SABBATICAL LEAVE PROPOSAL

Applicant: Thomas Amen
Department: Theater Arts
Type of Leave Requested: Travel, Study, and Creative Skills Development
Term of Sabbatical: Spring Semester 2010

Introduction

I have been privileged to be a member of the faculty in the Theater Department at Golden West College since the Fall of 2000. Prior to joining the Theater Department at Golden West College, I served as an adjunct faculty member at the following schools: Orange Coast College, Cypress College, Irvine Valley College, Riverside Community College, Miramar College, and the Orange County High School of the Arts. I also served as Artistic Director of the Vanguard Theater Ensemble in Fullerton, and as a guest director at numerous theater venues in California and Utah. I hold a BA in Acting from the University of California, Irvine, and an MFA in Directing from the University of Utah.

At present, my teaching assignment includes the following courses: Introduction to Theater, Beginning Acting, Intermediate Acting, Advanced Acting, Directing for the Stage, and Theater Production. In addition to teaching in the Theater Department, I direct departmental productions in each of our theater venues here at Golden West College, collaborating with my colleagues to create theater events that educate and inspire our students, and entertain our patrons. I also serve as the publicist for the Theater Department, which allows me to collaborate with numerous media and community organizations in the promotion of both our Theater Department productions and our instructional program.

I am currently beginning my ninth year as an Associate Professor in the Theater Department, and my fifteenth year as a theater educator. I can think of nothing that I would rather be doing with my life, and I am honored to be a member of the faculty at Golden West College.

Project Overview

My proposed project will focus upon several forms of research, which will include: literary and historical research, critical literary analysis, travel, direct observation, and creative conceptualization. With this in mind, I am proposing a travel and research sabbatical.

My project will involve extensive research focusing upon Herman Melville’s literary classic, Moby Dick. Long hailed as a masterpiece of American Literature, there have been numerous attempts to adapt Melville’s novel for the stage, yet few have succeeded in taking Moby Dick from the “page to the stage” in a way that has resonated with
audiences. For a number of years, I have had the desire to embrace this challenge myself, and my proposed sabbatical will allow me the necessary time for background research and critical analysis of the novel itself. This research and analysis will subsequently allow me to realize the professional goal of writing and directing an original stage adaptation of *Moby Dick*, which I plan to stage in the Mainstage Theater at Golden West College.

My overriding motivations in pursuing this educational and experiential opportunity are based upon several critical factors that not only define my identity as an educator and practicing theater artist, but reflect my personal interests as well. These motivations include:

- My passion for theater and theater education.
- My abiding interest in American literature that speaks to the heritage, breadth, and cultural diversity of the American experience.
- My fascination with American and international maritime history.
- My personal experience in South Pacific travel, and my keen interest in the history of what Melville called “the watery part of the world.”
- My personal background and experience as a life-long sailor.
- My sincere desire to test my artistic and academic abilities by embracing the challenge of doing the necessary research to create a dynamic and powerful play out of the Melville’s voluminous novel... a play that will engage my students and colleagues in the Theater Department, our greater GWC campus community, and the greater regional academic community.

With these motivations and challenging goals in mind, I have sought the advice of a great American author who has enjoyed considerable personal experience with the novel, *Moby Dick*. In formulating this project proposal, I have contacted the esteemed science-fiction writer, Ray Bradbury, who authored both the screenplay for John Huston’s original film version of *Moby Dick*, as well as a more recent stage adaptation of the story, entitled *Leviathan '99*. Prior to embarking upon my own journey toward adapting Melville’s novel for the stage, I asked Mr. Bradbury if he had any sage advice to pass on to an aspiring playwright. Mr. Bradbury readily and graciously responded, offering me, among other things, one piece of advice that he believed was particularly critical to his own success. His advice was to set aside the time to research the novel, to research Melville’s formative years, to research whaling history, and, through absorbing as much of these as possible, to “become Herman Melville”... to get inside the man, see the story through his eyes, and speak with his voice.

