

TEACHING HEATRE

The director's chair

Kathleen Smith Belcher

Thespians alum turned Met Opera director

The diva dilemma

When actor egos take over

(Beat)

Listen to the rhythm of the script



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Not on my watch

Title IX collaboration
tackles sexual assault



BY HARPER LEE

IN THE PAST six years, reports of sex discrimination to Xavier University's Title IX office have jumped from less than 10 to nearly 100. Sitting in her office on a rainy March afternoon, Kate Lawson, Xavier's Title IX coordinator, doesn't mince her words: That upward trend is a good thing, and she wants it to continue.

"The year before I came on," Lawson explains, "we had seven reports of sex discrimination to the Title IX office. The year after I came, we had 43. That's a significant increase. And then 86. And then 91. And then

95. Now, we are on track to be very close to over 100. That's the right direction. And it's a direct result of our training and education with things like *Slut Shaming*."

Produced as part of an innovative collaboration between Xavier University's theatre department and the school's Title IX office, *Slut Shaming* is a thought-provoking one-act that examines how a community undermines and abuses a rape survivor who dares to accuse her attacker.

Sexual assault is an issue for colleges nationwide, and Xavier is far from alone in taking steps to combat sexual violence. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one

in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college. Similarly, the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network states that, among undergraduates, 23% of women and 5% of men experience rape or sexual assault. Students early in their college career are especially at risk.

These numbers indicate "a public health epidemic," says Lawson. Sexual violence, she explains, is severely underreported in American culture. Sexual violence and sex discrimination can take many forms, and education is essential to combatting these issues.

"The increase of reports to my office indicates that the university's efforts to educate people on campus



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about sex discrimination are working,” Lawson said. “More and more students, staff, and faculty are actively rejecting the broader culture’s pervasive and systemic problems of victim-blame and social stigma, are embracing supporting individuals who experience sexual violence and getting them connected to a resource that can provide them with comprehensive information on their rights, options, and resources, and are consistently acting on their understanding that all of us have a role in preventing and addressing sexual violence.”

Stephen Skiles, head of Xavier’s burgeoning, ambitious theatre department, had seen a production of

Slut Shaming in the 2014 Cincinnati Fringe Festival. He knew he wanted to bring the show to Xavier, and he asked Lawson to help him connect the production to her work in the Title IX office and to all the initiatives meant to prevent and address sexual assault.

Lawson said that what began as a short conversation quickly blossomed. “It ended up being the most impactful, culture-shifting programming we’ve done around these issues,” Lawson said. “Because it was coming from a source people hadn’t thought of — the theatre department — it brought more people into the conversation.”

Theatre major Cassie Delicath (center) portrays Lauren Lucas in the 2016 Xavier University production of *Slut Shaming*. Lucas, a survivor of sexual assault, is tormented by her community for accusing her attacker. Reaching a breaking point, she screams her frustrations directly at the audience.

Conceived, written, and directed by theatre-making team Trey Tatum and Bridget Leak, the production opened Xavier's theatre season in fall 2016, playing to sold-out houses. More than 500 students saw one of the six performances, each one free to students thanks to sponsorships from departments and organizations on campus, including the Office of the President, Title IX office, and the Center for Diversity and Inclusion, among others. After the performances, many audience members stayed for the lengthy post-show talkbacks.

At the time of this writing, *Slut Shaming* was gearing up for a second round of performances at Xavier and remains a key element of the theatre department's partnership with Title IX. Skiles appreciates the overwhelming support from the campus community for *Slut Shaming*. He worked with residence life so resident assistants could bring entire floors of students to the production, which will once

again be free to students due to funding from the offices of the president, provost, and athletics, as well as the Student Government Association.

"Especially with all the news about women stepping forward more and more, using their voices," Skiles says, "I feel proud to be part of a community saying we need to not just talk about this, but we also need to stand behind it and see it through. This may be the most important thing we've done over the past two years."

There's a lot about Title IX that people don't know or misunderstand, Lawson says. Title IX goes beyond just women in athletics. Title IX is the federal civil rights law that addresses sex discrimination in any education institution that receives federal money. "Sex discrimination" covers a range of topics and issues. Title IX can ensure gender equity in systems (including, for example, women in athletics and STEM fields), provide protections for those who feel dis-

criminated against because they were pregnant or parenting, and address sex discrimination in interpersonal relationships (such as sexual harassment, rape, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence). Title IX protections also extend to employees at these institutions and their visitors.

"It's as broad as people a generation before thought it was narrow," Lawson said, "and all of it is separate from a student's, employee's, or visitor's right to a criminal process if the behavior or conduct they experienced is also against the criminal law."

While Title IX covers the waterfront on sex discrimination, *Slut Shaming* deals specifically with sexual assault and rape. Rehearsals, held in the evening in a small black box theatre space nestled inside Xavier's student union, are overseen by both creators, Leak and Tatum, who begin work by listening to the three young women in the cast talk about how they can't stop thinking about the play's protagonist, 15-year-old Lauren Lucas.

