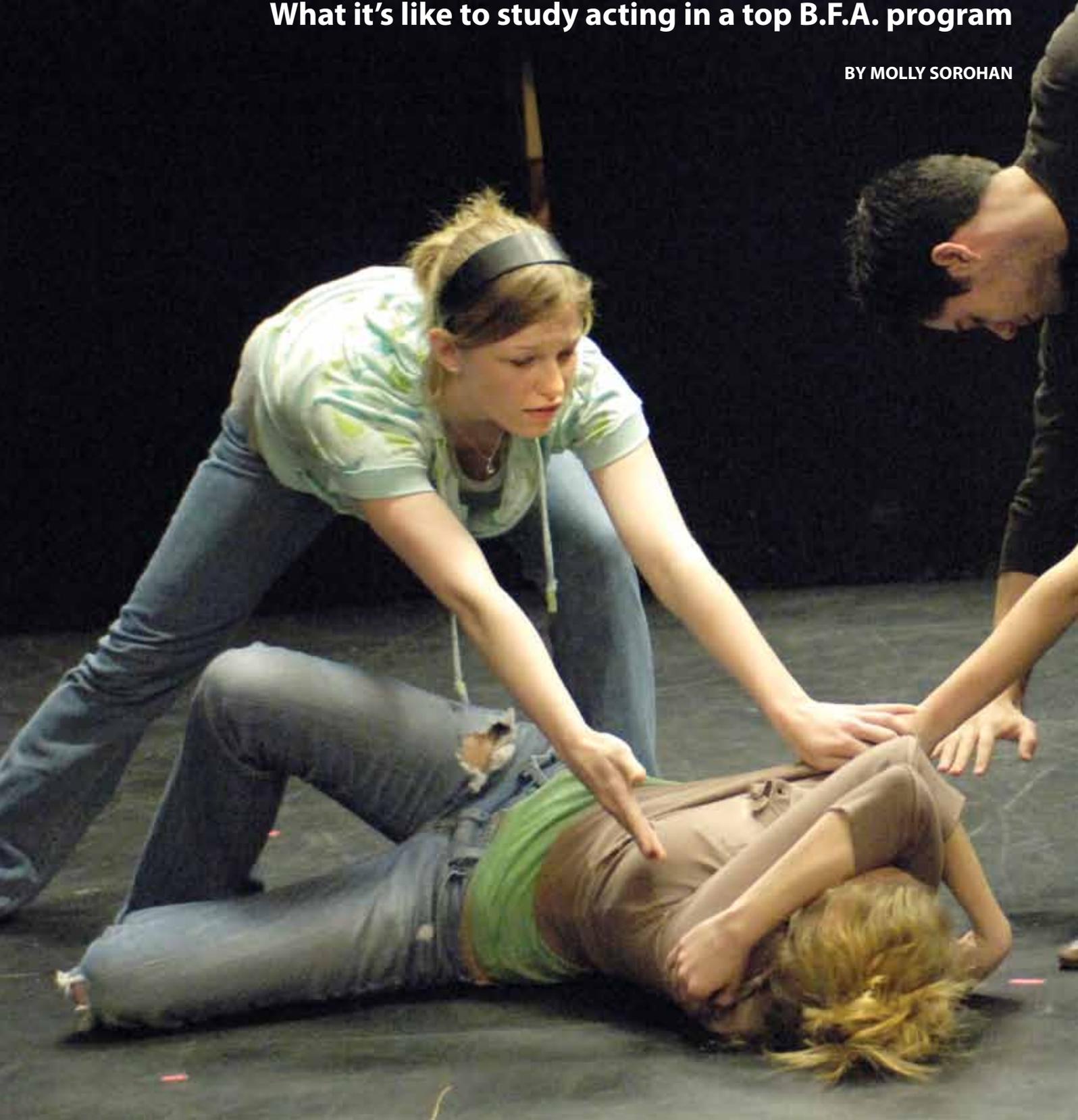


INSIDE THE CONSERVATORY

What it's like to study acting in a top B.F.A. program

BY MOLLY SOROHAN





IT IS A GENERALLY accepted truth among students who aspire to a career on the stage that the most direct route to their destination runs through a conservatory program that offers a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in acting or musical theatre. Every year at this time, thousands of talented young performers embark on audition tours with the goal of getting into one of the nation's top actor training programs. Many of these young people set out on a course toward a B.F.A. without a clear idea what they're getting into. Conservatory training at schools like Juilliard, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music (or at a two-year certificate program

Acting students performing in a workshop at Boston Conservatory.

like the American Academy of Dramatic Arts) requires intense commitment.

