

# Charting a course to college

## Second of two parts

*How to find the theatre program that's right for you*

*By Bruce Miller*

**T**HE QUESTION COMES UP constantly: what are the best colleges and universities? What are the best theatre programs? There is no single answer. A school with an excellent overall reputation may have a lousy theatre department. A school that you have never heard of may have a superb theatre department.

Moreover, the school that is a great fit for one student might be a horrible mismatch for another. You may feel more comfortable in a large university, or in a small one. That small university may have a large theatre department, or the large university may have a small one. Each institution and each theatre program has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses, some of which matter to you, some of which do not. All of this needs to be researched and thought through.

Students auditioning for the B.F.A. musical theatre program at the University of Miami, where I teach, often list the following schools as programs they applied to: Syracuse, Ithaca College, Carnegie Mellon, Michigan, the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, Boston University, Boston Conservatory, New York University, Webster, Northwestern, North Carolina School of the Arts, USC, UCLA, and Cal Arts.

These are all very fine schools, and we are happy that we are listed among them. (Please understand that there are many

other excellent schools out there and this is in no way intended to be a complete list of good places to study musical theatre.) The only thing they really have in common is a reputation for excellence in theatre training. The list includes large schools and small ones, private institutions and state universities. It includes schools in major cities, medium-sized cities, and small towns. It is geographically diverse. If there is another similarity, it is that none of them are inexpensive, but even among the best theatre programs it is possible for in-state students to find bargains at state universities.

### **The right school for you**

Finding the right school with the right theatre program will not be easy. You will have to define what you want in a university and in a theatre program. And you will have to research what's out there and analyze how it relates to your needs and desires. Among the characteristics that should be considered: cost, availability of financial aid, geographic location, size, setting, the kind of program, what specifically the curriculum consists of, the theatres and other campus facilities (what are the classrooms like? the dorms?), demographics of the student body, and academic requirements for admission. Here are some notes on a few of the more important considerations.

**Money.** If cost is an important issue, then a state school, which is far more affordable for state residents, is the way to go. The goal then becomes to find out which of the state-supported schools in your area best meets your other requirements. If you have your heart set on a more pricey private school (or a state university in another state) then you'll need to research scholarships and other financial aid packages. You should keep in mind, however, that if you're looking at B.F.A. programs, those schools are very competitive. A scholarship from such a program is likely to be offered on the basis of talent, academic achievement, or a combination of the two, and possibly other factors as well. The competition for that scholarship is sure to be stiff. If you are relying on a scholarship to make enrolling in a particular school possible, be sure that you hedge your bets by applying to more affordable schools as well.

One more note about cost and program. If you're thinking about a B.F.A., you really should consider that you are paying for training rather than for an education. Further, the degree is not a license or an entitlement that guarantees you'll be able to support yourself using the skills you will acquire in college. As an actor you will still have to audition for acting jobs. As a designer you will still have to show the portfolio. It is not easy to make a living

in theatre, especially for actors. Each of you should consider whether it is worth going deep in debt to get the degree from the program you want to attend, especially when it will probably be very difficult to pay off that debt with your earnings as an artist. If the difference in quality between that state school and a private school is not great, it may not be worth the difference in price. That is a hard conclusion to come to, but a life in the arts may require you to be tough with yourself in order to endure and succeed. You might as well start now. If mom and dad go broke paying for college, who will help pay the rent in New York?

**Geography.** Another major part of the decision-making is location, and a cluster of related factors. Does a warm, tropical climate sound appealing? Or maybe a more familiar four-season climate with a change of leaves, white Christmas, and crocuses in the spring is more to your taste. Does a high profile, winning sports program seem important? These are considerations that could make four years in college a more agreeable stay.

A note of caution, however: if you are planning on a B.F.A. program, there won't be a lot of outside time to pursue sports, fraternity life, or the attractions of the surrounding environment. Make sure you arrange your list of college criteria in order of importance, since it will affect your life tremendously for the next four years.

There's also a cost dimension to the location question. Consider the distance from home. College can be a lonely place for a freshman, and travel isn't cheap, especially when airplanes are involved. If money is an issue, then frequent trips home for comfort will not be a financial possibility. Is that going to matter to you?

**The work.** An ideal location, of course, means nothing if the school does not offer the kind of program you are looking for. Probably the most important investment you can make in the next few months is the time you spend examining the B.A. and B.F.A. programs that you're considering. That means you should get your hands on the specific requirements for graduation for each school you are interested in. You need to make sure that the program offers courses that fulfill the kind of education or training you are looking

for. If you hope to become a director and one of the B.A. theatre programs on your list offers only two courses in directing, you can probably cross that one off. A musical theatre program that offers only two semesters of dance or a design program that does not allow undergraduate students to design any actual productions should likewise give pause to prospective students.

