



Ward Haarbauer

The neon-lit Man and man base are displayed at Burning Man until their ritual burning the festival's last night in front of an audience of 50,000.

Professor Coaxes Theatre Students 'Out of Their Boxes' with Annual Field Trip to Counterculture Festival

by Dawn Larsen

As a student of theatre and performance studies, I was trained to examine theatre in a very inclusive way. I explain to my students that there are five elements of any performance:

- audience;
- performers (director, designers, crew, actors);
- text (even if it is a scenario);
- space;
- candy (costumes, lights, sets, sound, technology).

By looking at performance in this way, we can include even life as theatre (e.g., church, football and Thanksgiving dinners with family).

This way of examining performance is beneficial for our theatre majors and minors and also seems to make it more accessible for new students taking Theatre Appreciation classes, who often have never been exposed to drama. They begin to think of performance in a more critical way and thus begin to make very important connections between the stage and how performance reflects the world, both historically and contemporarily.

Writing the Grant: Why Burning Man?

It was this philosophy of performance, as well as my longtime desire to go to the counterculture festival Burning Man in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, that led to my writing a grant proposal for Francis Marion University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) program, which focuses on experiential learning. I thought: "What could be more *experiential* for rural, southern fine arts students than to go to Burning Man?!" I had no idea how right I was. Burning Man changes our students' lives.

The majority of our students are from rural South Carolina and often first-generation college students who grew up in, and seem to continually exist inside, little boxes. I believe a big part of my job as a professor in the rural South is to get students to come out of their boxes even if it is to only look around quickly and go back in again. So, for the past three years, Francis Marion University has offered junior and senior students majoring in fine arts (theatre, visual art and/or music) the opportunity through the QEP program to attend Burning Man with me as their faculty sponsor.

As Southern professors, we can take students to New York to look around, see shows and expand their view of theatre, but Burning Man goes beyond voyeurism to allow them to personally participate, collaborate, live among, and create art with people from all over the world. They experience their discipline on the cutting edge of their art. It also allows them the freedom to network with and get

criticism from artists in a non-threatening environment. They participate in creating and facilitating community by working within the theme camp in which we live and volunteer for community and discipline-related activities at Burning Man.

Planning the Trip

Getting to Burning Man is an adventure in itself. The students are required to help me plan the trip, which is a significant task. We live in the desert, a very hostile environment, for a week. We must bring all necessities for living with us, as there are no places at the event to buy anything except ice. We fly to Reno, rent a truck, pick up our shipped supplies and bikes, buy groceries and water, and then make the three- to four-hour drive to the Black Rock Desert. Of the six students I've taken in the past three years, three had never been in an airplane, three had never camped, and one had never used a porta potty. Merely the act of getting there provided half of them with experiences they had never had.

At Burning Man, we live in tents among a group of about 50 Southern Burners at a theme camp called Big Puffy Yellow. I chose to camp with them because most Puffers are from Charlotte, NC, and I thought being with other Southerners would give students an instant connection. In addition, Big Puffy Yellow has attended Burning Man for 10 years and has some of the best placement of all the camps in Black Rock City, the site of Burning Man. This year, we could see the "man" from our community tent.

10 Keys to Learning

There are 10 guiding principles for Burning Man participants that make it not only a unique experiment, but also make it a revolutionary experience for our students.

The first is **Radical Inclusion**, meaning that *anyone* can be a part of Burning Man. That allows our students access to numerous cultures, philosophies and people. It helps them to suspend judgments that have become habit in their normal (Burners call it "default") lives.

Gifting encourages students to share their art, be it a tangible object or

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performance, with many different people from many cultures. It allows them to network with other artists through their art.

Decommodification teaches them not to substitute consumption for participatory experience. Burning Man discourages the constant stream of media advertising that we all experience in the default world. It offers an experiential atmosphere free of constructs disguised as "proper" societal behavior, which are really only created to provide corporate profits.

Radical Self-Reliance helps students discover and use their own resources to thrive in an extremely different environment.

