

# Charting a course to college

## First of two parts

*A guide to choosing a place to study theatre*

*By Bruce Miller*

**I**F YOU'RE IN YOUR LAST two years of high school and thinking about studying acting or some other aspect of theatre in college, you probably have more questions than answers right now.

Questions like: What is the difference between B.F.A. and B.A. programs? How do I know what kind of program is right for me? Is it possible to succeed in a theatre career by going to a B.A. program? What are the best university theatre programs? How do they decide who gets in? What should I be doing now to prepare?

Let me say at the get-go that I do not have all the answers, or even all the questions. Even though I am a university professor in theatre, if my daughter were beginning her application process this fall like some of you, I would still be intimidated by the work and the decisions ahead.

But as someone who runs the B.A. and B.F.A. acting programs at a major university, I at least have a perspective on the process, from application to admission. Some of what I have learned over the years may be helpful to you as you begin your journey toward college. With accurate information and an idea of what to expect, you might just manage to land happily in the college that's right for you.

### **What the degrees mean**

Let's start with some definitions. The-

atre departments around the country basically offer two kinds of undergraduate theatre degrees: the Bachelor of Arts, or B.A., and the Bachelor of Fine Arts, or B.F.A. You can find a detailed discussion of these programs and related issues on this magazine's website ([www.edta.org](http://www.edta.org), and follow the links to Rehearsal Hall / College Prep). For the purposes of this article, however, here is a summary of what each program is and what each can offer you.

A B.A. program offers a general course of study in the subject of theatre. It is an academic program not unlike a major in biology or English. It offers a general exposure to the various elements of the subject, so that if you wish to, you can pursue a deeper understanding of an area of theatre at the next level of your education.

In theatre, this general exploration might include dramatic literature, stagecraft, design, stage management, and performance. Most B.A. programs allow for a more specific and deeper exploration of a particular area of interest to students after certain required courses are completed.

The B.A. at our school, for instance, requires a theatre major to take five required classes and then allows students to choose seven other courses of interest during their four years for a total of approximately thirty-six credits. If you have

a particular interest in design or performance, for example, you may take a sequence of acting classes or a series of lighting, set, and costume design courses to fill out the major's course requirements.

If you have talent and discipline, if the program has a particularly strong faculty, and if enough of your fellow students take their work seriously, you can finish a B.A. degree with a strong enough basic background to get into a good graduate school, or, in some cases, be prepared to begin a career in the business. But this is not necessary the intent of many B.A. theatre programs, and many B.A. theatre majors are in the department simply because they like theatre, not because they plan on making it a career. If you are seriously interested in a career in theatre or related fields, this difference in student attitude can sometimes affect the quality of your experience.

A B.F.A. program, on the other hand, offers intensive training in a particular area of theatre rather than a general exposure to the field. (An even more tightly focused version of this approach can be found in a two-year conservatory program.) Students who are accepted into B.F.A. programs rigorously study and develop their skills in selected areas such as design, stage management, or performance. For four years they spend every day training in these areas, and

those who graduate from the program will be prepared to pursue their art on a graduate level or in the profession. In a performance program, students are likely to study acting, script analysis, voice, and movement as part of their daily regimen. The education is focused and narrow rather than broad-based. The same is true in the areas of design and stage management.

This kind of training comes at a cost. The percentage of time spent in pursuing a general education is in reverse proportion to that of a B.A. student. In fact, in some conservatory programs, no courses outside of theatre are required at all. Under no circumstances could this be called an education in the traditional sense. The purpose is not to create educated people ready to face their adult lives with a well-rounded perspective on the world. The narrow focus of the curriculum prevents that.

Some B.F.A. programs do require coursework outside of theatre, but the required load is invariably small compared to that of a B.A. theatre major. In the program in which I teach, students are obliged to fulfill the minimum number of general studies courses required for an arts and sciences degree. The B.F.A. student takes approximately thirty credits outside of theatre—that is, typically, ten three-credit-hour classes over four years. It's not very much, and hardly enough to allow the B.F.A. graduate to call himself "educated." The remainder of the required courses for a degree come from the theatre department or from other departments offering courses related to theatre that fulfill the training obligations of the students.

### **Which is the right kind of program for you?**

Let me start by bragging on my daughter. She's twelve, and she is a wonderful actor, a natural talent. She's also very smart. She already knows how to read a script and make choices that work. She's been around theatre all her life, and with absolutely no pushing on the part of her parents, she has absorbed it like a sponge. Currently she is in a drama magnet school and a gifted program. She loves not only acting; she also loves

school, and does extremely well academically. (I should say that my wife and I both know how fortunate we are.)

Now here is the point. If my daughter were an upcoming senior and asked my advice about studying theatre in college, I would advise her to go into a B.A. program. Here's why.