To examine theatre programs at this level of detail, you'll need to collect and compare all of the actual menus of courses needed for graduation from the schools you're considering. By placing them side by side, you will begin to get a feel for the specifics shared by programs and their differences, practically and philosophically. You will also get a better idea of what you want and what may be best for you.

**Admission requirements.** Most B.A. programs in theatre have no specific entrance requirements beyond admission into the university. Some university programs, however, offer modified B.F.A. programs to selected B.A. students that begin after the first year of school is completed. Admission to these programs usually requires an audition and evaluation during the second semester of the first year.

Four-year B.F.A. programs require a rigorous entrance audition or portfolio review before acceptance. Some B.F.A. programs admit students solely on the basis of these audition/portfolio interviews. Highly competitive schools, though, require that you meet the academic standards of the university as well as the artistic ones of the program. This can sometimes be a dealbreaker. Many high school theatre students who are wonderful on stage do not perform as well in their academic courses. Others get a late start in committing to their academic responsibilities. This could cost you dearly when it comes time to hear from the university programs you have your heart set on. Each year there are some students accepted into our B.F.A. programs who are turned down by the university. This is always a disappointment to our department, but a far greater one, I think, to the students who had hoped to attend our school.

**Program size, cut policies, and the vibe.** Some B.A. programs are small and students tend to know each other before long. There is an intimacy and familiarity that may be appealing for some. Other B.A. programs, like ours, are large, and for some it is possible to maintain anonymity for four years. Familiarity could mean comfort, or it could mean being pigeonholed by a reputation, good or bad, that precedes you. Anonymity could mean a freedom to establish who you are and what you can do fresh with each new class you take. It could also mean a lack of a good support system within the department that could help you through some difficult times.

B.F.A. programs sometimes admit large classes with the intention of cutting the less successful students after the first year. Others admit small classes and commit to them with the dedication of loving parents. The programs that cut maintain a quality control that may be appealing to the students who survive. Certainly the practice keeps the competitive edge alive within the group and may help drive everybody involved to a level of excellence that might not be attained in a more comfortable environment. It can also compromise the sense of joy that might be found in the work if it were performed in a less judgmental atmosphere.

Schools that do not employ an obligatory cut system are trying to nurture a positive environment for creativity and growth. The danger is that they may also allow the level of excellence in the overall student population to be compromised by supporting students who prove to be less talented or less driven toward excellence. Bottom line, you must figure out the kind of environment in which you will best thrive.

Finding the right environment requires more than research through reading can provide. You can't really tell if a program is right for you until you get the feel of it. That means you should make every effort to visit the schools you are most interested in. The ideal way is to start visiting schools well before the beginning of your senior year. At the least, you should try to visit your top choices. Attend classes, interview teachers and students, and make sure you ask lots of ques-

tions. You'll find it especially helpful to talk to freshmen. Students are always a great source of information, since they are not selling and they have a perspective most like your own.

**Making a decision.** Savvy students apply to several schools and wait to see who accepts them and what kind of financial packages they are offered. If possible, once you know where you have been accepted, make arrangements for a visit to your final choices. A visit (while classes are in session) can really make it clear what the ultimate choice should be. You want to visit while classes are still in session.

Not everyone, of course, has the time and money to visit several schools before making a decision. If that sounds like you, you will need to make a decision based on what you are able to learn. It doesn't cost that much to talk on the phone to current students and teachers of any school you are considering. A call to the department office will usually be enough to get set up with student phone numbers and e-mail addresses to begin this final phase of research.

## What gets you in?

What will it take to get you into the theatre program you want?

If you plan on attending a B.A. program, then the short and simple answer is grades, SAT scores, and your overall academic record, including extracurricular activities. The college essay can be important, too, and recommendations can have a significant impact if they are particularly strong ones. A special word to my younger readers: in today's competitive market, a student who waits until his junior year to get serious about school may, unfortunately, be too late.

Acceptance into a B.F.A. program is more rigorous, and more about what you can do. It requires a demonstration of your theatrical chops. Actors are usually asked for two contrasting monologues of about two minutes or less. (Some schools want to see a combination of classical and contemporary; others, two contrasting contemporary pieces.) Musical theatre programs ask for one or two monologues and two contrasting songs, usually an up-tempo and a ballad. Some musical theatre programs require a dance audition as well.

## The audition

WHERE YOU WILL SPEND the next four years may depend to a great extent on how you perform a two-minute audition selection. Here's some general advice on choosing and performing an audition monologue.

Overall, you will want to show those for whom you audition the following qualities:

That you are exciting, versatile, intelligent, charming, and easy to work with.

