



Choose Joy

Advice for every step
of your college journey

BY JULIE YORK COPPENS

SOME THEATRE students know *exactly* what they want to do after high school.

Not Connor Lawrence, from Bowling Green, Kentucky.



Connor Lawrence

"I was one of those seniors who struggled, deciding what to pursue in college," says Lawrence.

"Theatre had always been my strongest passion, and I always dove into any project or play with eagerness, enthusiasm, and wonderment." Still, he had doubts: was he really cut out for full-time theatre study, much less an arduous, long-shot career as an actor? He was a good student, with interests beyond the stage—what about all those other fields where he might find happiness and success? Certainly there were a lot of people who wanted the best for Lawrence urging him to consider his choice with care. "My

family all majored in business," he says. Most of his friends looked forward to Greek life, athletics, and other "normal" college experiences, on familiar (and more affordable) in-state campuses.

"After getting accepted to the drama program at CCM, I faced a hurricane of decisions," Lawrence says. "I'm telling you, this was 'two roads diverged in a yellow wood' times ten."

But Lawrence had his loved ones' support when he finally chose to study acting in the B.F.A. program at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, one of the country's most competitive schools for aspiring performers. Now a junior hoping to launch his career in New York or Los Angeles after graduation, he adds, "I have never regretted for a second my decision to pursue theatre in school and for the rest





of my life.”

So how does a typical theatre-loving student withstand that college-choice hurricane and end up on solid ground, as Lawrence did? How does one even begin?

Well, you’re reading this article. That’s an excellent first step.

Break it down

There are more than four thousand colleges, universities, and professional schools in the United States, each with its own unique profile. The sheer number of possibilities, variables, and unknowns, not to mention the endless online applications, essays, and interviews, can be overwhelming for any high school student. For a student who loves theatre—whether performance, like Lawrence, or one of the behind-the-scenes disciplines—the college search doesn’t just *seem* more dramatic; it really is. Stakes are higher. More ap-

plicants are vying for fewer spots. Deadlines for auditions, interviews, and scholarships come around fast, somehow always clustering around tech week for your senior show. (How do they *do* that?!)

And unlike those who plan to major in business or biology, aspiring theatre artists have a critical choice to make at the outset, before taking their first freshman classes, about how to acquire the skills and knowledge they will use in their working lives: either pursue professional training immediately, in a four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts or two-year conservatory program; or begin by getting a broad liberal arts education, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in theatre. After completing that four-year B.A., students can then, if they choose, enter a professional training program at the graduate level. Future theatre teachers face a similar range of options and career-training approaches—a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science, in most cases—many of which involve graduate study as well.

Are you really prepared for college? Will you be able to afford it? What will the lingering recession mean for your job prospects when you finally graduate? While it’s true that you can always transfer if your first college turns out to be the wrong one, you’d much rather make the right choice now. Chances are, you feel like you have a lot to lose, and not a lot of time to figure it all out.

Degree categories, uncoded

The B.A. and the B.F.A. represent two fundamentally different ideas about how theatre artists should be trained. The liberal arts approach is designed to provide the B.A. student with a broad range of knowledge in the arts, humanities, and sciences as well as theatre; the B.F.A., on the other hand—whether in acting, design and technology, stage management, film and video production, theatre for youth, or musical theatre—is devoted almost entirely to building the professional skills you’ll need on the job. Conservatories that offer associate degrees or certificates, generally in a two-year program, are concentrated versions of the professional training approach; the difference, other than the length of the course of study, is that B.F.A. programs include a small amount of general, non-theatre coursework, and two-year conservatories don’t.

About 20 to 25 percent of the B.A. curriculum consists of theatre studies; 60 to 65 percent is general education, and the remaining 10 or 20 percent is made up of electives. In the B.F.A. curriculum, the percentages are approximately reversed: between 60 and

Top of page 10: Mublenberg College, Crazy for You. Bottom of pages 10 and 11 (left to right): Palm Beach Atlantic University, Stop the World—I Want to Get Off; College of Central Florida, checking the audition board for callbacks; Roosevelt University, Lysistrata; University of Pittsburgh, As You Like It; Emory University, Watching Chekhov Watching; Simpson University, University. Above (left to right): Clemson University, wig shop; University of Southern California, Crimes of the Heart; George Mason University, Into the Woods. Opposite: Brenau University, The Frog Prince (top); Princeton University, The Tempest (bottom).



70 percent of the coursework is in the area of theatre concentration and supportive studies, around 20 to 25 percent is in general education, and the remainder is made up of electives (which may include even more theatre courses).

There are other differences. In most colleges and universities that offer a B.A. in theatre, the student simply declares an intention to pursue that major. Entrance into a B.F.A. program usually requires an audition or portfolio evaluation, and the student's continued participation is subject to annual review.

