

# WHY STUDY THEATRE?



Writer 1272 at Aquinas College.

ERYN KOVACH / MOMENTS IN LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

## BY JEFFREY LEPTAK-MOREAU

HIGH SCHOOLS ACROSS North America have more or less the same curriculum, but when you enter college, the range of options can be bewildering. In addition to parental favorites such as law and medicine, you suddenly have courses and career paths available in things you never imagined, such as medical records management, metallurgical engineering, and Slavic languages. So among all things possible, why study theatre?

When friends and family ask that troublesome question, they may be overlooking the fact that theatre and related arts are a serious, significant occupation. After all, “play” is a key word in theatre, and we all know that nobody gets paid to play except professional athletes. When this concern comes up, you can remind your incredulous loved ones that a very important word in show business really is “business.”

Earlier this year, Americans for the Arts analyzed the economic impact of

“nonprofit” arts and culture organizations in the United States, which were found to be the source of \$166 billion in economic activity, an amount greater than the gross domestic product of many nations. Moreover, nonprofit creative industries alone support 5.7 million full-time jobs. An earlier study by AFA examined these creative industries, including all of the traditional fine arts plus radio, television, film, design, and publishing. That study found 548,000 businesses classified as creative industries, which is 3.1 per



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*Students in Columbia College Chicago's comedy studies program on stage at The Second City.*

cent of the total number of business-  
es. These creative industries em-  
ployed just a bit under three million  
people, or 2.2 per cent of the total  
workforce. The creative industries  
also help to secure America's place  
in the global economy, accounting  
for \$30 billion in annual exports,  
to say nothing of the domestic  
trade. As reported in *Artists in the  
Workforce, 1990-2005*, the National  
Endowment for the Arts found that  
the total number of performing art-  
ists increased from 1990-2005, with  
nearly 40,000 artists now reporting  
their occupation as actors. With  
three million people working pro-  
fessionally in the arts, both for-profit  
and non-profit, why couldn't you be  
one of them?

The creative industries' contribu-  
tion to America's gross domestic  
product comes largely from mass  
media such as television and film,  
but among the fine arts, theatre is the  
only one that can operate on a for-  
profit basis. Dance companies, sym-  
phony orchestras, operas, and the like  
all require substantial philanthropic

support and always have. Much the-  
atre is also produced by not-for-profit  
groups, but some theatre, from Broad-  
way to your local dinner theatre to  
comedy improv clubs, all operate on  
a for-profit basis. These are not chari-  
ties; they have owners and investors  
who expect a profitable return. What  
that means for you, the prospective  
theatre arts professional, is that the  
organizations that might employ you  
want you to be well-trained and ready  
to deliver a product that can help  
generate a profit.

In the last decade, entrepreneur-  
ship became a fashionable field of  
study at universities, but the only  
thing new about this in theatre is the  
big word borrowed from French. All  
creative artists have some entrepre-  
neurial spirit, tirelessly promoting  
their own vision with an eye toward  
making a living by sharing that vision  
with others. In an August 2009 letter  
to school leaders, U.S. Secretary of  
Education Arne Duncan said, "The  
arts can help students become tena-  
cious, team-oriented problem solvers  
who are confident and able to think

creatively. These qualities can be es-  
pecially important in improving learn-  
ing among students from economi-  
cally disadvantaged circumstances."

Theatre artists, it turns out, are at  
the cutting edge of small business  
development. There are also many  
career options available to people  
with theatre degrees besides the core  
activities of acting, directing, design,  
and teaching. Some require special-  
ized training programs offered by  
a more limited number of theatre  
departments, so careful shopping is  
required to find the right college the-  
atre program. Drama therapy, chil-  
dren's and youth theatre, museum  
theatre, puppetry, storytelling, and  
senior adult theatre are examples of  
specialities that often go overlooked.  
Some of the professionals involved  
in these fields are self-employed and  
some work for major institutions, but  
regardless, all have the satisfaction  
that comes with earning a living in  
theatre.

For example, voice acting meant  
mostly commercials and animation  
since the decline of radio drama, but  
due to its resurgence in electronic  
media, voice acting is a growing field.  
In fact, the Screen Actors Guild and  
the American Federation of Televi-  
sion and Radio Artists recently signed  
tentative agreements with video game  
companies regarding working condi-  
tions and benefits for game actors.  
Contrary to the stereotypes, computer  
geeks are not the only people making  
it big in the gaming industry—some  
game actors earn over \$100,000 per  
year.

A growing movement in many  
universities overseas is called "indus-  
trial theatre," which is theatre applied  
to human resource management and  
employee training. We have these  
same programs in North America, but  
here students are largely unaware of  
this career track until after they  
become working theatre artists. Com-  
edySportz L.A. regularly provides  
workshops for corporate power-  
houses such as Toyota, McDonalds,  
Sprint PCS, and Apple on topics such  
as leadership, communication, and

change. In North America, this type of applied theatre is also available from independent consultants and the education departments of many professional theatre companies. In recognition of this growing trend, some universities such as New York University and CUNY offer concentrations in Applied Theatre, described by the NYU program as “a vital adjunct to non-theatrical professions and cultural practices.”