Taking Ray Bradbury’s advice to heart, I have formulated a plan of attack that I believe will be enormously rewarding, productive, and beneficial. My intention is to investigate the foundational life-experiences, the personal and creative influences and motivations,
and the historical factors that drove Melville to write *Moby Dick*. At the same time, I will engage in a critical analysis of the novel itself, with an eye toward future adaptation. This rigorous investigative process will include:

- Traveling to Boston, Nantucket, New Bedford, Mystic, and other former whaling ports on the eastern seaboard, in order to research the 19th Century American whaling industry at its source. This will naturally include visits to whaling and natural history museums, maritime libraries, and historical locations significant to the American whaling culture, and depicted in Melville’s novel, *Moby Dick*.

- Traveling to Melville’s former home, *Arrowhead*, located in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Now a museum, *Arrowhead* serves as a cornerstone for all research into Melville’s life and work, and is also the location in which *Moby Dick* was written. It is said that Melville drew particular inspiration from the physical location of the property, which lies within the shadows of a large mountain that evidently reminded Melville of the back of a great, white whale.

- Traveling via a replica of a 19th Century sailing vessel from Valparaiso, Chile, through the Marquesas Islands, to Tahiti. This is the exact path that Melville followed as a young sailor aboard the American whaler, *Acushnet*, and the exact voyage that inspired three of his novels: *Typee*, *Omoo*, and, of course, *Moby Dick*. The confines of his ship, juxtaposed against the vast expanse of the open sea, had a profound effect on Melville’s psyche. His later ideas about good and evil, darkness and light, freedom and religious stricture, the savage and the civilized, where all largely shaped by this seminal experience. By traveling *to* and *through* this area...by following in Melville’s wake...by seeing some of what he saw...by absorbing some of the same sensory experiences that had such a profound impact upon Melville, I hope to gain some insight into the creative mindset that gave birth to *Moby Dick*. By embracing Ernest Hemingway’s belief that a writer needs first-hand experience in order to truthfully depict a time and place, I believe this experience will be invaluable to my own artistic interpretation of Melville’s novel, and my personal quest to adapt it for the stage.

- Critical research, breakdown, and analysis of the novel itself. My intention is to literally take *Moby Dick* apart, piece-by-piece. In doing so, I will thoroughly analyze the dramatic structure of the novel, and examine ways in which theatrical dialogue may substitute for some of the cumbersome narrative passages within the original text.

- Analyze other theatrical adaptations of the novel, focusing upon the areas in which other attempts at adaptation have been largely unsuccessful. There are a number of existing stage adaptations, and while each has certain strengths, all are plagued by dramatic weaknesses in one form or another. I believe that by exploring these texts I can increase the likelihood of my own artistic success by avoiding some of the pitfalls that other playwrights have encountered. Though
prior adaptations have been attempted, success has remained illusive. It is my
goal to succeed where others have failed.

- The composition of a playwright's outline and a director's concept detailing the
necessary theatrical methodologies and physical requirements of my own
proposed production of *Moby Dick* at Golden West College.

**Increased Competence**

In the area of *Increased Competence*, I believe that this sabbatical project will
generate the following outcomes:

- **My language and verbal skills** will increase by reading the extensive
historical texts, the extensive critical essays of Melville’s work, and the
various existing stage adaptations that I intend to explore as a part of this
research project. Above all, my detailed critical analysis of *Moby Dick*, which
will serve as the foundation upon which this research project is built, will
undoubtedly increase my skills in this area.

- **My language and verbal skills** will increase through the formulation of my
playwright’s outline and director’s concept, which I will compose at the
conclusion of this research project.