Acting conservatories have been around for a long time. The American Academy of Dramatic Arts, a two-year conservatory, was founded in New York in 1884, and the first university-based actor training program was established at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 1914. But professional actor training on the scale that it exists today, and the B.F.A. degree in theatre disciplines, are relatively new phenomena. As recently as

1970 there were only six professional training programs in the United States, all concentrated in the Northeast. Now this directory lists dozens of conservatory programs and university theatre departments that offer B.F.A. or M.F.A. degrees, from Seattle to Miami.

Like the other aspects of choosing a school, the question of whether to pursue a liberal arts or professional degree as an undergraduate is ultimately a personal one. The issue is not whether one approach is better; it's a matter of figuring out which course of study is better for you.

In the course of preparing this directory of college theatre programs over more than two decades, the staff of *Dramatics* has discussed the question of how actors should be trained with countless educators, students, actors, and directors. Here are some observations, based on that accumulated knowledge, about the choice between professional training and a liberal arts education at the undergraduate level.



- A generation ago, a liberal arts degree with a major in theatre was a well-traveled path toward a life on stage. Today, while it's not unheard of, neither is it common for an actor or designer to launch a professional career on the basis of a B.A. theatre degree alone. Most students who decide to continue their pursuit of a life in the theatre after earning a liberal arts theatre degree do so by enrolling in an M.F.A. program or conservatory, by spending a season as an acting apprentice at a resident theatre company, or by studying with an acting teacher in a studio. The B.F.A., on the other hand, is designed to prepare graduates to go directly to work. Indeed, many programs culminate in senior showcases for agents, casting directors, and other professionals in New York or Los Angeles.

- Many B.F.A. programs graduate actors who are indisputably well-trained. An actor who earns a liberal



Morgan Daniels

arts degree and then an M.F.A., though, is both well-trained and well-educated, a formidable combination that, all other things being equal, directors will find very appealing. The

downside is that the B.A./M.F.A. actor will have delayed the beginning of her career by two years and probably will have tens of thousands of dollars in additional student loan debt.

- The B.F.A. is a narrowly focused, highly specialized course of study. B.F.A. students learn a lot about their chosen theatre concentration and related areas and not much about anything else—although some B.F.A. programs these days do have a more liberal arts orientation (you'll get a sense of this by talking with current students and faculty).

“The B.F.A. offers more processed-based learning and really is the color on the inside of the picture, whereas with a B.A., you get more of the

outline,” observes Morgan Daniels, a senior in the B.F.A. musical theatre program at Drake University—which in Daniels's experience, combines the benefits of focused training *and* liberal arts education. “I'm able to delve into other topics of interest, including playwriting, dramaturgy, script development, directing, and choreography,” she says, areas she might not have had the chance to explore in a more regimented B.F.A. program. “The downside is that I had to take math—not a fun experience for anyone involved.”

Calculus aversion aside, most students *want* to venture outside the theatre building now and then—and not all B.F.A. programs afford that opportunity. As you compare schools, look very closely at course requirements and available electives, ask to see some representative four-year schedules, and try to find out how many students in those tracks actually have time to study and do the things *you* might want to study and do while you're in college. Bottom line: you should be very certain that you really want to spend your life in the theatre before committing to a professional degree.

- A cautionary note for students who are leaning toward a B.A. theatre major: if you're considering a school that offers both a B.A. and a B.F.A. or M.F.A., ask some hard questions about the B.A. students' performance and production opportunities and exposure to senior faculty. (This directory asks whether or not first-year acting students have opportunities to audition for roles.) Because B.F.A. students and graduate students require so much of the department's resources, liberal arts students sometimes are relegated to second-class status.

Economics 101

News flash: college is expensive, and it's getting more expensive every year. Depending on who's doing the math, prices for tuition, room and board, and other expenses for college students are rising five, ten, even twenty percent faster than inflation,

although the *actual* costs of college—that is, what students and their families end up paying after scholarships, grants, and other financial aid, are rising at less alarming rates (an annual average of 1.6 percent over inflation, according to a recent *New York Times* article that looked at twenty years of data). The increases, moreover, have been more dramatic at public universities and even community colleges, which used to be economical options for middle-class families; now, a typical financial aid package can make a diploma from Exclusive Private College surprisingly cheaper than one from Big State U.

The money picture can be especially murky for theatre students. They're passionate. They're committed. How can you put a price on studying what you love? Well, colleges *do* put a price on it, and it's a price totally out of whack with what most working theatre professionals earn. A recent Backstage.com article listing “Six College Programs for Actors on a Budget” prompted outrage from a lot of readers: not only did the list include some of the most expensive schools in the country (Boston Conservatory, Ithaca College), but bring up the subject of college-tuition debt in any green room, and you're bound to get an earful.

