

## Fighting for arts education

ACT's Susan Stauter

BY PAUL SIGNORELLI

Artists who serve as educators are hardly rare. Few, however, could claim to be more involved in art and education than Susan Stauter, director of American Conservatory Theater's training program in San Francisco.

Stauter, who oversees the training of amateur as well as professional actors at ACT, manages and teaches in a program that reaches children, teenagers, and adults. She is also a playwright and has helped others to develop their own writing skills. In addition to teaching and writing, Stauter has served as an administrator in various theatre programs.

Given her experience as an artist, educator and administrator Stauter has a lot to say about how the arts are treated in schools. She feels strongly that the arts need to be viewed as seriously as any other subject in schools throughout the United States.

The arts, said Stauter in a recent interview, are not dessert, not a frill to be added to a school's curriculum after more meaty subjects have been studied.

"That is what is wrong with public education," she stated. "We somehow have it that after you eat your green beans and vegetables, you may deserve to have your ice cream. What I have fought for and what I want to see happen is parity among artist-educators and artists in the schools and the traditional academic faculty. Parity, that's all."

She has had plenty of opportunities to fight for that parity. After earning her master's degree in theatre, she worked as an actress and taught for ten years in Placentia, California. She also worked in a pre-Jarvis-Gann (California's tax-cutting proposition approved by voters in 1978) program in Stockton, California, at Lincoln High School, where she helped run the school theatre company and wrote plays for students she continues to encounter onstage.

"I can't go to a regional theatre and not see a Stockton student's name in the program," she said.

Stauter also wrote and directed for the entertainment section of Disney Studios, wrote for the cable Disney Channel, and prepared vignettes for the characters in the Disney amusement parks. She also did more mundane work, what she called "real" jobs—running a dress shop part-time and serving as a shipping clerk—so she could learn "how hard people work for their money."

"I learned about how your feet hurt at the end of the day," said Stauter, "and I came out of the experience with a real



Susan Stauter

compassion for my parents and people I've known."

When the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts was created, Stauter was chosen to run the theatre department. She says she learned an important lesson during her time at the school: how to say "yes" rather than "no" to creative ideas. The director of the school, Charles Stewart, encouraged his colleagues to test and implement their ideas; the result was that creativity flourished and people learned how to make something out of nothing. She admits that she found it painful to leave the school when ACT offered her the position she currently holds, but she has continued to try to find ways to say "yes" even when the odds seem insurmountable.

Her commitment to education has continued to develop since her arrival in San Francisco. She teaches in a variety of places, has served on the

Superintendent's Task Force for the San Francisco High School for the Arts, and continues to serve as an advisor for the Superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District.

Stauter's varied experiences have convinced her that public education "has to recognize the importance and the validity of the arts. In doing so, educators are going to have to recognize the validity of artists in the schools."

Programs which bring artists into schools enliven and enrich the traditional curriculum, she explained. According to Stauter, these programs can be as simple as having theatre professionals visit local schools to observe, critique, and assist in drama training, or can involve projects which encourage students to create their own plays.

By working with children and teenagers in local school districts to create new plays, said Stauter, theatre professionals and the school districts' teachers can help young students discover their own voices and help them understand their place as budding artists in contemporary theatre.

The students involved in this process under the tutelage of their teachers and guest artists can learn to write and produce plays focusing on the issues of their time, emphasized Stauter. AIDS, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, environmental issues, and a myriad of other timely topics are all subjects students can address while drawing from a variety of historical and contemporary sources.

She recalled two examples of the process at work. In one case, a play called *To Whom It May Concern* was based on

letters ranging from those written by ancient Abyssinians to others penned to "Dear Abby." According to Stauter the play helped students understand and overcome their feelings of powerlessness to affect change. By writing and producing the play, she said, the students became aware of the importance of communication.

"The students who were in that show now write letters," said Stauter. "I know they do!"

A second student-written production, *The Wildest Storm of All*, channeled teenagers' rage and frustration over the spread of AIDS into a work which she believes "saved people's lives." Stauter also thinks the play forced the participating students to consider the boundaries they needed to establish in their own behavior in light of the increasing number of people afflicted with AIDS.

She has also helped create bilingual productions that have combined the efforts of students in drama classes with the work of students in language classes. The plays, translated into English, are intended to inspire students to want to read the plays in their original language.

One of Stauter's most fervently held convictions is that artist-teachers need to have a say in arts curriculum planning. Artists' experiences, she insisted, should be valued by school officials in charge of creating the proper setting for students to excel.

"I don't just mean Betty Beanbag arriving to teach a specific skill," she said, "but artists of all layers in the layer cake. This battle between artists and educators has got to stop, where the educators view the artists as flaky weirdos who can't take roll, or teach—"They can do it, but they can't teach it"—and the artists view the educators as dry, dusty, creepy little people who can only interpret what they do.

"We've got to trust each other. We need each other. There is a painful lack of respect coming from both sides."

The real losers, she suggested, are the students who remain unaware of the relationships between the arts and other subjects. Those students, according to Stauter, need to be introduced to the arts through artists-in-the-schools programs and visits to theatrical productions, museums and other arts settings and activities. When this does occur, said Stauter, students begin to see the ties between the arts and all the other subjects they encounter in their educational development.

"If interdisciplinary curriculum is instituted from the first grade," she said, "from kindergarten, then the arts are necessary to mathematics, to history, to everything, and then the arts become more accessible.

"Too many times I've worked with students who just develop

an insatiable appetite for O'Neill or an insatiable appetite for any given poet or playwright from the past because that person speaks to them.

"There's some kind of a comfort," explained Stauter, "that goes on when they realize that these things have happened before and that they are part of a continuum, and there is something ancient about all of this."

Students training in ACT's program, she noted, learn as much as they can about the largest possible variety of subjects. They might begin in classes designed for children and young teens, then move into the professional training program which covers everything from traditional theatre, diction, speech, and phonetics to tap dancing, stress management, and yoga.

"They have to eat everything on their plate," said Stauter. "We're interested in creating an ethic for the actor of tomorrow, an ethical, thinking, feeling human being who can take care of him or herself."

What she tries to bring to her students—whether they will work in theatre or become audience members—is an understanding of how important the arts are in daily life, the arts as far more than a subject to be studied in school, then discarded.

Stauter recalled, for example, working in Alaska through the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and meeting with people who traveled by bus for hours just to hear her speak about writing.

"They were little children, and they wanted to write. They make great efforts to be involved with the arts,

and they have this incredible spirit about it. It felt so isolated, but the arts really connect Alaskans."

What students gain through this relationship with the arts, Stauter concluded, is an overall awareness of the continuity which exists between generations.

"The notion of apprenticeship is really what I'm trying to conserve at ACT. The look in (ACT actor) Sidney Walker's eye when he's walking down the stairs, and he runs into a Young Conservatory student coming up the stairs, and they look at each other, and Sydney puts his hand on the child's shoulder, and then they just walk on. I know that child played Tiny Tim last night, and I know that Sydney played Scrooge. That's where it's at. It's the passing of the ancient torch.

"When I talk about arts in the schools, I'm talking about Sydney on the stairs with that child."

*Paul Signorelli is executive director of the San Francisco-based Teens Kick Off (TKO) theatre ensembles. He has written for a variety of newspapers and magazines.*

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