

# End of



Amy Wheeler

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Amy Wheeler  
Layla Lemmons

Zack Steele

# the beginning

The student showcase experience



## STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY HARPER LEE

THE PAIR OF dancers—a petite, blonde, beaming young woman and a tall, agile young man—grin at one another, smoothly executing choreography that they could clearly do in their sleep. A slide, a turn, upstage for a few counts, and then back around, enjoying the approving crowd gathered in the darkness beyond the stage lights. Their number is a charming, athletic crowd-pleaser. Her character has coaxed his into dancing. Then,

the music slows as the tempo eases. A sweet, quiet moment appears: his reluctance was an act. These two are smitten with each other. And as they glide to a rest, chins in hands, eyes locked on each other—a stray elbow bumps an uninvited water glass off the hood of the piano that's been scoring their encounter. The glass falls—shatters—sending ice, water, and debris across the stage.

The dancers, Taryn Lemmons

*Facing page: Headshots are sorted into stacks before the crowd arrives at the Laurie Beechman Theatre for Wright State University's 2014 senior showcase. Above: Jon Hacker takes a moment to study his music. After the showcase, Hacker became part of the first national tour of Disney's Newsies.*

and Cooper Taggard from Wright State University, have rehearsed for months. It's one of their first big moments in New York City: a featured duet in their senior showcase. There are agents in the house (gulp), and everything went smoothly except for the heap of glass at their feet.

They take a beat. And laugh.

### What is a showcase?

Each year, hundreds of soon-to-be B.F.A. theatre graduates from across the country make a pilgrimage to New York City or Los Angeles seeking connections, industry exposure, work, representation, housing, and a flexible day-job. Many of these students/newly minted professionals begin their theatrical careers as part of a senior class showcase, produced by their college or university at one or more venues in the city. The market

receives a jolt of fresh, energetic talent while recent grads get their first taste of the Big Apple.

During showcase season—the damp weeks stretching from the tail end of winter in March to the very tip of summer in May—New York will host approximately two hundred showcases. Wright State University, located in Fairborn, Ohio, just outside of Dayton, has been among these schools for almost two decades. Last April, *Dramatics* magazine tagged along with the 2014 musical theatre and acting B.F.A. graduates as they each said goodbye to an old life and hello to a new one with their own showcase experience in New York City.

This weekend is an opportunity for them to show potential employers what they're made of. Joe Deer, the longtime head of WSU's musical the-

atre program, believes the showcase is essential to B.F.A. training, part of how his department provides the best possible preparation for the industry.

"We felt that in order to be on par with all the other similar programs out there, we needed to offer that," Deer said of the showcase. "But we also were interested in really giving our kids a launch into the industry. Not just getting them agents or getting them seen by agents, but also getting them oriented towards the industry, which is a very important part of their education."

At Wright State, most students prepare two selections for the showcase: a solo and a piece they perform with a partner. The work is intended to reflect each student's skills and personality, clarifying in the minds of agents and casting directors each individual's type. A student more inclined to musical theatre might sing a duet as well as a solo; students with a great deal of dance training might dance during one of their pieces; and students with an acting focus might perform a monologue as well as a song, to demonstrate their drama chops.

The Wright State students worked extensively with their faculty to find and craft the best material, and ultimately assembled a lively, memorable, fun evening of entertainment. The class performs two shows in the city: one for invited industry professionals and one for Wright State alumni living in the area.

"I affectionately refer to the alumni performance as the debutante ball," Deer said. "It is our students coming out to the industry, but it's also them connecting with the alumni network. We have anywhere from a hundred to a hundred and fifty people show up, and there's a party immediately after. It's really a chance for everybody to see each other and for us to help cement relationships between the new graduates and the alumni."

In addition to their performance pieces, the showcase forces students to prep résumés, headshots, and an entire book of additional material that demonstrates their range and can be



*Kelsey Andrae preps for show time.*

called up at a moment's notice in an audition setting. Does a casting agent want to hear something more legit? Maybe something more character? No problem; it's in the book. The showcase grooms graduates for the profession, the finishing touch to four rigorous years of technical training. But Deer noted that the showcase also prepares students psychologically for the stresses of near-constant auditioning and what will inevitably come after college: rejection.

