



# STAGES OF OUR LIVES

P H O T O G R A P H S   B Y   B I L L   B U R K H A R T

*The essence of drama is transformation, says Professor of Psychology Karl Scheibe, who explores the drama of everyday life in a popular course. Associate Editor Cynthia Rockwell discovers why his students, one after another, say: "It changed my life."*

**K**arl Scheibe argues that we need a new psychology useful in our daily lives. The language of the theater best illuminates this study of ourselves, he says, offering us the possibility of transformation.

I remember my first meeting with Karl as dramatic, because it radically transformed my perspective.

More than a decade ago, when my youngest son developed a hemangioma, a raised, berry-red patch of skin, on his chin soon after birth, people would stop me on the street. "What a shame.... He'd be such a handsome baby without that," they told me.

Then, one Sunday in church, Karl approached as I was gathering up my newborn and toddler from the pew. "I feel a kinship with your baby," he told me. "For years I had a birthmark, too, right there on my chin, right where your son's is. I had it removed only when I started shaving and I kept nicking myself there. But until then, it never bothered me; I had it for years."

With these comments, he recast my son and me in new roles. While I'd been thinking we were living a drama about a disfigured child who endures a difficult childhood, his comment made me realize that I could treat the blemish as negligible and the child might also experience it that way. By viewing life as drama, we can rewrite the script, choose the roles, change the interpretation: live it differently.

Throughout our daily lives, we move from one dramatic setting to another—now in our workplace, dealing with clients, colleagues, supervisors; later in our home lives as partners, siblings, and children. At times we might play the delicious role of a diner at a chi-chi restaurant or the heart-thumping drama of a driver pulled over for speeding. Sometimes we are caught up in the action, earnest participants in a scene with consequences to our life stories. At other times, we go as observers: at a casino, perhaps, watching gamblers put their money on a high-stakes game.

In his book, *The Drama of Everyday Life*, Scheibe tests this model of psychology against different facets of hu-





Maggie Burbank '02 recalls her monologue from “the costume class.”

“My character was hypothetically named Shana Carter, but I never said that during class, I don’t think. She is 19; lives in Nashville, Tennessee; got a country music record contract at the age of 15; and is a huge success. My monologue happened during a concert tour. Shana was planning for her birthday party and on the phone with three different people. The first was her masseuse, then her drug dealer, then her mom. I can’t remember exactly what I said, but each conversation showed a different side of me: first, how demanding and mean I am; second, how selfish I am; third, how much I love my mother and can hide from her my true self. “

man experience: our emotions—fear and greed, indifference, romantic love; and our customs—cosmetics and costumes, eating and sex, giving of gifts.

His approach has won plaudits from reviewers. *ForeWord* magazine said his book “exudes an inherent value for students while its winning literary style offers universal appeal.” *Science* said, “Scheibe’s entertaining book is a reaffirmation of one of the most powerful alternative ways of looking at human affairs: from the dramaturgical point of view.”

And in *The Harvard Book Review*, Sophia Domokos writes, “The fact that our lives often seem playlike should surprise no one. Shakespeare said so himself .... After all, if ‘all the world is a stage,’ ... who is the cosmic audience? ... Karl Scheibe revolutionizes conventional theories of quotidian existence by suggesting that we ourselves are the audience.”

Twelve years after our first meeting, I encountered Karl again, this time in his office to discuss his book and his course.

He is tall, more than six feet, with an erect carriage and a well-bred politeness. The slightly European flavor to his manner hints of his familiarity with Brazilian culture, of which he has written in the preface.

Photos against a wall clamor for attention: color snapshots of his students and him in class, smiling at the camera, holding hands in a circle; or stopped in midaction on stage, seated on the floor, laughing—a bulletin board full. “That’s part of the course,” he tells me. “The camera is there in class, for everyone to use: it’s not just the professor who decides which moments are important.” Each week, Scheibe posts last week’s photographs on the classroom bulletin board as a pictorial journal of the meeting.

