybe some Anthropology. I do feel a limiting sense of structure there. So if I get too crazy and creative in suggesting something, I sometimes find them saying, "can I do that?" I don't find them coming to me sufficiently with this "hey, I've got this wild idea. I've got a fantastic way of getting into this show or this playwright. We'll come at him from the back, we'll take his clothes off..." I find very little of that. I find it kind of traditional, in a sense, boring, ideas. Like, "can I discuss the themes of Shakespeare?" Oh yeah, great, that sounds really exciting. My reaction is: let's destroy that notion, let's take someone's pants down and let's rethink this. Come on, there has to be a more exciting way. That's not going to replicate anything for anybody. That's not going to get back to those creative explosions. Again, that moment when I first started theatre and I just stood there and looked around this marvelous big theatre we were all working in at the McPherson Playhouse in Victoria. You've got to recapture that in some way, that turn on, that explosion of creativity. It's so wonderful. And if you can't kick that a bit and deal with that, you probably shouldn't be writing about theatre.

**English 309 Student:** So would you say that one of the marks of a really good theatre student would be a progression from first year to fourth year in creativity in their ability to just pick something up and run with it?

**Hoffman:** Yup. Getting, I would say, more and more into theatre, almost like they're working in it, they're directing it, they're staging it, they're writing it. Except that they are writing it, they are creating it. And that's the big lesson to learn I guess, that they are creating theatre. You're not outside it. You can't honestly write about it and be outside, you can't be objective, you can't be just scientific. That just doesn't work, it's boring and it's probably been done.

**English 309 Students:** Are you creative with your exams then? How can students show their creativity when they only have like an hour or so to do an exam?

**Hoffman:** Yeah, well that's true. It's hard to do.

**English 309 Student:** Or do you say, "oh, don't worry about exams"?

**Hoffman:** No, I say worry about exams. We have to play the game of course, of having exams, getting grades. I have worked at the professional theatre schools, I've worked at several. I ran my own, where we didn't have grades. At a proper theatre school, where they do study academics as well, you don't get grades. But everyone works two hundred percent all the time, otherwise you don't stay in the school. But no, here we must play the game and I guess we have to work within structures as well. But I guess within that I try to have some creativity in the kinds of questions I ask. So it does, hopefully, release some creativity. But it's hard to do in an exam.

**English 309 Student:** Besides creativity, how would an upper-level course "A" paper differ from a "C" paper?

**Hoffman:** Probably in two ways: one, it would be formally not very good or weak. By formally, I mean we are writing an essay and it is somewhat like an English essay. We do, after all, have to have a thesis and develop it logically and have a coherent argument that's either convincing or not and there has to be sufficient evidence; also there has to be a standard of writing that's adequate, and hopefully good. There's that side of things and then there's a creative side as well, that I've talked about earlier. So I guess the two things I look for...the best papers, and I've had some great papers, even from people here, who shall be nameless, have both. They're as well written as an English paper, and they're also nicely creative. And you feel the person has got personally involved and invested something of themselves in it and attempted to replicate something important for them.

**English 309 Student:** For your first year acting student you have them write journals as opposed to papers, I was wondering if you could describe that for us and maybe discuss what's important in those journals--like mechanics or creativity, and the purpose behind having those students write them.

**Hoffman:** The first year acting students, and I teach first year acting, and I have them keep a journal, and I call that their textbook. So that they're writing their own textbook. There are thousands of acting textbooks and they're all usually not very useful to me, but I love the idea of students writing their own journal and having this wonderful record of the year which they can look back to in the years to come. I ask three things: number one, I ask for a record of what we do. I don't ask for much there, all I ask for is a record of what we do in each class. Sum up what we did: all the exercises, the themes, the topics, etc. Secondly, I ask them to keep a personal record of their progress. I want to see them in it. I want to see what we did. Then I want to see how they were doing: what worked for them, what didn't, what they noticed about other students sitting in the class. So they're writing observations about themselves and others as well. So secondly, it's a personal record of what's going on with them, their progress. Thirdly, I asked for what I call "extras." "Extras" are just...I talk about personalizing it: putting in doodles, photographs, cut-outs from magazines, quotes from favorite actors. If you see a magazine

article and there's your favorite actor, Al Pacino, saying something about acting and you think, "hey, that's right on, perfect, what a great thing to say," snip it out, glue it in to the journal. So, the best journals I get are just fabulous. They're fun to read, they've got color, they've got photos, they've got great quotes from actors and they're just super. And also, you can see the record of how they're doing in their work, as well as the record of what we did each day. The best ones are just marvelous, just marvelous. It's a revelation of somebody in this kind of crazy world of acting, which is a real challenge to you. An acting course is a real challenge to you in a very total way.

**English 309 Student:** What kind of textbooks do you use in upper-level courses?

**Hoffman:** Usually anthologies. I like anthologies because we often study plays. I also like source books. [Dr. Hoffman addresses several members of the student panel directly] As you know that in the course your taking right now, the Canadian Theatre History course, there's an anthology we use of Canadian plays. There's also a source book of documents from Canadian theatre. Articles written by critics or people involved. It's mostly primary source material.