Students pursue rigorous schedules in an extremely competitive atmosphere. The B.F.A. path is not for everyone, and if you're considering it, you owe it to yourself to learn as much as you can about what lies ahead before you make a decision on how you'll spend the next four years.

The lullaby of Broadway

There are more than three hundred colleges and universities that offer B.F.A. degrees in acting, musical theatre, and design and production in the United States. The two dozen or so top conservatories have earned their reputations through the success of their graduates, and they work hard to prepare students for careers as actors in the commercial theatre, regional theatres, and film. They shepherd their graduates into the industry on one or both coasts in senior showcases for agents and casting directors.

The level of professionalism and preparedness for the industry is one of the biggest distinctions between those with a conservatory degree and

those with a liberal arts degree. "They have an edge," says Neil Donohoe, Boston Conservatory's director of drama. "When my students hit New York, they usually say it is not any different or more difficult than going through a four-year conservatory program. They've learned to dig deep and become vulnerable artists, but at the same time they've built the outer layer of toughness they need for this career."

Conservatory graduates also have a built-in support system—a set of friends and connections who studied in the same undergraduate program—once they arrive in New York City. "I envy the connections that artists have made just by being alumni," says actress Megan Lewis, whose credits include *Grey Gardens* on Broadway and *Forbidden Broadway: Special Victims Unit*.

Graduates of the most respected conservatories also have an advantage when it comes to getting access to top agents and casting directors in New York and Los Angeles. "We're very fortunate," says Juilliard's administrative director of drama, Katherine

Hood. "Most of our students are able to get representation. It's the first step towards getting work in the profession." Conservatories actively market their students. Some prepare DVDs of graduating seniors' work, some prep students with mock interviews, and many invite agents and casting directors to give master classes, not only for the students' benefit, but to give important industry people a first look at hot new talent.

Not all students are comfortable with the stress on commercial success. Some feel boxed in by the emphasis on becoming commercially viable. "They wanted a specific product for me, and when I didn't want that, we butted heads," says one conservatory graduate who wishes to remain anonymous.

Even with the advantages of four years of the best training, a prestigious degree, and valuable industry contacts, an actor's life is likely to be difficult. While some graduates work on Broadway right out of school, most do not achieve that success without years of persistence and a lot of determination. "People who do get work right away are promoted as examples of the school's success, while the fact that at least half of the graduates are still trying is overlooked," says 2002 Carnegie Mellon graduate Sharon Farrell.

Can any undergraduate program prepare students for the unpredictable life of an actor? "I'm not sure if anybody can," says Gary Kline, an associate professor of music theatre at Carnegie Mellon. "Life can be surprising and a little shocking to students who don't achieve immediate success. I don't think anyone is making a guarantee, though. I've seen the greatest, biggest talent have to wait for the opportunity and some of it is just plain old luck." Juilliard's Katherine Hood adds: "What we're doing is giving them the skills they need to have a versatile career. Hopefully they will have longevity and hopefully as they grow and develop as people, so does the craft they learn."



Diane Kvapil, associate professor of drama, and Salvatore Cacciato, a B.F.A. acting student, doing scene work at CCM.

Survival

Being admitted to the conservatory is only the first hurdle that stands between the student and the degree. A conservatory student's progress is regularly evaluated, and those who fall short of the program's high standards may be advised to consider another educational path. This practice is known among students as the "cut system," a term that faculty members now rarely use.

Most cuts are made at the end of the first or second year, creating much angst and insecurity among freshmen and sophomores who are still trying to figure out how they fit in to a new setting. Before making the decision to audition for a conservatory, ask yourself how well you work under pressure: will a competitive environment help bring out the best in you? Or would you do better in a more nurturing atmosphere?

