Andrew Davis
2010 Faculty Development Grant Report

My 2010 Faculty Development Grant allowed me to attend the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) Conference held in Seattle on November 18-21, 2010. As an adjunct instructor, I do not receive travel money to attend conferences. This was the first time that I have been able to attend the ASTR Conference since 2004, when it was held in Las Vegas and I drove to it. I was eager to attend this year’s conference because my book, *America’s Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre*, was published earlier in the year by Penn State Press, and this was an opportunity to engage with the audience most likely to be interested in the book – theatre historians.

This year’s conference was held in conjunction with the Congress on Research in Dance (CORD) and the Theatre Library Association (TLA). The guiding theme for the conference was “corporeal power” and sessions focused on “the moving body in performance” and how power has worked on and through bodies in dance and drama. The theme of the body is an important one in theatre and performance, for the body is the much more the means of expression in performance than in the visual arts. The title of the 2010 Conference was “Embodying Power: Work Over Time,” and the stated goal of the conference was “to reflect on the biopolitics of bodies in movement across cultures and national boundaries, to reconsider the agency of bodies in performance on and off stage, and to rethink the links and ruptures between bodies as commodities, as labor, and as agents of transformation.”

ASTR operates somewhat differently from most academic conferences. There were Plenary Sessions, which featured scholars reading papers on topics ranging from “Unruly/Disruptive/Dangerous Bodies” and “Moving Spectators/Affective Power” to “State of the Profession” and “Subversions of Power.” More interesting, however, were the Working Sessions. Rather than deliver their papers to each other and to the audience, the participants exchange papers, and the working session allows them to discuss the papers with each other and with attendees. I attended several of these, notably sessions on “Massed Bodies, Mass Power,” “Popular Fiesta and Carnival of the Americas” and “Moveable Feasts: Methods and Theories for Analyzing Food Performance,” each of which touch on topics directly related to the Cultural Studies courses that I teach at Otis.

“Massed Bodies, Mass Power” was the most theoretical of the panels. Chaired by Kimberly Jannarone from UC Santa Cruz, the papers looked at the staging of spectacle and drama through use of massed bodies and drew heavily on crowd theory. Most of the papers looked at large-scale state-staged spectacles such as the Nuremberg rallies, a Zionist pageant at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, early Modern Catholic mass, Bolshevik rallies, revolutionary pageants of the French Revolution, and the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. There were explorations of use of massed bodies and choral speaking in avant-garde theatrical productions including political spectacle in Expressionist Drama and Epic Theatre, The Living Theatre of the 1960s and a public “Symphony of Sirens” in Baku Azherbatijan in the 1922. On the far end were unplanned, and un-“staged” spectacle of riots in Pittsburgh that followed the Steelers’ 2008 Super Bowl win.

“Popular Fiesta and Carnival” also looked at large-scale performances, largely in expression of the carnivalesque in popular festivals ranging from devil dances in Venezuela, zombie walks in America, a gay carnival krewe in Baton Rouge, all-Soul’s day procession in Tucson and other. Rather than expressions of top-down authority, these events were often expressions of resistance – escape from the restrictions of society or protest against. This session turned out to be the product of an ongoing “Popular Fiesta and Carnival” working group that is in contact with one another during the year, and meets at each ASTR Conference to discuss the themes. They planned to put together a panel at the ASTR meeting in Montreal. Given that the Montreal conference will address issues of Economic considerations, my
experience in producing these kinds of events through the Integrated Learning Program at Otis would be interesting.

The last of these working sessions was on Food performance, which looked at “Methods and Theories for Analyzing Food Performance.” This was not a topic that I was particularly knowledgeable about, but as foodways is a component in the Foundation-level Cultural Studies class that I teach, I thought it might provide some useful ways of thinking about food. It did. Like the popular Fiesta session, the Food group has met annually to discuss issues of food, the staging of food in live theatre, and responses to food ranging from disgust to desire, and looking at the use of food in performances ranging from Jacobean court masques to commedia dell’arte to holy communion. Much of the discussion revolved around food as sinful/sensual, and the conflict expressed by a number of attendees as to when and how we should celebrate the appeal of food or resist it. Several of the performances described opulent and corpulent presentations of food. In one theatrical performance, an entire roasted steer being brought onstage and cut apart by a team of butchers and distributed to the audience. Against this were the politics of resistance enacted by vegans, dieters, slow-food advocates and those concerned with sustainability.

These discussion sessions were much more engaging than the plenary sessions. Some sessions were run better than others, but there was more of a sense of involvement, as members of the audience, who were in many cases as knowledgeable about the topic as those who wrote papers, contributed to a lively discussion of issues that were raised. The only problem was that there was often too little time; the two hours allocated zipped by. My favorite handling of these was the “Massed Bodies” session, which had each presenter give a 3-5 minute synopsis of their own work. The presenters had previously met in small groups of 3-4 panel members to discuss their shared themes, and each of these groups talked about their discussions. Those discussions opened up to a more general discussion of shared themes and ideas, and the audience actively participated. Other groups were not so well done. I walked out of a session when at the beginning of the session, small groups had already formed and the session leader made no attempt to involve those of us who were “not” of the working group.

