

## **Dr. Valerie Lynn Schrader**

**Professor Tenure-Line**  
**Communication Arts and Sciences**

**Title of your research project.**

“Beauty is Found Within:” Burkean Identification and Inclusivity in Olney Theatre Center’s 2022 Production of Beauty and the Beast.

**Description of research. Please provide a few sentences that explain the question and the methods employed in this research project.**

In November 2022, Olney Theatre Center, a small regional theatre in Olney, Maryland, received national acclaim for their holiday season production of Disney’s Beauty and the Beast. The production featured Jade Jones, a non-binary plus-sized African American actor, in the role of Belle, and Evan Ruggiero, an actor with a physical disability, in the role of the Beast. In this rhetorical analysis of the January 1, 2023 matinee performance, I argue that Olney Theatre Center’s production of Beauty and the Beast successfully re-envisioned the Disney classic to not only be more inclusive, but to enhance the message of the show, focusing on expanding the definition of beauty. I suggest that the performances and casting choices created Burkean identification by establishing common ground with audience members, causing them to be more open to the production’s inclusive message about beauty. Audience members who never saw themselves in either character before may have related to Jones’ and Ruggiero’s performances and may have been more likely to be persuaded of the show’s message that “beauty is found within.”

**Did this project include Penn State students as researchers?**

No

**If yes to the above question, please state where it was published.**

N/A

**What problem do you address with your research?**

How to make theater productions more inclusive.