While conservatory students may live in fear of the cut system, most admit to its usefulness. "I appreciated our school's policy because it allowed time to improve and grow, letting students develop as far as they could through sophomore year, then counseling students to either take a year off or try something else," says Farrell. "If a conservatory [faculty] is noticing a lack of work ethic, growth, or skill, it is their responsibility to counsel a student to seek another career choice." Graduating such students doesn't do them any favors once they encounter the real world.

Bobby List, a 2006 CCM graduate who is now on tour with *High School Musical*, says the knowledge that he could be asked to leave the program "forced me to be professional, making the real life of an actor a whole lot easier. I learned how to be disciplined, how to balance my social life with school and do whatever I had to in order to be the best I could be."

Most of the faculty members and administrators interviewed for this article were reluctant to talk about cut policies. Those who did emphasized their schools' commitment to keeping students on course through graduation.

LOUIS STEIN



Kaf Warman, associate professor at Carnegie Mellon, with students in a movement class.

"We don't have a cut system," insists Carnegie Mellon's Gary Kline. "[When we did have one] a lot of people were hurt by it. Everyone had to operate from fear, and artists can only achieve by confidence. The only way students are cut now is by cutting class or because of drug or medical problems. We aren't cutting people due to sheer lack of talent."

"We call it a retention system," says CCM's Roger Grodksy. "If you do your work, you won't be in jeopardy."

As with any course of study, some students elect to leave of their own volition. Some cite personal reasons. Others simply change their mind about the profession altogether. Conservatories emphasize the difficulty of carving out a career in the arts and stress the tenacity and passion for the craft an actor must have to survive; some students leave because they come to the realization, quite accurately, that there are much easier ways to make a living.

Some continue to train, but opt to do so at a liberal arts university, where they'll be exposed to a broader range of knowledge. "I felt I needed

a real education to be effective in the theatre," says Matthew Lee-Erlbach, who left Boston Conservatory and transferred to the University of Illinois. "There were a number of Tony Award winners [at Illinois] who were teaching and really affecting the field. Their innovation was inspiring. You weren't just getting trained to get jobs. They wanted you to challenge conventions, to be the writers and directors as well as the actors."

Students should ask themselves what options are available in the event that their plans change. Plenty of actors have carved out terrific careers without conservatory degrees, and many students begin actor training only to discover a hunger and talent for a different aspect of the arts.

The faculty

Faculty members at major conservatories are artists themselves, and like all university professors, they are required to remain active in their field to achieve tenure. This can yield valuable professional connections for students who find themselves looking for work after four years in the program. The potential downside is that

the effort faculty members put into their professional careers can conflict with their responsibilities as a teacher and mentor.

Conservatory class sizes and faculty rosters are typically quite small, and students and professors are likely to get to know one another very well over the course of four years of undergraduate work.

"There are only three people on the music theatre faculty" at CCM, says Grodsky. "[The students] see us on a daily basis. I'm very involved with keeping students on track."

"We have extremely small classes and we really take care of our students," says Carnegie Mellon's Gary Kline. "We care about their health. We care about a lot of things, and maybe sometimes it's too much. We have to be careful. We want to mentor you and we want to help, but we're not your parents. The main thing is we want to help everyone achieve top potential by the time they leave."

Professional actors have different opinions about what makes a great teacher. "They have to be selfless, constructively critical, honest, supportive, and open to an actor's questions," says CMU grad Sharon Farrell. Kimberly Dawn Neumann, who graduated from the University of Maryland with a liberal arts degree and has appeared on Broadway in *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Urban Cowboy*, says "I don't approve of those holier-than-thou teachers who think they must break you down in order to build you up. I believe that participation in the arts should feed your soul, not destroy it."

Faculty members and students alike agree that a good acting teacher should be able to speak frankly about the work, be accessible by keeping regular hours, and challenge you. Be wary of a teacher with nothing but praise: are you really growing? Faculty members should never bring personal issues into the classroom, play favorites, or make a student feel unsafe while trying something new.