His office is a balance of the colloquial and the formal. A practicing psychotherapist, he has cultivated the professional distance of an observer. Yet as a college professor and mentor to 20-somethings, he is relaxed and approachable. He does make clear, though, that his course is assuredly not a series of therapy sessions but an academic offering. Both drama and psychology majors flock to it.

“If I’ve done anything pedagogically unique at Wesleyan, this course is it,” he says, nodding toward those photos of his students. “It began 20 years ago as an experiment. I thought I’d teach it once or twice, but the students were really excited by it and I really enjoyed it. It’s a kind of ‘Wesleyan course.’”

Dramaturgical Approach to Psychology, he explains, offers students the responsibility for their own learning. They are the ones who teach the class—with his guidance. They prepare the exercises based on a weekly reading assignment, usually a play and a chapter from Karl’s book or that of another psychologist; they illuminate the concepts for themselves and each other.

“It’s a sound educational principle. The learners become participants in the process,” he explains. “A lot of psychological material is in the students.”

As we talk about the article I will write, he interrupts himself to offer me, once again, a new perspective: Instead of a fly-on-the-wall observer in his course, I could be a participant. “Active is better than passive,” he reminds me. Of course, I agree.

Judd 106 is in the basement of the psychology building. It is carpeted, with a raised platform center front and lights that can be dimmed and focused on that little stage. A sign on the door requests that we take off our shoes. The practical reason is that we’ll be sitting on the floor a lot and don’t want to track in dirt on the rug. But the act of removing our shoes, of entering the classroom in stockinged feet, became a ritual of demarcation, the way my son bows when he enters or leaves his karate school.

Karl begins this first class’s activities with a greeting exercise. We stand in two rows, silently facing each other, and, on his command, “Greet!” we reach out, touch palms, and lock eyes with the person across from us. And then, like a Vulcan square dance, we drop hands, look ahead to our next partner, and move one step down to repeat all this with the new person. Some eyes meet mine; someone down the line giggles nervously; some eyes flicker on my face only briefly, perhaps wondering what they’ve gotten themselves into?

More conventionally, we look at the syllabus: *Angels in America*, *Equus*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Othello*—stories about masks, lies, and secrets; romantic love, sanity versus insanity, family dynamics, loss and death, costumes, ideals of beauty, betrayal, sexual politics, power, good versus evil, ability to adapt.

“You will decide how to learn from the material,” he says, as he divides the class into random groups. Each week, he’ll meet with that week’s leaders to hear their lesson plans and offer suggestions, guidance, warnings of possible pitfalls, and general wisdom.

Students send weekly e-mail journals to Scheibe, as he tells the class to call him. (“The form of address problem is a serious question in many classes,” he explains. “When I started teaching here at Wesleyan I was 26 and I was ‘Karl.’ Now I’m old enough to be their grandfather, and using my first name is phony. It pretends I’m one of them. Scheibe is what they call me to each other, outside the class—why not sanction it?”)

Although he’d always included journal-writing as part of the class, e-mail improves it as much as 50 percent, he says. “There’s a directness and immediacy of e-mail, when you get your response back in one hour at times. It’s just extremely important to complete that dramatic circle of writing and response.”

The students find these journal entries a hotline to their professor, a place for candid discussion of

“If I’ve done anything pedagogically unique at Wesleyan, this course is it,” says Karl Scheibe, nodding toward those photos of his students. “It began 20 years ago as an experiment.”

personal experience that the themes in class awaken in them.

“I’m not the only one.”

After reading *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the students leading the class that day—Lara Perez-Longobardo ’01, Lin-Manuel Miranda ’02, and Jeff Woulfin ’01—asked us to arrive with a love letter we’d written in the high romantic style of *Cyrano*. Entering class, we dropped them anonymously in a bag. Later we each picked one from the batch and read it, spotlighted on stage.

“I was amazed,” said Mattitiah Zimble ’01, a dance and psychology major, during the discussion. “About half of them made me think, I could have written that letter. I was surprised to find out that I’m not the only one who feels that way.”