I was surprised to find out how many of the papers fell into my area of training – Performance Studies. ASTR has largely been a theatre history conference, but it is clear that Performance Studies is playing a large role in the life of the organization. Instead of a backward-looking assembly of historians, most of the focus is on modern theatre, much of it looking beyond the confines of the proscenium theatre to performance in general. Many of the prominent figures I remember from my grad school days are no longer there. It is clear that a younger generation of scholars is taking charge of the organization, and the emphasis is moving toward politics, identity, memory and belief. These were themes that were very prevalent in grad school at NYU in the mid-1990s.

Since it has been some years since I have attended an ASTR Conference, it was interesting to see that many of my classmates from graduate school – now entering their forties – have become mid-career scholars, juggling the demands of career and family. Only a handful of people from my grad-school cohort are still active in the field, and only three have tenured positions. It seems clear that an academic career is not a tenable direction for anyone who wants to raise a family. The failure of colleges to provide health care for young academics has forced many young women to delay starting families. The most poignant moment occurred over dinner. I was invited to come along with two female classmates from NYU’s Department of Performance Studies. Both have full-time employment as college professors. One is teaching at Empire State College in upstate New York, the other in the Department of Drama at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. Over a dinner of seafood, we talked about careers and family. The two women, now entering their forties, talked a great deal about family and the difficulty they have had in conceiving. Both delayed having children until their late 30s, as they have tried to build a teaching career after completing work on their PhDs, and each has had fertility problems. To me, this is one of the great shames of modern academic life – which is structured to keep junior faculty members teaching part-time
so that colleges do not have to provide medical insurance. It was an ironic and somewhat disturbing demonstration on how power works on the bodies of young academics.

Despite all the focus on the “biopolitics of bodies” at the conference, academics fail to address (or see?) how they are implicated in a system that is systematically devaluing their work and their need to provide for themselves, their families, and their bodies. I was not particularly surprised for despite the current generation of academics’ preoccupation with interrogating the scholar’s position vis-à-vis their object of study, they have failed to really include themselves in their picture. It is probably too threatening for academics to really look at the disparities of opportunity, power and authority and the extent to which senior academics’ lifestyles is a burden carried by junior faculty members, who are purposely kept underemployed so that colleges aren’t required to provide expensive medical coverage, and on students, many of whom will be carrying their student loans for decades. The fact that 70% of Otis faculty members are part-time employees without medical benefits indicates that my institution is implicated in this discourse of power.

This issue, not surprisingly, was not a theme that was addressed at the Plenary Session on the “State of the Profession,” which was not an open discussion, but a formal presentation of papers – thereby limiting the number of voices that were heard. The papers, presented by high profile scholars from leading institutions, largely addressed the needs and concerns of graduate programs on an administrative level, rather than more economic concerns driving these programs. The issue of what is happening to junior faculty coming in, who are competing for fewer and fewer tenured or even full-time positions, is not something that concerns senior-level faculty members themselves are willing to address.

I am continually struck by the capacity for highly-intelligent and highly-educated individuals to explore how power operates in our culture and through our bodies, yet cannot or will not face the ways in which their own lives, their own bodies and their own choices are subject to these same forces, and how – as academics – our own bodies are constrained, even oppressed by an economic structure that devalues classroom teaching. When graduate schools are churning out more PhD’s than the system can employ, when colleges rely on a large crop of part-time instructors so that they do not have to provide medical insurance, and when college graduates are carrying educational loans that will take most of their lifetime to repay, the system of higher education itself has become corrupted. Despite clear evidence that academics themselves are implicated in this picture of what we would have called, in the 1990s, oppression, it appears to be too scary for academics to really look at it. Young faculty members publish and attend conferences in the often-vain hope that they will be one of the select few that the system will anoint them as among the chosen.

My own book on the Walnut Street Theatre, which I was hoping would do something in terms of improving my status or marketability, is not likely to do much in that regard. After much pressure on my part, my publisher did have my book included at the Scholar’s Choice table, but the publicity was minimal, as Penn State Press has specifically stated to me that they have little incentive to promote the book (as sales do not seem to be a concern to the publisher.) I was able to reconnect with an associate from grad school who volunteered to review the book for the Theatre Library Association. And I was also able to meet face-to-face with the editor of Palgrave/Macmillan which will be publishing my next book, Baggy Pants Comedy: Burlesque and the Oral Tradition. But I have to wonder whether these individual works of scholarly writing will have much impact beyond personal satisfaction, as my employment both at Otis and at Cal Poly Pomona is in interdisciplinary programs, where publishing is secondary to teaching abilities as measured largely by student evaluations.

As I write this, government employees in Wisconsin are demonstrating in the state capitol building against the Governor’s plan to ban collective bargaining by state employees. This ban does not include either firemen or policemen, and seems to be targeted at two groups – administrators and teachers. It appears to me that only collective action on the part of teachers will change things or improve their
careers. I would be interested in seeing what the “Massed Bodies, Mass Power” panel would have to say on this issue. It’s an issue that cannot forever be ignored.