- **My language and verbal skills** will increase through my visits to numerous
museums and historical sites as they relate to both *Moby Dick*, and the history
of American whaling. These visits, coupled with the extensive research
mentioned above, will allow me to develop an understanding of the historical
terminology, equipment, and physical processes described in Melville’s
novel, and employed in the American whaling industry and culture of the 19th
Century. These first-hand visits, coupled with extensive historical and literary
research and analysis, will allow me to develop an authoritative voice on the
subject, which will subsequently allow me to effectively communicate
historical information and terminology, and literary themes and ideas, to my
students in the context of the production process of *Moby Dick* at Golden
West College. My ability to speak authoritatively on the historical
background and literary context of Melville’s story will be crucial to the
educational experience that my students will enjoy through the process of
bringing the novel to our stage in theatrical form.

- **My practical, hands-on experience** will be greatly enhanced through the
travels I intend to undertake as a part of this research project. This is
particularly true of the sailing voyage I have described earlier in this
proposal. Having done some initial research, I have confirmed that there is an
opportunity for me to sail aboard a working vessel that regularly plies the
route that I have described earlier. One key aspect of this opportunity, and one of the primary attractions to me in the context of this project, is the requirement that passengers function as crew-members, and actively participate in the sailing, maintenance, and general operation of the vessel throughout the voyage. In other words, this will not be a pleasure cruise, but rather a hands-on educational experience, which will afford me tremendous insight into the excitement, monotony, even terror, of being at sea in a 19th Century vessel.

- My sensory perception will be greatly enriched through the travels that I intend to undertake as a part of this research project. To be able to incorporate the sights and sounds that I experience into my eventual play will give the work the necessary voice of authority and understanding that it will need in order to be artistically successful and academically relevant. Most significantly, my ability to relate the richness of my experience to my students will allow my students to indirectly share in my experience, which is a crucial factor in the creation of an engaging and rewarding educational experience of this nature. In other words: If I am inspired by what I have been fortunate enough to experience first-hand throughout my own creative journey, I will be in a stronger position to inspire my students in our collective artistic and educational journey through a theatrical production at Golden West College.

**Improvement of Instructional Services (Amended Version)**

In the area of Improvement of Instructional Services, I believe that this sabbatical project will generate the following outcomes:

- **Increase student language/verbal skills** by exposing students to a superior example of American Literature of significant historical and cultural merit. Throughout the proposed production process, students will also be exposed to a vast array of articles, essays, and books that discuss the history of the American whaling industry, Herman Melville’s life and work, etc., from historical and cultural perspectives. This exposure will afford an additional opportunity to expose students to intellectual materials that will greatly enhance their language/verbal skills, as well as their capacity to absorb and comprehend complex intellectual research materials.

- **Increase student language/verbal skills** by providing an exceptional opportunity for students to gain increased comfort and confidence with formal, historical language of a specific culture by requiring the students engaged in the proposed production process to both comprehend and actively “speak” this formal, historical language throughout the proposed production processes. This facet of the production process will have future benefits when students encounter
numerous other samples of formal or classical dramatic literature that require a high level of comfort and confidence during the production process.

- Afford students a unique *practical, hands-on experience* by creating an exciting research and performance opportunity for the students in my Theater Production classes. This opportunity would also extend to the students in my Introduction to Theater classes. By creating an exciting research and production experience, that is significant in artistic, historical, and multi-cultural contexts, I will have the capacity to offer the students in my Theater Production and Acting classes a unique, one-of-a-kind educational experience. At the same time, by being able to discuss, from a first-hand perspective, my experiences as a playwright, I will be able to better address those portions of my Introduction to Theater and Directing courses that pertain to the work of the playwright.

- Afford students the unique and rare *practical, hands-on experience* of working directly with a playwright in the production process. Most students, even at the graduate level, never have this practical opportunity, yet it is commonplace in the professional theater arena. By engaging my students in the hands-on experience of taking a play from the “page-to-the-stage” through the collaborative play production process, I will have the capacity to offer them something of immense artistic and academic value.