"Students get to find out what life is like on the high wire," said Stuart McDowell, chair of Wright State's department of theatre, dance, and motion pictures. "They are auditioning in front of agents and it's tough. A big chunk of their future is auditioning. It will be their bread and butter."

"It's a lonely career," McDowell went on to say. "The showcase experience can prepare a student for rejection and not getting the role. You have to learn to deal with that, and it's best to learn as an undergrad, when we can help."

### Big fish, new pond

It's an especially wet and dreary April afternoon in Manhattan when the group arrives at the Laurie Beechman Theatre, an intimate cabaret space on West 42nd Street. The fourteen student performers apply make-up, rehearse, sound the room, sort headshots, and review choreography. In just a few hours, they will kick off their long weekend of pavement-pounding.

"The goal in coming here, at least for me, is to get some perspective of where I sit in the hierarchy of things in New York City," Wright State B.F.A. student Zack Steele said. As part of his warm-up, Steele tunes his guitar; he provides the accompaniment to a classmate's solo in the showcase. "When you go to college, you aren't really sure. You're a big fish in high school and then you go to college and say, 'Okay, at this level where am I at?'"

Months prior, WSU faculty sent out hundreds of invitations to agents, directors, choreographers, musical



*From left: Kaitlyn Sage, Cameron Blankenship, Zack Steele, Taylor Montgomery, and DeLee Cooper at lunch together between appointments.*

directors, casting directors, and other theatre professionals. During the height of showcase season, an agent might make it to only seven or eight out of the approximately two hundred showcases, Deer said. He pointed out that many faculty members worry that the showcase system is not as effective as they would like for it to be simply because there are so many programs trying to put their students out in the world.

"Agents are overwhelmed," he said. "Their full-time job is to find their clients work—not seek out new talent. For them to give up two hundred afternoons, they'd be working half days for months."

Today's industry crowd is small, but very engaged. They chuckle as they make notes and hand out cards. After their water glass fiasco, Lemmons and Taggard receive some unexpected praise and notice. They kept their cool. They didn't let a hiccup devastate them. Agents found that impressive.

"It happened in slow motion, you know," Taggard said once safely off-stage. "But there was nothing I could do about it. You just sort of have to acknowledge it and move on." A San Francisco native, Taggard came to Wright State by way of Interlochen Summer Arts Camp, where Greg Hellems, a WSU faculty member, is an instructor.

That same steely-eyed positivity and determination is evident in

their classmate Amy Wheeler, who spent the previous evening battling sickness. Quiet and cocooned in a blanket until show time, Wheeler transforms for her moment in the showcase.

"I haven't eaten a whole lot," she said later, smiling. "But because I'm not eating a whole lot, I can afford to take a taxi. Last night, I was like, 'With this ten dollars I haven't eaten with—I'm going to ride in a taxi.'"

Having agents in the room is thrilling, but the Wright State crew seems happiest about sharing a singular, special moment in their careers: a final performance together and for most, an inaugural performance in New York City.

"This is one of the last times I know I'll be getting to perform," DeLee Cooper said. "Because once you graduate you might not have a job for a while. I'm just really excited to be here in the city and doing what I love, because who knows when the next opportunity is going to be."

### 'Scary people in the scary room'

The next day, students gather at Telsey+Company, a leading casting agency on West 43rd. Instead of a bright stage and an attentive audience, this is the cloistered world of professional auditions. Huddled near a closed door, the group whispers, listens, and waits for their name to be called.



WSU graduates get advice from [title of show]’s Susan Blackwell, below, also a Wright State alumna, on living and working in New York City.

“The scary people in the scary room,” Cameron Blankenship said.

Inside, the students perform their showcase pieces again, getting feedback from the handful of casting directors who have agreed to spend a few hours responding to each student’s performance, appearance, and headshot. In some cases, students hear old news: admonishment about bad habits, encouragement to loosen up and have more fun.