We find commonalities in our experience, our emotions.

Although he assigned us reading each week, “the texts are not the object of inquiry,” Scheibe says. “Rather, they serve to set and illustrate problems and issues, to pose questions. *Othello* is a study in jealousy—but the object is not so much to understand *Othello* as it is to use the play as a way of understanding jealousy as we see it and know it in our lives.”

The leaders of the class call for volunteers for skits after we’ve read *Othello*. Maggie Burbank ’02 and Bajir Cannon ’02 create an improv skit from a make-believe marriage. The situation: He has discovered she has a lover; he is devastated. “How did you go to meet him?” he asks her. “Did you use our car? With gas I paid for? While I was at work?”

We’re all waiting for “The Costume Class,” the first one after spring break, when we are to arrive in costume and perform a short skit in character. We enter like children on Halloween, celebratory and lifted out of the ordinary, and a little nervous, like an audition from *A Chorus Line*.

Scheibe sets the theme for psychological discovery: Clad in dark tights and turtleneck, black gloves and smooth, featureless mask, he is The Shadow. Not, he explains, the 1940s radio-show character, but the dark side of everything seen. “Fear me, and I become mischievous—and dangerous. Accept me and I hold no power over you.”

Eve Kagan ’01, a religion major who took the class the previous year, recalled her experience: “I was an exotic dancer from Jersey and I wore a wig and a slutty, slutty dress. I was talking about all these girls who claim that they aren’t exotic dancers, but they really are.

“I realized I was saying that it’s important to own up to who you are, which is what the class is about. Scheibe’s point is, First you have to realize what your drama is. You realize which dramas are yours and then you can change them.

“One girl in the class wore a huge coat and painted her lips blue. She was an Eskimo. Another girl dressed all in pink and stood on one leg; she was a lawn flamingo. Then one guy went up as a five-year-old boy and just lay on the floor with his crayons, drawing pictures and talking about his mom.

“It showed us how many characters we have floating inside us. And it’s great to see this and let them out, playing our shadow side.”

When I asked my classmates to recall a favorite session in the course, most mentioned the class after we read *Angels in America*. I’d missed that class, so Amy Rosenblum ’02, a dance and psychology major, and Ellen Tuzzolo ’01, a sociology major, filled me in.

The group leaders gave them this situation for an improvisation: Ellen was dying of AIDS and Amy was abandoning her lover. They had to go from talking to shouting, then back to talking.

Amy recalls, “I took the perspective, You’re going to die, but I love you so much I can’t bear to watch. But how do you leave someone who is dying?”

“It took us over in a way I don’t think I’ve ever experienced,” says Ellen. “I was screaming; I felt as though my life couldn’t get any worse. Amy was the one person who was making it possible to live, and she was leaving.”

“I knew I was taking away all Ellen’s hope, but I knew I had to leave if I were going to survive! I had to get on with my life!”

“When the scene was over and I looked around and saw everyone just staring at us and no one said a word, I felt so exposed.”

“It took a minute to get back to reality,” Amy agreed. “You know,

Bajir uses art to cope with death

“My final project started with an assignment from a dance class—to translate an experience to another art form—so I used film. We’d been working with the split between internal and external focus in dance. In dance you can focus on the feeling as you move, or on the external appearance: how it’s perceived by others, how you are moving relative to them.

“I decided to make a film that showed the split between the internal and external focus.

“On Saturday, I did the external focus: as I walked across campus, I filmed what I saw—a bag caught up in some tree branches, an old woman walking—just whatever was there.

“Late Saturday night, I got an e-mail from my mom, saying ‘Call me as early as you can tomorrow.’ I called and she told me my grandfather had died. It was real tough for my mom and me not to be together. That entire day and the next two weeks—that’s all I thought of.

“I hadn’t planned to make this part of the project, but I’d made up my mind to do the internal monologue on Sunday, so I did. But I was scared to do it. The things that were coming out were pretty intense.

