Theater exec/professor Nolan closing curtain on influential role at Yale

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Victoria Nolan at the Great Wall of China. Photo: Yale School of Drama / Contributed photo
At 27 years, Victoria Nolan has enjoyed a longer run at Yale Repertory Theatre than any Broadway show except “The Phantom of the Opera.” Though her remarkable streak happily concludes at the end of June when Nolan steps down as deputy dean of Yale School of Drama, managing director of Yale Repertory Theatre and professor in the practice of theater management, her work ripples through American theater.

“I think her legacy is already operating out there in the field,” said James Bundy, who as dean of the Yale School of Drama and artistic director of Yale Rep has worked alongside of Nolan for 17 years. “It’s in all the leaders that she’s had such an important role in training.”

Nolan, who announced her decision back in October and is succeeded by Florie Seery, has seen the theatrical landscape evolve first-hand from her
multifaceted position at Yale. As a shrewd managing director and innovative educator, Nolan is as responsible as any one person for how theaters operate across the commercial and nonprofit spectrum countrywide. Naturally, her influence started in New Haven.

“We were a $16 million operation then,” said Nolan of Yale Rep’s operating budget, “and $40 million now.

“The university was in a very tight-fisted mode of operation then,” said Nolan, who arrived when Stan Wojewodski Jr. was artistic director. “It had gone for decades without maintenance, so all the buildings were crumbling. There was a feeling that the university was doing just fine.”

One thing Nolan saw that wasn’t so fine was the crippling financial burden dragging on students upon graduation, which averaged $40,000 in 1993. Working with Bundy and the university administration, Nolan helped create scholarship and work study opportunities to bring the debt under $14,000 for today’s students relying on financial aid.

Nolan was also instrumental in building the YSD faculty.

“There were far fewer resident faculty,” said Nolan. “A huge component of the Yale School of Drama is that we do not have tenure and we are committed to hiring the best practitioners to be the teachers.”

Nolan added that she and Bundy agreed that the faculty’s role “is not to teach the students to make the theater we made. It’s how to create an environment in which they can make the theater they’re going to make,” she said.

Chief among Nolan’s priorities has been diversity, now very much in evidence in the plays Yale Rep has produced during Bundy’s tenure as
artistic director.

“The number of world premieres we do every year has exponentially grown,” she said. “That in itself has created a more diverse body of work.

“One of the hallmarks of James’ tenure has been the Binger Center for New Theatre and the commissioning of 40 or 50 playwrights right now,” said Nolan, citing the $18 million endowment from The Robina Foundation created by James H. Binger.

Diversity, Nolan knew, was key in hiring faculty, staff and guest artists at YSD and Yale Rep.

“In our field, there’s a tendency to hire within, and hire by word of mouth,” she said. “That just doesn’t work. That doesn’t lead to a rich and diverse staff and, frankly, I think in order to achieve excellence, which is a core value, you need diversity...

“So I, working with James, pushed the drama school to make the commitment to not fill any empty positions without conducting a search and assembling a qualified field of diverse candidates,” she said. “

This innovation ran contrary to the common practice of developing one’s career with implied upward mobility, Nolan said.

“If the head of the costume shop were to leave and we had a number two person in the costume shop who was eminently qualified to take over, it meant that that person now had to go through the search process,” she said, “and that took some getting used to.

“But that’s very much a part of our DNA now and has led to learning about people who’ve come into our community who are vibrant, talented, extraordinary human beings that we might not ever have found if we hadn’t
established that discipline.”

Nolan’s keen interest in a diverse work environment extended well beyond Yale’s ivy walls. When she arrived in New Haven in 1993, “there were no managing directors of color in regional theater and only, maybe, one handful of artistic directors of color,” she said.

“The field was decrying the fact that there was nobody in the pipeline. My attitude about that was it’s wrong,” Nolan said. “There are plenty of people out there, we just don’t know them.”

Nolan teamed up with Curt Columbus, then at Trinity Rep in Providence, R.I., and the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival to create the ASPIRE KCACTF/LORT Leadership Program, which grooms young artistic and administrative leaders for the American theater with a focus of engaging people of color, women and members of other groups that are consistently underrepresented in the field.

Back on campus, Nolan personally taught Managing the Production Process, a class popular with YSD management students as well as others from outside the concentration.

“I teach them how to create and manage a production budget for a season,” said Nolan, who also taught a class in managing employees. “I split them into four groups and give them $975,000 and a case study of the theater they’re running. They pick a mission and plan a six-play season.”

According to Bundy, Nolan’s strength “as a teacher and mentor is understanding the difference between the kinds of skills people need to have and the sort of personal journey of owning those skills in your own idiom,” he said. “So I think she really was great at laying out the things people really had to know, but also encouraging the personality of her
students.

“'She has a certain kind of inner strength that is very inspiring and she’s also tremendously attuned to the challenges her colleagues are facing, to the challenges the students are facing,’” he said. “It’s a wonderful combination. It’s why she’s been so successful all these years.”

Above everything else, Nolan said that she will miss the students most.

“I will miss the mentoring,” said Nolan, who has no set course of action for the future other than enjoying her family. “I will miss how much I learn from students. What they bring in every day, the kinds of questions they ask. I will miss the intellectual rigor that exists at Yale,” she said. “The fact that my job changes every day.”