Industrial theatre is not limited to the corporate world, either. For many years, a group of dentists in St. Louis have funded the Dental Health Theatre, one of the more unique tourist attractions anywhere. Why a Dental Health Theatre? Because theatre and puppetry proved to be an effective way to teach young people how to take care of their teeth. Somebody had to write the scripts, design the puppets and the staging, direct the performance, and run lights and sound. The dentists need help from theatre artists to meet their objective of promoting better dental health.

You should include teaching among the applications of an advanced education in theatre. One of my professors at Ohio State University was fond of telling teachers-in-training that educational theatre was the real professional theatre in America. His argument was simply that more people earn a living by making theatre in educational settings such as schools and universities than at formally recognized professional theatre companies. In most population centers, there are more university theatre programs than resident professional theatres, with more people employed as theatre faculty than full-time artists. Universities in rural areas also have theatre departments, but rarely do rural communities have professional theatre.

When you are visiting campuses to select a program for yourself, try to see a play if at all possible. You will probably be astonished at the professional quality and the advanced facilities and equipment available for use by faculty and students. This does



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*Cornell: The Importance of Being Earnest.*

not even begin to take into account the thousands of theatre teachers working in secondary schools. Add together the traditional artists, the mass media entertainment industry, and artists in education, and you have a sizable profession which surely has room for one more like you.

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DISCUSSIONS OF the merits and disadvantages of a particular field of study usually proceed from the assumption that higher education is training for some specific career. That certainly applies to careers that require licensure like nursing, teaching, or law. Having a degree in those fields is an essential first step down those career paths. But we all know that theatre is not such a field. Having a degree in theatre from even the most pres-

tigious university or conservatory is no guarantee that you will get any given part. Actors especially will be tested anew each time they audition, regardless of their training. Everyone has heard stories about people with Ph.D.s in English literature who drive taxis for a living. Could that be you if you get a degree in theatre?

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the top ten personal qualities and skills consistently sought by employers during the last decade are:

1. Communication skills (both verbal and written)
2. Honesty and integrity
3. Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)
4. Motivation and initiative
5. Strong work ethic
6. Teamwork skills (works well with others)
7. Analytical skills
8. Flexibility and adaptability

9. Computer skills

10. Detail-oriented.

In 2008, a similar study by the Society for Human Resource Managers confirmed that employers place a high priority on the types of soft skills practiced daily in the theatre arts, such as adaptability/flexibility, critical thinking/problem solving, professionalism/work ethic, and teamwork/collaboration. According to *Arts and the Economy*, published by the National Governors Association, "The most desirable high-wage jobs require employees with creativity and higher order problem-solving and communications skills. . . ." That person with the highly desirable, high-wage job could be you with a degree in theatre.

Another report, the Framework for 21st Century Learning, commissioned by the Partnership for 21st Century Learning Skills, identified the skills needed for jobs in our rapidly changing times. A core strand called learning and innovation skills is particularly relevant because it encompasses creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving, and communication and collaboration. To keep our workforce competitive in the global economy, the Partnership encourages educational reform that will develop these abilities in all students, but graduates in theatre can already demonstrate their achievements in these essential skills.

You will leave college having learned, and more importantly, dem-

onstrated everything employers say they look for in new hires. Your theatre training gives you a clear advantage because, according to Marilyn Mackes, NACE executive director, "in times like these when job opportunities are tight, it is perhaps even more important for job candidates to understand what employers want and find ways to demonstrate those qualities."

You can find many examples of people who have been successful in fields other than what they studied. Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, got all of his degrees in economics, but he also studied music in college. Cate Blanchett also studied economics while Sean (Diddy) Combs pursued business management, but both found greater success in show business. Steve Martin majored in philosophy, Ashton Kutcher studied biochemical engineering, and Eva Longoria was a kinesiology major. Brad Pitt, Queen Latifah, and Denzel Washington all studied journalism. What is the lesson here? Outside of those professions that require specific degrees for licensure, do not make too much of the relationship between one's field of study and career opportunities.

By all means, you should go to college and get a degree in something. In 2009, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that people over age twenty-five with a bach-

elor's degree in anything, regardless of major, earned an average of \$16,000 more per year than somebody with an associate degree and \$21,000 more per year than a high school graduate. The National Association for Colleges and Employers 2009 salary survey showed average starting salaries for business administration majors to be \$44,944, almost \$9,000 more than the starting salary for most liberal arts majors. But it is important to note that most people with degrees in the liberal arts do not actually make a living in things like history or philosophy (and we might add theatre), but at marketing or management. Moreover, those are only starting salaries. Because their skills are unproven, the liberal arts majors initially earn less than the business majors, even in the same job. However, after just a year of experience, on-the-job performance totally eclipses education in determining salary and promotion. At that point, the income gap disappears.

In the end, the question is not "why study theatre" but "why not?" Getting a degree in any subject, including theatre, is a perfectly valid route to success and happiness if you learn the right skills and attitudes.

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