“It started me thinking that no one *just* walks around: everyone has this stuff going on inside. So I did a longer version of the film, with several characters walking through what looks like a typical day, but a voice-over interior monologue tells of the difficult things they’re each going through, like a breakup with a boyfriend or a best friend in a coma.

“The final project for Scheibe’s class gave me the chance to explore those ideas in a more controlled way. It didn’t matter how much was fiction; it was all things that *could* happen. Everyone has their issues.”

—Bajir Cannon ’02







For the costume class, Rutherford Chang '02, a psychology major, became “the sort of person I had met maybe the week before, some flyer out of San José airport with a lap-top, who’s going to a tech conference. What was interesting to me was that the characters we chose to assume showed more about ourselves than we usually want to show to others. In everyday life, we’re usually trying to play a role and be someone else.”

I’d always wanted to dance for a living, but I could never justify spending my life just prancing around on stage—until we did this scene. It really solidified for me why art is so important.”

“Dance and working with kids who had eating disorders were always my passions,” said Amy. “My grand plan was always to do an art therapy or wilderness therapy for girls.”

Ellen turned to look at Amy. “That’s totally my dream: to have a home for kids and do wilderness therapy,” she said.

Through the power of dramatic art, which heals, unites, transforms, we learn a psychological truth: I’m not alone.

After we read *The Beauty Myth*, we paired up—those who routinely used make-up applying it to those who normally didn’t. It’s a very personal task, putting make-up on a classmate. You look at features carefully, see the beauty revealed. I (of the segment that uses make-up regularly) applied it to Rachel’s face and saw up close her flawless skin, her high cheekbones, gentle dark brown eyes, and full, shapely lips always ready for a wide smile.

It also made us think about this beauty custom, about what is beauty. Some classmates tried out a subtle new look, as I gave Rachel. Others painted generously. The professor sported startlingly crimson lips (which he washed at break-time, reporting that the sight of himself in the mirror had given him a bit of a turn). Then we sat in our circle, picked out one of the index cards we’d placed anonymously in the bag and read aloud what a classmate had felt was his or her most unattractive feature: Fat thighs, big noses, small eyes, thinning hair. (“I didn’t write that one,” said Scheibe. “I’m at peace with being bald.”)

“It was amazing,” recalls Bajir, a film studies major, “because there we are, sitting in our circle, listening to all these supposed physical flaws. But the room is filled with beautiful people. I’m listening to these and thinking, No one would limit his or her love for you because of that! Everyone has their issues, but this class made me question how much of these are just stuff we create to give ourselves an identity.”

Like Cyrano de Bergerac, we create our own limitations with our supposed flaws.

“The gift of theater” was the next topic in the syllabus. We gave each other gifts—things that didn’t cost us anything. Again, we put these anonymously in paper bags and chose in grab-bag style—hand-drawn pictures, lucky stones, special shells from the beach, a papier-mâché parrot. We sat in the circle for show-and-tell, each giver explaining the thought behind the gift: “I wanted to make someone here smile.” “I made those blueberry muffins because everyone likes food.” “It’s fun to make papier-mâché, and it’s what I can do.”

**“It’s a very personal task, putting make-up on a classmate. You look at features carefully, see the beauty revealed. I applied it to Rachel’s face and saw up close her flawless skin ...It also made us think about this beauty custom, about what is beauty.”**

Each of us has unique gifts to give.

While we are blindfolded, Scheibe called our names in pairs. Without talking, without peeking, we were to find each other in that roomful of classmates. Lara Schwartzberg ’02, a theater major: tall, lovely, slender Lara, with her long hair, was my partner. How do you find someone if you can’t see, can’t call out to her? Walking across the room, I reached out for hands nearby, patted broad shoulders, rubbed fuzzy heads, and moved on. Then, long, slim hands grasped mine... Lara’s? I felt this woman’s hair—long and silky and straight. Her fingers moved across my hands, and I realized she was searching for my wedding ring. This was my partner, my Lara, searching for me, looking for the details that mark me as unique in this room, just as I was doing for her.

