

3M Teaching Fellow

## MARC RICHARD

For Dr. Marc Richard, teaching kindergarten set the stage for his career as an educator. He believed a student's creative energy and intelligence could be cultivated through exploration and discovery. Now, Richard is the Coordinator for Sheridan's Honours Bachelor of Music Theatre Performance in the Faculty of Animation, Arts and Design and he is one of the 2018 3M National Teaching Fellowship Award Winners –Canada's most prestigious awards for teaching excellence. This honour is a merit to Richard's approach to learner-

centred teaching that steps beyond common methods. His techniques are rooted in the Reggio Emilia approach to education, whereby Richard states the teacher's role is to not "get in the way of learning." In the rich, dynamic, learning environment provided by musical theatre, Richard helps his students learn a process of creative discovery and exploration that they will maintain beyond graduation. When the focus is on meaning making, Richard says,

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*"Last year I learned the importance of loving the questions – the answer is a comfort zone and I do not want to be comfortable. I want to fall in love with living my way to the answer."*  
- Student

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students gain the autonomy needed to create their own versions of theatrical elements, such as singing, acting, or dance: "Once they own it – it's magic," Richard says. "They discovered it for themselves and no one can take that away."

In this way, Richard has changed the traditional landscape of teaching musical theatre and arts education. Focused typically on the final, theatrical production as the learning 'end point', Richard has flipped the focus to the learning *process*. Somehow teaching the

importance of excellence in performance – the finale – had overshadowed the necessity of teaching students the process of creativity.

“Process has always been very important to me as an actor and performer, but as a teacher it was not always welcomed,” Richard says. With the support of his department and colleagues, Richard created a shift in Sheridan’s program. Through the development of requirements called Creative Projects, Richard and colleagues teach and mentor students through the creative process: experimentation, exploration, selection, follow-up, and refinement – while prioritizing feedback and reflection along the way. This approach requires a ‘break from tradition’, since, as Richard suggests, ‘the entertainment world’ expects a polished performance as an end product to represent student accomplishment. But Richard adheres that in musical theatre, much process-learning occurs internally, and although it is not explicit – it is essential. “In classes we need to not get to the end product,” Richard says. “We need to loop around a few times in digging into it...and saying that is one version - now let’s go at this again...let’s look at it through a different lens this week.” Richard describes a shift in expectation for students. “The product that comes out of class now is messy – it is odd and discombobulated. It is not really a product yet – we are giving [the students] time to investigate.” To Richard, this investigative process represents embodied research. He explains how artists need time to ‘discover’ within their bodies -- how bodies hold information and ‘carry layers of personal research that the audience or public will never see’. The acceptance of process as research is an innovative and exciting aspect of the musical theatre program at Sheridan.

The award-winning musical, *Come From Away*, was originally developed and produced by Sheridan College and The Canadian Music Theatre Project. It is one example that illustrates how musical theatre is a powerful art that has the ability to make change in the world through storytelling, Richard says. Storytelling is the key to musical theatre's ability to reach diverse audiences. "Because the students understand the power of the storytelling medium called musical theatre, they are able to go out into the world and recognize that there are important venues and opportunities to tell stories to populations that might not otherwise hear those stories or tell stories of other populations – to raise awareness and bring stories to light," Richard says. In this way, Sheridan students are making a difference. For example, Smile Theatre and Smile Serenaders are student-driven initiatives that take theatre and music into care homes for older adults. For some students, their involvement has been life-changing and empowering.

Richard is proud of his students' community involvement. He also credits his students for aspects of his own professional development: "I learn from students just by interacting...by their theories...I want them to know that they are just as profound [as the books they read]...I want them to feel that their writing and scholarship is vital – people need to be hearing from them and their thoughts." Richard uses a technique called documentation panels, which provides an opportunity for him to animate the process of student learning within class through a collection of pictures displayed with quotes from student reflection journals. The 'panels' remain on classroom walls even after the class has finished – students can reflect on the learning of past students. Richard identifies this sharing of learning stories with colleagues, and in particular regarding student contributions, as one of the most powerful ways of learning and staying current: "We are doing a lot of professional

development by having collegial conversations about our practice – seeing what our students are doing in the classroom and what they are contributing. We are not in control of their learning. We come back with stories about what the students brought to the table – it is not about me or what I did. It is what the students bring’.

Richard’s belief in the value of developing creative energy in his students is endless. Through a critical and reflective teaching practice, he has encouraged his program to place value in process over product and to offer musical theatre students skills in the *how* of creativity. And, Richard feels that the benefits of this learning far surpass the classroom. Supporting students with the autonomy to venture out on their *own pathways* of creative discovery will facilitate the development of skills that will foster individualized personal and professional growth - a dance, a song, a script – of themselves. With generations of documentation panels hanging on the classroom walls, Richard’s students may have graduated, but their ideas are still alive. Ideas that will carry us and them forward onto life’s multiple stages.