- Provide students a truly unique experience in the area of *sensory perception* by engaging them in a project in which the visual and aural elements of the production will be key factors in the story telling. This is a complex story to attempt to bring to the stage, and it poses many difficult challenges in terms of depicting physical action. By allowing the students to collaborate directly with the playwright/director (me), they will have the opportunity to assist in the definition and implementation of effective visual and aural elements that allow the play to speak to the audience on a “sensory” level, as well as an intellectual one. Furthermore, because my students would be sharing the fruits of their labor directly with the audience, the students would gain enormous feedback as to their level of success. This is one of the areas of this project that I believe is most exciting and rewarding, because, in a sense, the students would evolve into *teachers* by the end of the project, in that they would educate and inspire their audiences during performance by presenting a dynamic work of fiction that has often seemed inaccessible to many. The discovery, comprehension, and implementation of visual and aural spectacle is the very basis of theater itself.

- Provide students with an engaging experience in the area of *sensory perception* by exposing them to numerous photographs, paintings, physical artifacts, and samples of music from the American whaling era. This speaks directly to the need of each student in the production to have a detailed visual and aural understanding of the “world of the play”…the specific time and place in which the play is set. By exposing students to the types of materials mentioned above,
their production experience would be immeasurably enriched, and their general academic experience would be greatly enhanced.

In addition to these three examples of *Improvement of Instructional Services*, I would like to include two additional examples that I believe should also be addressed in this area. This project also has the capacity to:

- Offer my colleagues within the Theater Department a unique educational resource, which will improve their own capacity to *Improve Instructional Services*. Not only would this project enrich the educational experience within my own classes, it would enrich the classes of my fellow faculty members as well. In fact, virtually every class we teach would be positively impacted, including our courses in: Acting, Costume Design, Scenic Design and Stagecraft, Lighting Design, Stage Management, Stage Make-up, etc. The potential for shared benefit is enormous, as the production that will result from this research project would positively impact and engage the entire Theater Department as a whole. Due to the general collaborative nature of theater, and the specific ideals of collaboration and integration that we promote each and every day within our program, the scope of this proposed production would engage and envelope the talents of our theater students, faculty, and staff, and enhance the collaborative spirit of our program in a powerful way.

- *Improve Instructional Services* across the GWC campus, and throughout the greater academic community, by providing an exciting educational opportunity and experience that extends beyond our Theater Department. This project has the potential to benefit our GWC faculty and students in such disciplines as Literature and History, as the resulting theatrical production could easily be incorporated into the curriculum of other programs. In addition, such a project naturally lends itself to inter-disciplinary projects, which I believe would greatly enhance the educational experience and spirit of collaboration across our campus. Finally, the production that will grow out of this research project has the potential to benefit students and educators at other institutions of learning, particularly within our regional colleges and high schools, where *Moby Dick* is a frequent component of the curriculum. With this in mind, the Theater Department at Golden West College would make a concerted effort to bring these individuals to our campus to enjoy the educational benefits of our eventual production. In return, our Theater Department, and our college in general, would enjoy a heightened profile within the greater academic community, and the resulting opportunity to introduce and recruit new students to our campus would be exceptional.

**Exceptional Opportunity**

In the area of *Exceptional Opportunity*, I believe that this sabbatical project will afford me the following:
• The opportunity to create an original, unique, historically significant, and culturally diverse academic and artistic experience for my students, while deeply enriching my own professional experience and credentials as an educator, an artist, and a student of literature and history. By engaging in this research, which will eventually lead to the creation and production of a play based upon *Moby Dick*, this project will, I believe, distinguish itself within the academic community as a worthy and ambitious undertaking. Furthermore, through the eventual creation of this play, this project has the capacity to serve a valuable purpose beyond my own academic discipline. Both the immediate and eventual benefits of this project have the capacity to extend beyond our theater program to other programs in literature, history, etc., both at Golden West College and beyond.

• The opportunity to gain valuable, first-hand creative, academic, and practical experience as it relates to this proposed project.