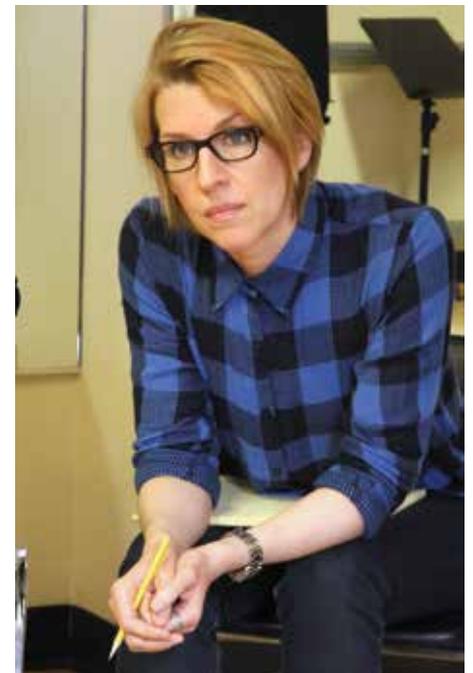
But some of the responses are brand new, and students are coached to expect questions about their choices. While they’re well-prepared, this is a new world. For example, often in university theatre, directors are casting entire shows with people from the same age group. Characters written to be sixty, ten, forty-five, even eighty, will all probably be realized by an actor who is a young adult.

“But we have to have material that we can play right now,” Blankenship said. His showcase piece, “I Wonder What the King Is Doing Tonight,” is a King Arthur number from the musical *Camelot*. “When I played my song they said, ‘Do you really think you

can play King Arthur right now?’ And I said, ‘No, this song just has a better arc and I can act more in this song.’ And they said, ‘Sing the Mordred song from *Camelot*. Sing the other character because you could play that part right now.’ And I said okay because I do have that song in my book. It’s academic theatre versus the business world. And they told me to shave.”

Greg Hellems, Wright State professor of musical theatre and acting, said that while it’s great if students come away from the showcase experience with jobs or agents—there’s more to it than that.

“For most students,” Hellems said, “the real success in showcasing is that you met your fear. Literally, by the time you have finished showcase, you have performed your first show in front of a New York audience. For students to have survived that and for them to have had a great experience—that’s a great psychological boost. For me as an educator, that’s the most important thing: that they recognize their potential in the profession by having met their fear of having to compete at that level.”



## Know yourself—and your type

According to Hellems, to thrive in the industry, students not only need skills and determination, but also a good grasp of who they are as people and what makes them special. This knowledge cultivates confidence, invaluable in this line of work, as well as a sophisticated sense of how best to market yourself. He encourages his students to imagine an Equity principal audition.

“When you go to that audition,” he said, “more than likely, everyone in that room will be some version of you, in terms of appearance and personality. We tend to think of personality types, so people will look for this kind of person or that kind of person. They need to understand where they fit in that column of people and they need to understand what makes them uniquely different.”

Finding and clicking with your type is a process and, for many, an evolution. Young artists often discover their identities in school while crafting their skillset. DeLee Cooper began her college career as a classic ingénue with long blonde hair. Four years later, she sports an edgy burgundy pixie cut—less *Cinderella*, more *American Idiot*.

“Type has been a really hard one for me,” Cooper said. “[Cutting my hair] drastically changed my type. But my voice still sounded the same, and I’m still the same person. So there’s a bit of a disconnect between who I am and what my skills are and how I look. And the people who are the most successful are the people who have a clear story and what they look like matches who they are.”

Theatre is about living truthfully in the moment, not assuming a false persona. To know your type—you first have to know yourself.

“A lot of people think theatre is about transformation, about being someone else,” Hellems said. “And it’s really it’s about revealing yourself in someone else’s experiences.”

Kaitlyn Sage, another Interlochen alumna, feels that her Wright State

training helped her home in on her sense of self and her place in the industry.