Theatre is the one place where everything you can learn will help you. Do a play by Sophocles, and you'll be glad you learned some Greek history and studied early Western culture and civilization. No doubt that unit on poetry and mythology will come in pretty handy as well. Get cast in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* and you'll need to know about the poetry of Byron, and the math involved in Fermat's Theorem. Read *Amadeus* and you'll need some background in music and a knowledge of Mozart and eighteenth century European culture, and a good deal of history won't hurt either. Even contemporary plays require knowledge beyond what an actor can find in the script. Plays like *Copenhagen*, *Proof*, and *Spinning into Butter*—plays steeped in current events, culture and recent history that have been in New York in just the past couple of seasons—make that eminently clear.

If you're like most people your age, your four years in college will provide you with the last structured opportunity to become educated. A good B.A. program in theatre holds out the possibility of that happening while allowing my daughter to continue to pursue her love of theatre. But a B.A. education also offers her the possibility of exploring some of her other talents and interests that include music, literature, writing, and even mathematics. If she were to become a B.F.A. student, her opportunity for expanding her horizons would be far more limited. So that would be the advice I'd give my daughter—do a B.A. program.

I would also recommend a B.A. program if you've had intensive theatre training during your high school years. Before moving into a college position, I ran the theatre program at an outstanding performing arts high school, one in which the training actually rivals that of more than a few college programs. I always encouraged my students there to avoid a B.F.A. program. A good B.A. program in

conjunction with the intensive training you already have had in high school would probably stand you in good stead if you chose to pursue a career in theatre after college, and you would have gotten a well-rounded education during your college years as well. If after college you choose to continue studying theatre on a graduate level, you would be ready to do so.

Here's the catch. Suppose my daughter told me that, in spite of all my good arguments, she wanted to earn a B.F.A. in college because nothing else could make her happy. If after I had exhausted all other arguments, she still told me that, I would probably relent because we all want our children to be happy. But if she showed any ambivalence whatsoever, I would keep trying to convince her to go for the better education.

If you are already committed to a specific area of theatre to the exclusion of everything else, or if you are a student who does not do well academically, but might thrive in a theatre conservatory situation, then a B.F.A. might be for you. (Keep in mind, however, that many B.F.A. programs have rigorous academic entrance requirements in addition to their talent requirements.)

### **Cost versus quality**

I'll start this part of the discussion by admitting my own prejudices. I went to a state school as an undergraduate, and because of the kind of student I was, I got an excellent education. I wanted to learn, knew how to learn, and wanted to get my money's worth in every course.

In the years since my own college days, I have had friends and former students who have gone to Ivy League schools. More than one has told me that the hardest aspect of their education at these universities was getting in, not getting out. Consequently, some of them settled for getting by, and, as a result, the enormous amount of money spent on their education might have been better spent elsewhere. Of course, it is worth something to be able to say that you're from Harvard. In some fields it's worth a lot, but as an actor, no matter where you went to school, you still have to show that you can act or demonstrate some other quality that someone thinks

is marketable.

The program where I teach is very expensive. Is it worth \$120,000 to buy four years of training for a career field in which, according to statistics, it is very likely you will not succeed? I won't answer that question directly. There is no single right answer anyway.

The important thing to remember is that the amount spent on tuition does not always correspond directly with the quality of education you will receive. Whether the school is Harvard (for example; I don't mean to besmirch the reputation of that fine university) or the State College of Far from Anywhere, the educational experience can only be as good as the content of the curriculum and the quality of the teachers who work there. It is true that a university with a respected name and a healthy budget probably has the resources to attract the best teachers and to provide top-quality facilities, factors that will contribute to an excellent undergraduate theatre experience. It is also true that it is possible to find great teachers in what might seem to be unlikely places.

All this means that you must be a careful shopper. You will have to do your research and find out which programs have the best reputations, regardless of how much they cost.

Reputation—that is, the public perception of a school—can be a tricky business, too. It takes a long time for a program to develop a good reputation and, more importantly for our purposes, a long time to lose it.

Here's what I mean. Suppose a university has developed a good reputation as a result of some of its graduates who have gone on to have successful and high profile careers. On face value, that sounds like a good indicator. But if we examine that more closely, it is likely that several years have gone by between the time those students graduated and became famous. Suppose the teaching faculty who trained these successful graduates is no longer there? Suppose that in the intervening years, a new administration that is less supportive of theatre now runs the college or university, and the program is heading downhill? Unless you are careful in your research, you may miss

this vital information.

Any program can produce a famous graduate from time to time. That kind of success is as much about luck as talent and training. Information about the numbers of recent graduates who are finding work in the business is more meaningful than the fact that a single graduate has found fame and fortune. The University of Miami, where I teach, is where legendary composer Jerry Herman went to school. Does that mean we have a great musical theatre program? Actually we do, but it would be a logical leap to draw any conclusions about the quality of musical theatre training at Miami based on the fact that Jerry, who graduated about fifty years ago, got his degree here. Ray Liotta, a more recent graduate, dropped by last summer to pay a visit. He was most interested in catching up with his old acting teacher, who retired several years ago. If he were to recommend his alma mater based on his experience with that now-retired faculty member, that recommendation would not be particularly valuable, would it?

