

# Peer Evaluation of Creative and/or Research Activity

Name of Professor Evaluated: **J. Austin Eyer**

Project Evaluated: ***Head Over Heels* – Director & Choreographer**

1. Describe the production/project including the title, if any.
2. Describe the professor's preparation for their project/production assignment that is evident to you.
3. Indicate challenges that the professor faced with the project/production.
4. If an artistic concept was involved in the professor's work, please state your evaluation of that concept or what the professor has indicated in their concept.
5. Evaluate the artistic/technical process that may be evident to you.
6. Evaluate the professor's success in achieving his/her concept or their creative/technical goals.

1. Professor Eyer served as Director and Choreographer for the UTA Department of Theatre Arts & Dance production of the musical, *Head Over Heels*.
2. During a brief discussion prior to the performance with Professor Eyer and the production's Scenic and Lighting Designer, Professor Leah Mazur, it was clear that Professor Eyer had done extensive research on the musical's source materials: *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, a 16th-century prose romance by Sir Philip Sidney, and the music and lyrics of the rock band, the Go-Go's.

Musical theatre has so many "moving parts" in its creative process, making detailed preparation by a production's director key to a successful outcome. "Very good" directorial preparation for a musical is the minimum required to create even an "adequate" result. The overall quality, consistency, and cohesiveness of this production of *Head Over Heels* is doubtless the result of an extremely high level of creative preparation by Professor Eyer.

3. When producing musical theatre, the over-arching challenge for all members of the creative team is to create a world of the play in which the audience accepts the fact that the play's characters burst into song, know the same lyrics as one another (enabling two or more characters to sing together), and know the same choreography. And, while we can assume that the audience knows and accepts how musical theatre works and understands its theatrical conventions, for any production of a musical to be truly successful, it must create and present an imaginary world of the play that is, for the audience, completely "believable." To create such a world, the actions and behavior of the characters must be truthful.

Again, musical theatre audiences typically know what to expect, and they accept what they see and hear—even if it is not at the level of truthfulness that one hopes for. This production did not settle for that.

Another challenge presented to a director by *Head Over Heels* is content that focusses on matters of gender identity and sexuality. Professor Eyer's research and expertise in the areas of queer studies and, in particular, queer representation in musical theatre were so important to this production and its effectiveness. These topics were handled well and were presented with truthfulness, sensitivity, and respect.

4. Regarding “artistic concept,” Professor Eyer was dealing with a world of the play that was ancient, magical, mystical, and quite human—all at the same time. With that in mind, it appeared that he made the wise choice to guide his actors and creative colleagues toward committing fully to the story that they were telling and the given circumstances of their characters—as fantastical as those given circumstances may have been at any given moment. That approach worked exceptionally well.

5&6. Evaluation of Professor Eyer's artistic process and of his success in achieving his creative goals.

The world of *Head Over Heels* includes singing, dancing, mythical gods, magic, mysticism, mistaken identity, sexual awakening, and the music and lyrics of the Go-Go's. The creative “traps” of the piece are myriad. The musical, as written, is, in and of itself, non-traditional (to say the least) and rather extraordinary. In the hands of a less accomplished director/choreographer than Professor Eyer, it could very easily have gotten out of control—particularly with younger and less-experienced performers. Truth be told, had this production gotten “out of hand,” it very likely would still have been quite entertaining.

However, it did not go over the top. Professor Eyer cast the production beautifully and did an exceptional job of directing his young performers in such a way as to enable them to create truthful, nuanced performances. His work as choreographer was also effective. Of note was his ability to make less-experienced dancers look good without the choreography appearing to be more elementary than the production required.

A way that one might judge the quality of a university theatre production and its performers is to speculate about which performances, if any, would hold up in a professional production of the play. In this case, several of the featured actors would hold their own in a professional production of *Head Over Heels*. This is, of course, not only a credit to the talent and training of the student performers, but also to the efforts and contributions of Professor Eyer as their director and choreographer.

Finally, it has long been true—and perhaps truer now than ever—that musical theatre productions are more about spectacle than about content, more about concept than about truth, more about visual and vocal pyrotechnics than about meaningful story telling.

This production had plenty of spectacle, plenty of well-sung and well-played music, and plenty of outrageous, even shocking, moments, but it was all in service to the story, to the creation of a consistent and truthful world of the play, and to supporting the truthful behavior of the characters, and that is what made this production so much more than just serviceable.

It was, in fact, an outstanding production due, in large part, to Professor Eyer's artistry, vision, and leadership.