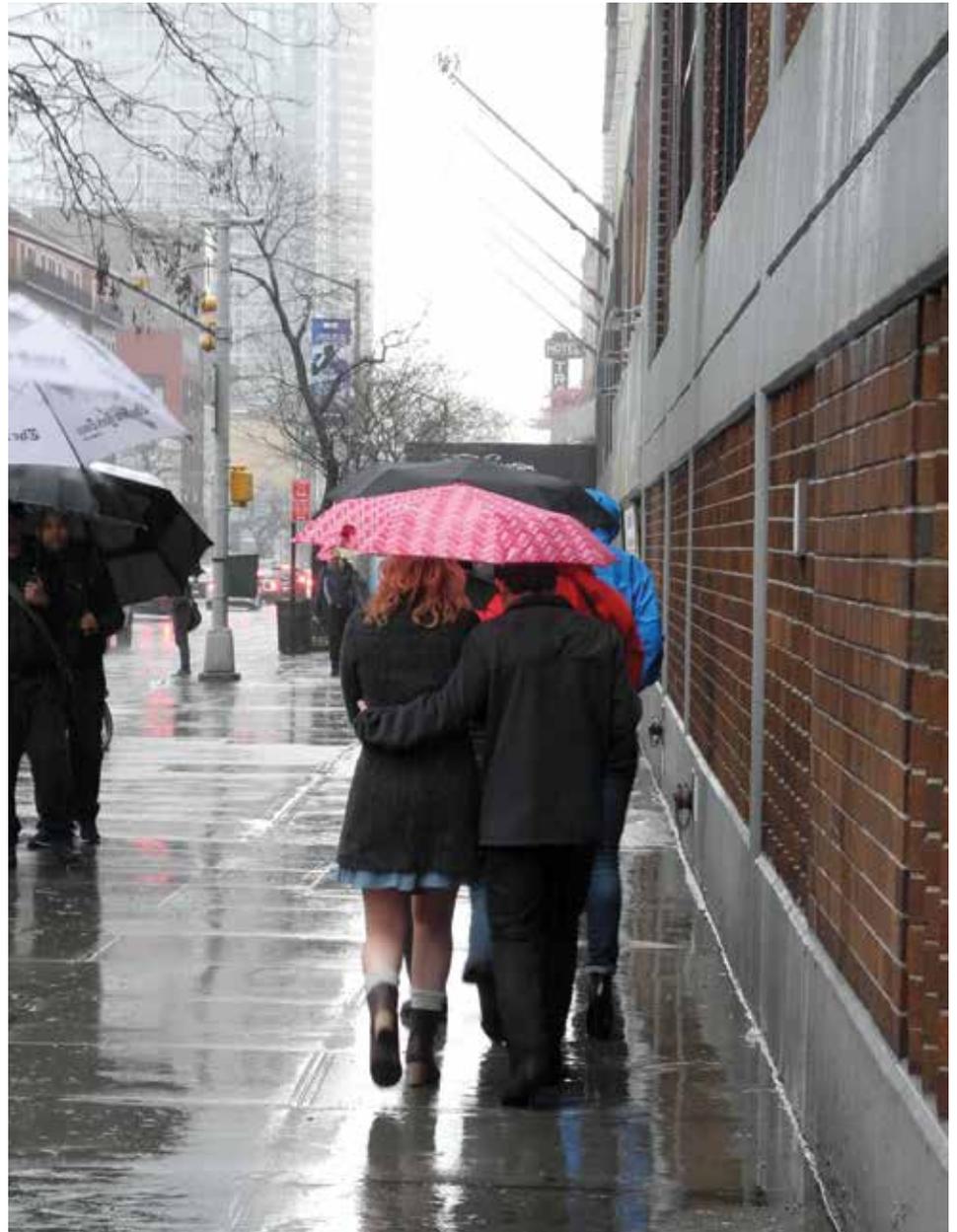
“I want everyone to see me through my work,” Sage said. “The teachers at Wright State want you to have a strong sense of who you are, and I think all of our pieces really show who we are as people.”

## Rhinos, oysters, the city, and uncertainty

During the showcase weekend, students had to arrange their own ac-

comodations, navigate New York using the subway, and find their own meals. Students are also encouraged to attend auditions outside of their showcase agenda. Even those in the group who have visited New York before occasionally feel overwhelmed by the city’s pace. Students get a sense of the daily grind in the theatre scene in New York and decide: this is or isn’t for me.