• The opportunity to focus upon a challenging academic and artistic project using a number of exciting, creative, and challenging methodologies, and to do so within an intense, concentrated time frame. These methodologies to include: literary and historical research, travel and direct observation, textual analysis, and creative conceptualization.

• The opportunity to take advantage of the unique opportunity to replicate the path of Melville’s original journey into the South Pacific via a replica of a 19th Century sailing vessel. This opportunity is one that is, unfortunately, “time sensitive”, in that the ship upon which I would be sailing only embarks upon this voyage at certain times of year; times that are in direct conflict with my teaching schedule at Golden West College throughout the regular academic year.

• The opportunity to engage in this travel and research project at a time that doing so will not negatively impact my colleagues or our general program. The current faculty dynamic within our Theater Department makes this project both possible and practical at the present time. Prior to the hiring of my colleague, Martie Ramm Engle, such a proposal would have left our department with only one faculty member present during my leave. However, with Martie now contributing to the strength of our program, with Susan Babbs steady at the helm as our Department Chair, and with the current pool of adjunct faculty members that support our program, I am in a position, for the first time in my career at Golden West College, to propose a personal sabbatical project that will not only enrich my own career as an educator, but will have a positive impact upon our program. With this in mind, I have discussed my intentions with David Hudson, Dean of Arts and Letters, and with Susan Babbs. I believe that both are in support of my decision to pursue this sabbatical leave at this time.

• The opportunity to realize a long-held artistic and educational goal at a time in my life and career that is conducive to aggressive research, extensive travel, and bold creativity. The rigor of this research, the challenges of artistic creativity and
innovation, and the physical demands of certain portions of my proposed travel itinerary, will demand a considerable amount of physical stamina, emotional motivation, academic maturity, and creative power. Taking these factors into consideration, I believe that I am at a point in my teaching career where I am thoroughly prepared for, and would greatly welcome, an ambitious academic and artistic challenge of this nature. Having already done some necessary groundwork and basic research, having already explored some potential opportunities, having already made some significant contacts, and having carefully considered the factors mentioned above, I believe that the time is right for me to push toward this goal. With your approval and support, I will do exactly that.

Summary

To summarize and conclude this Sabbatical Leave Proposal, please allow me to reaffirm the goals of this project. The goals of this project are:

- To engage in academic research of a critical, analytical, historical, and practical nature, in an effort to increase my personal competence, instructional value as an educator, and critical insight and practical experience as a theater artist.

- To conduct research and engage in practical, hands-on experiences that will facilitate the composition and production of an original play at Golden West College.

- To engage in the detailed background work necessary to the completion of an original stage adaptation and production which will directly benefit the students and faculty of the Theater Department at Golden West College, other departments at Golden West College, and the greater academic community of the region.

- To enhance the depth and breadth of my own experience as a career educator, and to enhance and diversify the curriculum that I teach.

- To lay the groundwork for what will become a unique, historically relevant, and culturally diverse creative and educational experience for the students within the Theater Department at Golden West College.

- To aggressively pursue a long-held academic and artistic goal at a time in my career, and a time in my life, that such a pursuit is both possible and practical.

- To reinvigorate my own academic and artistic creativity and curiosity in a way that will directly inspire and educate my students and fellow faculty members.

It is my sincere belief that the goals and methodologies outlined throughout this proposal are academically relevant, professionally worthy, artistically challenging, and realistically attainable. In addition, the intentions behind this proposed project are honorable and grounded in the spirit and tradition of academic inquiry, exploration, and scholarship.
Your support for this project will allow me to become a more effective theater professor, and a more dynamic theater practitioner, which will be of direct benefit to my students and colleagues at Golden West College. Therefore, I hope that the committee will thoroughly discuss and carefully consider this request for sabbatical leave. I believe that this is an ambitious and worthy project, and I am hopeful that upon considering my proposal you will reach the same conclusion and allow me to pursue it.

Thank you for the opportunity to apply for this exceptional professional opportunity!