Each of us feels appreciated for our individuality.

“As I grow older, I find myself less inclined to judge and more to love,” quoted Scheibe, from the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, for the final assignment. We wrote one index card for everyone, finding something positive to say about each—an association, a few words, a delightful connection or memory.

We passed out the cards one by one, each person reading a card about every other person in the room.

“It could have been really tedious,” said Amy, “but everyone was riveted.”

“It was beautiful to watch each person’s face as they listened. It was a wonderful affirmation of our value to others; it also gave us keys to understanding ourselves,” says Rachel Feinstein ’01, a psychology major.

Then, our final exercise: The same greeting that had begun the class would end it—except that it was en-

tirely different. The hand-touching-eye-contact-move-to-the-next became instead a clasp of friendship and deep communication, eyes locked onto each other. Most of us wept; many of us would graduate and bring the lessons from the class to our lives beyond Wesleyan.

“It is probably the most significant class I’ll ever have,” said Bajir. “I’ll have those cards forever. Afterwards, Rutherford [Chang ’02] and I walked out on Foss Hill with this wild feeling of having had a great shared experience, and we wanted everyone out there on Foss Hill to feel as cared for as we did then.

“Psychology—how many of these issues, these dramas, do we hold on to because we don’t know what we’d do without them?” he muses. “That’s what my brain has been stewing over.”

Owen Panettieri ’01, a psychology major, headed for New York after graduation to do a year-long acting conservatory at The Actors Center. He says, “Scheibe’s course helped me be okay with that decision. It made me more in touch with myself and gave me courage.

“Even more important, though, I learned that when two people really understand each other, you can’t have the barriers of hate and prejudice. I still try to carry that around with me.”

Caitlin Meister ’01, a theater major also off to New York City to act, agrees. “Scheibe taught us that we can find something positive and create emotional bonds with people who are not necessarily like ourselves.”

Scheibe also sums up the class with his hopes and goals. “I think there’s a sin that this course could commit,” he says. “It’s like I could have a wonderful experience, climbing the Swiss Alps, maybe, and then come back and tell you about it, and all you could say is, ‘Uh-huhhhhh.’ You have nothing of that experience. It’s a sin to create a course that is insular, that has a mystique surrounding it.

“I want to generalize this experience so others can have it, too. I hear from the journals that people talk to their housemates about it. People’s lives are changed, they tell me. They change direction, think about things differently, or accept things about themselves.

“Next year, I’ll be on sabbatical, but I’ll still teach this course. I thought, Why should I punish myself by not teaching it? I enjoy the contact with the students. The ones from this class are the ones who keep in touch after they graduate. I’ll teach it again each year.

“That’s another dramatic element: If you are an actor in a long-running play, how do you retain freshness? I’ve spoken to actors and they do, by and large, retain freshness. It’s living the moment, finding something in the moment to enjoy. It’s like my garden: I till the same 30 feet each year. It’s not original, but it’s fresh. I add fresh horse manure, fresh seeds.

“For me, I’ve taught the plays, some of them 20 times, but what makes it fresh each year is the new class.” 🍌



Micah Allen ’01, a theater major, termed his character a “psychologically abusive husband,” and recalls a line from his monologue: “I don’t hear you crying, do I?”

“I was one of the three students who had to organize that class, so I was doing a lot of preparation and needed an easy costume [t-shirt and shorts] and the monologue went from there. I’ve always been interested in exploring people who don’t physically abuse but mentally abuse others,” he says.



Lara Schwartzberg ’02, a theater major, wore a short dark wig, a peach-colored uniform and a brief flounced apron for the costume class. She recalls: “I was a saucy, single, star struck diner waitress who wanted to make it big. I improvised the monologue, so I’m not sure exactly what I said, but I know I did say ‘I hate peach. As color, as a flavor, as a concept. Peach makes you look like a slut; it’s a slut look.’”