Radical Self-Expression upholds the idea that individuals have the right to express themselves in any way that they see fit as long as it is not intrusive to recipients. It teaches respect for others, as well as nurtures a clearer vision of how they might want to participate in the world.

Communal Effort focuses on cooperation and collaboration, the founding principles of theatre. It takes a village to make and serve a community of over 50,000.

Civic Responsibility illustrates and teaches the value of a civil society, reinforcing the principle of considering others while radically self-expressing.

Leave No Trace stresses the importance of environment. The event is held on public lands policed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Making sure there is not one sequin left teaches responsibility toward natural resources and others.

Participation teaches the belief that, according to the Burning Man website, "transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation," a restatement of what the arts are really about.

And finally, **Immediacy** means that immediate experience, living in the moment, is the most significant indicator of Burning Man's cultural values. This teaches for me the most important lesson: to suspend judgment and be fully in the moment, thus providing an authentic experience that the students and I have consciously participated in building.

Finding Theatre at Burning Man

Putting aside all that touchy-feely stuff, what about theatre? Performing events abound. In the printed event guide, there are as many advertised performances as any other type of activity on the Playa (the open desert space at Burning Man). Also, much of the visual art has a performative component. This year, I attended an interactive performance of dancers/actors in goddess costumes inside a geodesic dome that featured painted goddesses from a variety of cultures. There's also the Billion Bunny March, a spontaneous performative

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event (see story, Page 26). Center Camp, a large tent that provides a community gathering place, has several stages that present musical, spoken word, dance and stand-up comedy acts.

Even if you do not share my view of performance, you'll still find plenty of theatre at Burning Man. More traditional theatre offerings in 2010 included a Shakespeare Camp, which invited all to participate as actors in productions of Shakespeare. This year, there were many varied theatre events, including charades; improvisational theatre games; "Gorilla Theatre," a camp that organized flash mobs; and the "Rusty Rebar Show," a cabaret-style, one-man performance.

Student Assignments

The grant I write to take students to Burning Man requires that they "reflect" on their experience. I require them to journal and video journal, which they then edit into a formal presentation that we offer to the university. Most of the time, students create and edit a video to explain what the Burning Man experience was like. Because the event is so experiential, the video often comes across as more of a montage of images. However, it is clear how changed they are by their experience. It is difficult for them (as well as for me) to articulate what Burning Man is. Many cry when they talk about it.

My favorite passage from one student's

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: Ashley Leamon, 2010? Graduate, Francis Marion University

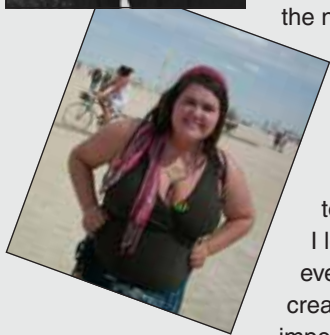


Burning Man forever changed the way I look at and function within our world. I have never before experienced such an environment of unity and togetherness, and I spend my days now trying to create similar situations in the "real world."

Upon returning from Burning Man, I had a hard time adhering to a time schedule or re-dedicating myself to the grind of our society. I missed the easy passage of time with nothing to do but commune with others and myself while the moon, our ancient observer, watched over us as we lit up the Playa. It was hard to believe that the world could not transform itself into the world I experienced in the Black Rock Desert. People traded and bartered goods rather than depending on the fickle dollar. Every tent community offered a service to the larger community, and everyone had one another's back. Creativity and free thought are the norm, with art installations abounding and music pouring out of every space.

At Burning Man, you are not who you have to be in order to make a living or fit into social norms. You are who you want to be...This is a big reason why most "burners" refer to the Playa as home; we are more at home out there than we are in our "normal" lives.