**English 309 Students:** Do you read textbooks yourself in researching for an article?

**Hoffman:** When I'm researching an article, do I read textbooks? Oh no, they're not good sources. They're not even secondary sources really. They're tertiary, they're like encyclopedias which, they're very limited, they're very general. Usually at the level of serious research you're mostly involved with primary sources, maybe some secondaries. I write mostly Canadian theatre history and particularly B.C. , and there's actually not a lot done. It's not a field that's huge. So if you're writing in that field you can pretty well, within minutes, know what's been written. In most cases it's nothing. I've spent years writing articles on B.C. theatre and whatever I was doing, no one had touched. So I was in fresh territory. So I could mark the territory...so anybody doing that research now has to deal with my article, my work, you see.

**English 309 Student:** Speaking of research, how much research is necessary to, for you as a theatre teacher, to keep up with what's going on in theatre?

**Hoffman:** Quite a bit. Well I'm just always doing it anyway, so I don't know. I'm not sure but I would say that it's absolutely necessary to know what's going on, sure.

**English 309 Student:** Would you encourage other students to follow in your footsteps of looking at B.C. theatre?

**Hoffman:** Oh yeah, sure. It's our province, it's where we live. Ultimately we need to understand ourselves and I guess much of what we're doing anyway, at least indirectly, a way of understanding ourselves better and articulating better, our situation. I mean, why are we doing all this...all this study of English and History and...right? So, I guess I'm just in a field that's perhaps a little more direct than what you're doing. But I've come at it indirectly too. I find it very exciting and very revealing and even, occasionally, scary to see what's happened in B.C.



theatre. Often you're going, "wow, wow, we had that, and this happened, wow, gee what can I do with that." And there's the research problem...so you find something, great, but then how do you interpret it, how do you replicate it, how do you display it to people, what was it? And that's a major problem. What do we make of the Pow Wow? Look at masks of the North West coast of native peoples, those incredible masks that they have that did all these tricks. It's so incredibly powerful. What do we do with that in terms of displaying it, replicating it, interpreting it as theatre or performance in B.C.? What do we even call it? What do you call it when the natives, for example, didn't have a word for theatre. We use terms like "theatre." They never had a term of that. So we march around using a word like "theatre." "Yeah, it was theatre, or it was this or it was that." But the native people, the first nations, they'll say, "we didn't or we don't have a word for that, really, so what are we talking about here?" Problems like that get immense.

**English 309 Student:** Would it be fair to say then, that theatre students almost become explorers in searching for new ways of looking at things, discovering uncharted territory?

**Hoffman:** For sure, yes. With a lot of humility and honesty. That's hard to do too, I think. It's easier to go in there with some pompous idea or trick you're going to use. You've got to be careful of doing that. It's so easy from our perspectives now to look back and say, "oh, it was just melodrama," or "it was just a simple, little religious thing they did." You know, we belittle the past quite often, or it wasn't true, it wasn't really worthy because there were no texts, or the texts they had, it wasn't Shakespeare. So, we've got to be careful of that because, after all, for them, that performance was probably very, very important.

**English 309 Student:** You talked quite a bit about personal investment and papers and seeing people's personalities come through, and I wonder how that idea affects the way that you do workshop papers at all? Do you feel that collaboration between actors is important in the writing that they do, or do you feel that it's more important to be personally...

**Hoffman:** Well, it's all important, the collaboration, the investment, yeah. That's why I do the interview technique of collaboration and developing a paper so that the person can become personally involved with, and creative with. That may involve talking to actors, it may involve using oral history methods, you know, interviewing people, or it may involve looking at photographs or artifacts or props.

**English 309 Students:** Using different levels of collaboration? in different fields?

**Hoffman:** Yeah, that's another problem, if you like, of theatre research is that in a way it's indistinct. It's not that discreet really. Usually when we're doing theatre research, when we develop critical ideas or critical frames to analyze, discuss it, we're often drawing from a whole vast field. So you might be drawing from history, historical critical methods, you might be drawing from philosophy, aesthetics, semiotics, economics, cultural theory. Good theatre scholars have their specialties, they draw particularly from blah, blah, blah, you know. In my work recently I draw a lot from post colonial theory in my own writing because I find that

extremely useful in understanding and interpreting B.C. Canadian theatre. It seems to work very well, so I'm into that. But I have used also post-modern ideas in analyzing other aspects of theatre. So we draw from a vast amount of areas, as vast as any other discipline, perhaps vaster. We may draw from more fields than say, for example, English. We're open...economics, great, architectural analyses, great, because, after all, theatres are architectural, they're economic, they're social, they're cultural, they're etc. So, "go for it" is our theme. [Applause]

**W.F. Garrett-Petts:** Thank you Jim, and thank you to the English 309 class for your excellent questions. [Applause]