By now you're starting to get the picture. You will absolutely have to weigh cost and reputation of each university you are interested in, but you will also have to find a way of doing so based on what the program is doing now.

### **Will a B.A. program prepare you to work in the theatre?**

The short answer is some do. In fact some B.A. programs are every bit as good in developing good actors, designers, and stage managers as some B.F.A. programs. It depends on what goes on day to day at the school (including the number of production opportunities available), the teachers who teach there, and the kind of student that the B.A. program draws. All these elements need to be checked out in any B.A. or B.F.A. program that you're considering.

For some students, a good B.A. program has several advantages over a conservatory program. First of all it offers you much more flexibility in tailoring a curriculum in theatre and academics that meets your own tastes. If you are interested in acting for the camera and directing, but not in voice and speech, you'll

have the freedom to focus your coursework in a way that suits you. You simply take the acting for the camera and skip the voice training. Further, if you are interested in minoring in film, you can work out your schedule to focus on this area.

In B.F.A. programs, on the other hand, flexibility is relatively minimal. Musical theatre students in our program, for instance, can take only required theatre courses their first year. Performance majors take only two English or math classes besides their required theatre courses. Those in the B.F.A. program must take all classes required of them whether they like those areas or not, and if there is a course that's not on the B.F.A. track that interests them, more often than not its scheduled time conflicts with their required course work. All of our B.F.A. students are required to take some dance and some singing even if they swear they will never audition for a musical again once they leave the university. It is accurate to say that B.F.A. training is like a smorgasbord of actor training, but it is a smorgasbord where you have to eat everything on the table. Clearly that kind of dining is not for everyone.

The B.F.A. actors in our department clearly have the edge in training over our B.A. theatre majors, and will get the best parts more often. Like other good theatre schools, we audition all over the country and select only the strongest candidates for our B.F.A. program. The intensive training offer we offer these students almost guarantees that they will develop their craft more quickly and effectively than most of our B.A. students will. However, talent will rise to the surface like a cork on the ocean, and many of our B.A. students manage to compete very nicely with our B.F.A.'s. Generally speaking, though, in programs that offer both B.F.A. and B.A. degrees, there is a definite slant in favor of B.F.A.'s. They'll get the roles, the faculty's attention, and the recognition.

Many universities have wonderful theatre programs that offer only B.A. degrees. Such departments may offer an outstanding production season with main stage and black box schedules that insure that all students can find plenty of acting work,

and that the truly talented and committed students can get lead roles consistently without having to worry about competing with B.F.A. students. Many of these programs also have wonderful classes in technique that compare favorably with those offered in B.F.A. programs.

The caveat here is that there is no real quality control regarding students in a B.A. program. Everyone can take a particular class as long as they have completed the prerequisite courses. That means that, unlike a B.F.A. course, where all the students must perform at a certain level and with demonstrated commitment in order to stay in the program, B.A. courses have no such built-in standards. You will need to be responsible for finding partners that have the level of ability and commitment that you do. But if the majority of those in a particular class are not this kind of student, then your ability to seek out and maintain excellence will be compromised.

The B.A. student looking for a top-notch program to hone her skills is not completely safe even if the department has no B.F.A. Some theatre departments

do not have a B.F.A. because they put their energy into an M.F.A. instead. In some cases this may be even worse for the B.A. student. M.F.A. students are older and generally more experienced than undergraduate theatre students. Many programs operate with the understanding that M.F.A.'s will get the primary roles in productions, do the designing left undone by the faculty, and generally have their own way. The undergraduates, B.A. and B.F.A., in this kind of program may get only the crumbs. That usually means small roles in mainstage productions and lots of studio shows. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If the studio production schedule is healthy, and the best teachers work with undergraduates as well as the graduate students, there may still be an excellent theatre education available. The trick is researching the way a department runs, and that means going deeper than simply reading the brochures a university or department puts out.

One more thought on this subject before closing it. A good education is about learning how to learn as much as it is about what you learn. Once you graduate, you will no doubt want to continue to

pursue mastery of your art form. You will realize that you have not completed your education simply because you have gotten your diploma. When you go to New York or Los Angeles and work for money (or for no money), you will continue to develop the craft you learned in college. If no work is available, you will take classes to further develop your skills or to keep them sharp. You might even choose to go on to graduate school to get an M.F.A. The point is that the undergraduate education you receive should not be considered the be-all and end-all of your education. Every true artist continues to pursue perfection in his craft while realizing it will never be attained. The journey is the important thing. You'll be learning all your life.

*This two-part guide to selecting a college theatre program will be concluded in our November issue.*

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