“Clearly going to college for theatre is now only possible for privileged, upper-class kids who are living on mommy and daddy's credit cards,” commented one reader. “Shameful.”

We wouldn't go that far: a theatre degree at a good college *can* be affordable, and even practical, if students approach it in the right way, for the right reasons. The best time to think about the financial implications of your college decision is, of course, *before* you head off to said college, not five or ten years later when you're struggling to pay off student loans on an unemployed actor's salary. A few strategies that might help lessen the damage:

- Avoid urban centers and other areas with a high cost of living. Housing, food, transportation and related

costs are rapidly outpacing tuition as a factor in student debt loads. Over-spending on credit cards, for things like clothes and entertainment, is another. Don't do it—or at least live somewhere you'll be less tempted. In general, room and board cost less at colleges in the South and the non-urban Midwest than on the coasts; living on a large public campus can be cheaper than at a small, private college, but not always. As you compare, remember to look ahead to the years you might not live in the dorm: cheap subsidized housing your freshman year might lead to sticker shock later when you try to rent an apartment—something you'll face soon enough when you're a working actor and really have to live in an expensive place.

- Apply for scholarships—many, early, and often. College cash comes from an astounding array of sources, both public and private, and you might be surprised by how many you're eligible for. Even small awards can add up. And don't assume you have to commit to theatre all four years in order to land a performance or technical scholarship that might get you in the door. Just be sure you understand the consequences if you accept a scholarship for a certain major, a certain level of sustained academic achievement, or with other hurdles to renewal. What happens if you're in the midst of a program, lose your ride, and can no longer pay? You can probably guess. It happens to hundreds of students every year.

- Earn while you learn. This is another tough one for theatre students, who are often working (unpaid) on productions while students in other majors are landing actual part-time jobs or paid internships to help offset college costs. Granted, good theatre experience now will pay off later, but you have to balance résumé-building with financial common sense. A few work-study hours a week, perhaps helping out in the campus box office or script library, can put a dent in your tuition bill *and* help you pre-

pare for a future survival job, while still leaving time for more fun and meaningful theatre work (and studying). Summers, too, should be a time for money-making as well as artistic exploration. One should not rule out the other.

- Borrowing? Read the fine print. True, student loans are still cheaper than other forms of credit: last summer President Obama signed a bipartisan bill lowering rates charged on most federal student loans, to around 3.8 percent for the current year when they might have gone up above 6 percent. But that same law, designed to be "revenue neutral" over the next ten years, ties the federal student loan rate to other rates set by the U.S. Treasury, which are sure to rise; by 2017, student borrowers may be charged 8.5 percent or more, and if you don't understand the huge difference a few tiny percentage points can make over the life of a loan, ask someone who's smart about money to explain it to you. (Or play around with an online loan calculator, which you can find on bank websites or at www.finaid.org/calculators/. You might vow never to borrow money, from anyone, for any reason.) Even at current, relatively affordable interest rates, each year more and more college graduates default on their student loans, according to the U.S. Department of Education—a failure that can ruin a young person's credit.

School yourself

In sorting through these issues, talk to people who know you and your work—your parents, your theatre teachers—and to people who know college theatre programs, including representatives of the schools themselves. Sure, it's part of their job to recruit students, but more importantly, they're interested in recruiting students who will succeed. They want you make the right decision.

Also reach out to current students in programs that interest you. Start



Hayden Kraus

at various stages of their education and training, all over the country, in all disciplines. Most would agree with Michael Cienfuegos-Baca, from Fort Collins, Colorado, now a sophomore theatre major at Marquette University: start the college search early, visit as many of your top choices in person as you possibly can, and "find the school that fits *you*—don't make *you* fit the school."

Above all: try to relax, as difficult as that can seem for the undecided. Even once you make the decision, college theatre can be scary.

"When I first walked into Drake Theatre's doors, I was terrified out of my mind," admits Hayden Kraus, a classmate of Morgan Daniels in the Drake University B.F.A. musical theatre program. "I didn't know what to expect from getting a college degree in theatre. What I found out was that I could find a home and safe place wherever I went. There is always someone to help you out when you need it."

Connor Lawrence, too, found a home for himself at CCM.

"I am having the time of my life," Lawrence says. "I feel confident not only as an actor but also as a person. I have the tools to make my career whatever I want it to be.... I wake up every day thankful that I have the ability to go to school for something I love and care about."

For theatre-loving high school juniors or seniors who are struggling, as he did, with all the choices, Lawrence has this simple advice: "Choose joy. Be yourself. Embrace your passions. Never stop fueling your fire." ▼

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