“You have to be super-organized and super-hardworking,” Lemmons said. “You have to have a lot of will-



*A pair of Wright State classmates under an umbrella, taking the drippy New York City weather in stride.*

power. In New York, you have to get up early. You have to get to your dance class or your acting class. You have to train yourself. And you have to find auditions, and that's not always easy. It's more about time management."

Not to mention New York's knack for curveballs. One student hopped on an express train that stopped blocks from his destination; another went to the wrong studio space because it had the same name as the place she needed to be. Both basically hustled straight from their frustrating detour into an audition, letting their adrenaline carry them into the next moment.

"You start to get nervous and go, what if I'm not meant to do this?" Cooper said. "What if I get there and I change my mind and I spent all of this time and all of this money on an education? But I've worked really hard and this is what it's for."

Some curveballs are more welcome. At her first New York audition outside the showcase appointments, Sage received a callback—for the day she planned to fly home. Delighted, her mom offered to help find a new flight.

For Deer, the toughest part of the showcase is the reality-check. As a result of the showcase, lots of students get representation within six months of graduation. But many are left hoping for that really big break—that doesn't come.

"No matter what we tell them about the universal statistics of the likelihood that they're going to get an agent out of the showcase," Deer said, "our students, like every other student at every university, hope that what's going to happen is they'll do the showcase, they'll get an audition for a Broadway show, and they'll be on Broadway within six weeks. They all understand that that's not a realistic expectation, but they still harbor it. That expectation of landing something golden is the hardest thing for them, because when it doesn't happen there's a little piece of them that

goes, 'Oh, I'm not going to be successful or my education wasn't what I needed it to be.' That's a universal experience that students with showcases have."

Deer hates to see his students—who are like his children, he said—experience that first crushing letdown, but it's an essential step. It has a burnishing quality: if they get through it once then they've learned to cope.

"Of course you want someone to go, 'I have a job for you right now,'" Blankenship said. "So there's always going to be a little disappointment, but that's just how it is. We have to have the hide of a rhino, but the heart of an oyster. Have the pearl inside, but have the hard shell."

### Goodbye/hello

On their final morning together in New York, the group gathers for a discussion session with other Wright State alums led by *[title of show]*'s Susan Blackwell, also a Wright State grad. The room is uncharacteristically quiet and contemplative—even somber at times. Sitting in a circle, speaking one at a time, each individual is candid about what excites them and what scares them about leaving college and starting their careers. Money is a common theme, as is always working low-status day jobs, and being far away from family. The showcase weekend has been about planning for the future and reflecting. They have put in years of work, countless hours spent in acting studios, voice lessons, dance classes, auditions, and rehearsals.

"It's like rose-colored glasses," Caroline Gruber said. "My favorite thing over the last four years would be all of these people. They mean so much to me. I know our class definitely has a family unit feel, and we all really care about each other succeeding. When I look back on my four years, it's always memories of us

having a pizza party in the dorms—having all of these things that I will remember with my classmates."

Kelsey Andrae encouraged her Texas family not to travel to Ohio for her graduation. It didn't mean as much to her as the showcase weekend with her B.F.A. cohort.

"Honestly, I didn't want to walk because commencement is boring," Andrae said. "There have been some graduates from previous years who haven't been able to make it to all of their agency meetings because they just couldn't fit it in before they had to leave for graduation. Showcase is basically my version of graduating. It's the end."

The end or the beginning?

"Well," she said. "A little bit of both."

### On success

According to Deer, the 2014 graduates of Wright State's B.F.A. program did exceptionally well coming off their showcase weekend. Some quickly landed agents, got callbacks, secured months' worth of regional work and even a national tour. Others, six months after graduating, are back in their hometowns, working in a restaurant, and wondering if New York is really the place. McDowell pointed out: Actors' Equity has the most unemployed union members in the country. Working in the theatre requires taking rejection in stride and constantly starting over; Wright State's showcase is meant to prepare students for exactly that.

"It's a scary career," Sage said. "There are so many people doing it. That's something I think about a lot. We're doing our showcase, but every other school is doing their showcase. I know for myself that I have to try it. I've always wanted to do musical theatre, and I've always wanted to move to New York ever since I was little. I've waited for my whole life. This is now the moment." ▼