After a couple months of mourning my entrance back into society, I came to an important realization: we are at Burning Man just one week a year, but it is my responsibility the other 51 weeks to bring my Burning Man experience into my world. Theatre is my discipline, so I apply the principles I learned into my work as a theatre artist. Through radical inclusion, I believe that there is a place for everyone in theatre and new blood means new perspective. Radical self-expression opens me up to create unbiased, unselfconscious art and has improved my performances. Immediacy is one of the most important principles to apply to stage. The idea that the present moment deserves all of our attention and is the most important thing is the most effective way to pursue an **objective** when portraying a character. The level of participation and community that exists at Burning Man creates such a healthy and productive environment when applied to theatre. The principles I learned at Burning Man have strengthened my craft and have allowed me to fully enjoy my work in theatre.



*Ashley Leamon
today and at
Burning Man*



People often travel via bicycle or on art cars. *Ride of Passage* (center), an art car, includes stadium seating from which attendees can watch the burns.

review of the experience follows:

"This singular experience taught me more than anything else I've ever participated in. We spend so much time conforming to the world in which we live that we never really question what could be better, or what we want, if it doesn't fit

into society's 'system.' I have learned that anything is possible, and that humanity is capable of so many wonderful things. The world isn't just one giant ball of hate and war; there are so many beautiful things out there that just need to be seen or created. Burning Man doesn't just leave you with specific skills or new abilities. It opens your mind up to everything that's possible and I am so thankful for having this opportunity."

Wow, that touchy, feely stuff is significant and feeds their art.

For me, the traditional Burner greeting of "Welcome home!" expresses what I think Burning Man is all about. For me, this is how the world should work. It is an open, creative, non-judgmental, collaborative society where participants are allowed to authentically and freely

express themselves. And I get to live it for one week a year.

One day last year toward the end of the week, I happened upon one of my male students, a theatre major, near center camp. He was a little older than a traditional student because he did two tours in Afghanistan before he came back home to attend Francis Marion University. He was standing there in a hat, boots, and a flowery skirt that he had been wearing most of the week. He looked sort of shell-shocked. I said, "Are you all right?" He looked at me and said, "I gotta get out of South Carolina..." I thought, "And THAT is why I take them to Burning Man. Ladies and gentlemen, my job here is done." ■



Dawn Larsen is an associate professor of theatre at Francis Marion University in Florence, SC, and administrative vice president of SETC. She is planning her fourth trip to Burning Man in 2012.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: C.J. Miller, Senior Theatre Major, Francis Marion University



C.J. Miller at school and at Burning Man

Burning Man was nearly impossible to get my head around so I simply decided to immerse myself in it. Burning Man is one giant performance from the hearts of those involved. I was able to see this firsthand as I actually performed stand-up comedy there on two occasions. Just as with any theatrical performance, it was important for me to understand the audience I was performing for in order to determine what message I wanted to deliver and how to most effectively deliver it.

Leading up to my first stand-up set, I took part in a "skip parade." This is exactly how it sounds (I think). A group of about 20 of us got together and literally skipped for about a mile to our destination, the camp where stand-up was held. I should mention that everyone, guys and gals, was wearing a skirt. The route we took was not directly to our final destination, but instead went by various camps and through different locations as a way to promote the event planned for that evening. We were basically walking, skipping "fliers" and it worked, as the majority of people who attended the comic show were intrigued by our skip parade and decided to follow us to the venue. One of the camps we skipped by was a musical poetry camp. People would come here to play instruments and/or recite poetry, much of it impromptu. The skip parade took a small pit stop here to stretch and relax while listening to some very interesting poems and musical pieces. After getting back on our way, we were pleasantly surprised to be joined by many of the artists from the musical poetry camp, as well as by people who had stopped by to listen to them. So, in essence, you had theatre attracting theatre on the way to do theatre.

Everything about Burning Man is theatrical. I believe this to be because what takes place there is a reflection of who we are internally. In everyday life, we try to express what we feel. We hug someone to say we love them. We smile to say hello. We clap our hands to show approval. Theatre is a way to communicate to the world what we feel on the inside. Burning Man is simply a dramatic display of the manifestation of our souls. Not only is Burning Man the best example of what life should be, it is a prime example of pure theatrical theatre.