All in the family

There is an all-consuming quality to conservatory study that prospective students should also take into consideration.

If you don't think you can have a satisfying college experience without joining a fraternity or sorority, you should probably think twice about enrolling in a B.F.A. program. Demanding schedules rarely allow conservatory students time for Greek obligations, or for any other obligations outside of class, crew, and rehearsal. A typical day begins at eight or nine and continues until eleven at night, making it difficult for students to make friends outside of the major.

"It is definitely a unique experience working and taking class with the same people every day for four years," says 2004 University of Michigan alum Lori Brooke Cohan. "You really do become like a family." Just like in any family, students encounter friction. With class sizes ranging from six to twenty, classmates inevitably come to know each other's personal and artistic struggles, which can be reassuring, yet polarizing.

"It's important not to compare," says Cohan. "You have to think of your classmates as being on a different, though parallel, path."

However, spending day in and day out with your classmates means that they are more familiar with your work than anybody else. Their opinions can be the most candid and the most to the point. "I felt as though my work was honestly evaluated about 70 percent of the time from my teachers, but about 100 percent of the time from my classmates," says one conservatory student.

When giving or receiving feedback from classmates, a little politesse goes a long way. Back up a piece of negative criticism with a positive one. Be respectful of your classmates' efforts and be sure the comment is about them, as opposed to how their challenges compare to yours. Most importantly, do not interpret any criticism of your classwork as a personal attack, regardless of whether it comes

from a teacher or another student.

Performance opportunities

Top conservatories approach acting as a craft, and at most institutions the first two years are spent learning and solidifying technique.

"We really want our students to focus on process and not on creating a product," says Juilliard's Katherine Hood. "In a classroom, they feel safer and can really explore. It's a way of challenging them and giving them a different experience from what they may have done previously. By keeping the work in a studio with minimal costumes and props, we emphasize using the imagination instead of relying on any production aspects to help fill in the gaps. It's about them and what they're creating."

Students also benefit from playing roles in the studio or classroom in which they might not be cast in a full production: they expand their boundaries and learn how to find a character that may not immediately feel comfortable. Keeping work away from the public eye creates a safe haven in which students can work on strengthening their weaknesses.

Students may be impatient with an approach that keeps them away from audiences for the first part of their college career, but most come to see its benefits. "I was able to focus more on my voice when not performing," says 2002 Carnegie Mellon grad Leo Ash Evens, who is now working on the new Off Broadway musical *Wanda's World*. "I was building my repertoire, learning new monologues, songs, and plays. It was a wonderful time of growth and exploration."

While Carnegie Mellon and Juilliard don't cast younger students in shows, some conservatories, such as CCM and Boston Conservatory, do. "We have a professional criterion rather than an educational criterion," says Boston Conservatory's Donohoe. "The best person for the role gets the role."

Enlarging the casting pool can ratchet up the level of competition. It challenges new students to test themselves against more experienced actors,

and requires older students who are trying to fulfill the required number of performance credits for graduation to compete against fresh faces for roles.

“It is up to the student to get cast,” says CCM’s Roger Grodsky. “The audition process is to show that you are improving. If you don’t get cast, you’ll be in jeopardy of not being able to finish the degree.”

Whichever approach appeals to you—the immediate opportunity to perform or the initial period of cloistered study—you should make sure you understand and are comfortable with a school’s casting policy before you make a commitment to enroll.

* * *

IF YOU STILL THINK your passion, drive, and goals are a good match for conservatory training, be sure to let the faculty see that when you audition. One thing all conservatories want to see in an audition is your love of the art. “I look to see whether the student is really alive and has a sense of spontaneity within the framework of the piece,” says Carnegie Mellon professor of acting Barbara MacKenzie-Wood. “The most interesting thing is to see a person who’s alive on stage.”

Hood at Juilliard concurs. “We are looking for trainable potential,” she says. “It covers a serious commitment to an acting career, their energy and openness of mind, their ability to connect intellectually and emotionally.” She pauses for a moment, then smiles. “A good sense of humor helps, too!” ▼