Lauren is a time traveler. She can move forward, anticipating moments that haven't yet happened. And she can move backward, reliving humiliation and pain. Her memory is redacted, though, and the particulars of two memories are omitted from the official record of her mind: the night she was raped by a boy in her class and the prelude to the moment she found herself soaking wet on the front lawn.

Social media is a major theme throughout the show. Degrading photos of Lauren appear online, and the word "slut" appears on her locker. Tatum used actual tweets and messages he discovered online in the script. Annie Mayer, a cast member in the current production, says the show's unpacking of victim-blaming is eye-opening. "There's a moment when Lauren's parents are arguing about shutting off the internet at their house, because of all of these terrible texts and tweets that she is receiving," Mayer said.



JEFF BURKLE

A moment from the 2014 production of *Slut Shaming* at the Cincinnati Fringe Festival, where Stephen Skiles, head of Xavier's theatre department, first saw the show. *Slut Shaming* has since become a key element of the department's ongoing collaboration with the university's Title IX office.



Cast members Cassie Delicath, Annie Mayer, and Taylor Maas talk with playwright Trey Tatum and director Bridget Leak during rehearsal of Xavier's 2018 production of *Slut Shaming*, before getting on their feet to work the show.

"I was memorizing this bit the other day, as I was on the treadmill at the gym, and was thinking how angry I was and how sick it made me. ... When people say the internet is forever, it really is. There's a moment in the show when Lauren talks about how my kids will be on the internet one day and they will see all of these things that people have said about me."

Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in a diner, Tatum and Leak are not only frequent collaborators but also a couple. Leak is eying the clock; she has another rehearsal this evening. Over French fries, the pair literally finish each other sentences as they recount the show's development. As part of a festival of new works led by up-and-coming directors, Leak was asked to stage a piece about women in media narratives; she knew immediately she wanted to examine how female victims of rape and sexual assault were portrayed in the news.

Tatum wrote the first draft of *Slut Shaming* — longhand — pacing on the roof of their apartment building. The production has continued to evolve over the years, incorporating new social media platforms and new stories — but never statistics. "You never hear a statistic, in the entirety of the play," Leak says. Tatum nods, "Empathy is the name of the game," he adds. "You don't change hearts and minds with statistics. You don't convince a person with statistics."

Lauren Lucas' antagonist in *Slut Shaming* is not her rapist, Tatum points out. Lauren's antagonist is her community. "For us, it's about how we create a hostile environment for a survivor to live in," Tatum said, "it's about how our communities ..." Leak jumps in, "... further victimize victims of sexual assault." Tatum agrees, "I don't pretend that this play has the power to convince anyone not to as-

sault somebody or to feel remorse for an assault, but if it can give a little bit of perspective on how we have this conversation and how we jump to conclusions — that's the goal."

Hannah Sheppard, a Xavier theatre alum and cast member from the school's first production of *Slut Shaming*, feels that theatre is the most powerful and most effective way to tell difficult stories, to make you feel outside yourself and give you a taste of another human's inner life. "Theatre can break all the rules and never get in trouble," she says. "It has permission to be provocative. You can't sit everybody in a classroom and say 'OK, now we'll talk about sexual assault and why it's wrong and who it's impacting and its implications, mentally, emotionally, and physically.' But if you put it in a story, the audience becomes overwhelmed with emotions. ... Not only are you forced to pay attention, but you're also forced

to lean in and buy into the story.”

Slut Shaming wants people to think critically and self-reflectively: What behavior do we engage in that undermines victims of sexual assault and rape, forcing them to shoulder the responsibility — and shame — for their experiences? More importantly, how can we do better? “Every year, I tell the incoming class of Xavier students that the greatest tool perpetrators of gender-based violence have is us,” Lawson said, “those people around the potential victim and the people around the potential perpetrator. Perpetrators count on us

to say, ‘That’s none of my business,’ or ‘I’m sure it’s fine,’ or ‘What else did they think would happen?’ When we don’t speak up or say, ‘That won’t fly here,’ or ‘Not on my watch,’ then we’re complicit.”

Together, Xavier’s Title IX office and the theatre department have staged *The Vagina Monologues* and screened the documentary *The Hunting Ground*. Their collaboration even earned a special award from the Jesuit Association of Student Personnel Administrators: the Ignatian Medal for Outstanding Commitment to Diversity and Social Justice.

Skiles feels that theatre artists have a responsibility to not only entertain their audiences but also to push them to engage with big issues, to talk and be open to change and new ideas. “Discussion. Understanding. Respect,” Skiles said. “That’s what theatre does on any college campus better than almost any other department. We give a humanistic view of issues. It’s one thing sit down and try to talk intellectually about rape, about sexual assault. It’s another thing to sit down for an hour and see somebody go through it.” **T**