That you can use your body effectively as an actor, as well as deliver dialogue.

That you recognize the dramatic moments in a piece.

That you can make dramatic moments happen clearly and convincingly.

That you can deliver acting moments that make sense in the context of the given circumstances.

HERE IS A LIST of monologue characteristics that are likely to help you make those qualities apparent:

The speaker should be speaking because she is in the midst of some tumultuous conflict that must be resolved, immediately if possible.

The speech should have an arc or throughline. It should allow us to see the speaker going on a journey of some kind.

The character should change during the length of the speech as a result of what she has learned in that time.

The conflict and journey should cause a step-by-step progression that moves toward resolution during the monologue.

The character should make discoveries, find new ideas, and experience victories and defeats, each of these leading him forward on his journey.

The given circumstances of the piece should make the stakes and urgency extremely high.

IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH the goals above, you will have to do the following:

Define the conflict.

Figure out your character's objective. What does she need from or want to do to the character she is speaking to? Be specific.

Define the specific given circumstances surrounding the monologue. How can you use these specifics actively in the work?

Figure out why the stakes are so high. If they are not, make them so.

Locate the big events and dramatic moments.

Divide and label the beats in your script in terms of tactics and transitions.

Decide where and how the unseen listener reacts, and how your character responds to this reaction.

Develop physical choices—gesture, movement, and business—that will help you effectively tell the story.

Decide where your focus will be, and why. Decide at what points your focus will change, and why.

Design and stage management students are asked to present a portfolio of their work. All of the above, however, is dependent on having the grades and overall academic record to get into the university that houses these programs.

For acting students, the box on page 30 contains a checklist that will help you locate and prepare monologues that will work effectively for you when you audition. You can find more advice on preparing for a college audition on the Educa-

tional Theatre Association website: go to [www.edta.org](http://www.edta.org) and click through the links to Rehearsal Hall / College Prep / The Audition.

In a B.F.A. program, the audition is the most important aspect of the admission process. But some schools do interviews as well as auditions. The personality and commitment demonstrated in an interview can be very important to your success. Keep in mind that schools are building a class ensemble as well as looking for

talent. Those who seem like collaborative people will do better than those who do not.

Some departments also require an essay about a candidate's goals in theatre, and that can be an important element of the application, too. I personally cringe when I read essays that talk about training for stardom. This certainly hints at ego that invariably causes trouble during a four-year voyage. On the other hand, an essay that focuses on love for theatre and dedication to the work puts a student in a favorable light. I often read student essays before interviewing and auditioning perspective candidates to find out something about them in advance. What I read in an essay probably sometimes affects my perceptions of the interview. In addition, talented students who are also good academic students tend to do far better in rigorous programs like ours. Demonstrating an ability to communicate effectively in writing suggests potential for success in such a demanding program.

### Preparing for college

Every fall I meet some new first-year students who have not done themselves any favors in their preparation to study acting at the university level. Here are some of the qualities I often see in freshmen that strike me as serious disadvantages for actors:

- A dislike for reading and poor reading comprehension.
- A limited vocabulary.
- An inability to communicate effectively in written and spoken language.

- A lack of understanding about what theatre is beyond musical theatre.

- A lack of knowledge about history, culture, politics, and world affairs.

- A lack of ability to analyze and synthesize.

- Inability to act with their bodies.

- A lack of understanding about how acting choices are strongly connected to an understanding of the script, and that character choices must be in service of telling the story of the play.

If this is true for B.F.A. actors, more than likely it is also true for B.A. students. So I'd like to share with you my prescription for preparation for college. If you can focus on these things before you enter college, it will greatly help you when you begin the next level of your theatre education. Here's what I'd suggest:

- Read and analyze plays, as many as possible. Find a list of the great playwrights and plays—your theatre teacher should be able to help with that—and begin reading.

- Write about the plays you read. Force yourself to analyze them in terms of action, character, spectacle, dialogue, and meaning.

- Read aloud, anything and everything. You must learn to read with expression. You must learn to use the words.

- Take an interest in the world. Begin to understand that educating yourself is an important actor tool. Actors must know about everything. Plays take place anywhere and any time, and focus on ev-

ery subject imaginable.

- See as many plays as possible, all kinds of plays. Think about what works, what doesn't work, and try to figure out why.

- If there's not a good theatre company where you live, see movies based on plays. Analyze what you see in terms of what works and what doesn't and why.

- Work on craft. Develop your storytelling skills beyond being able to deliver dialogue. Remember that dialogue is a tool no more or less important than the other things you do to tell the story. Physical actions, which communicate what a character is thinking and feeling, are as important as what the character is saying. It is a necessary acting skill to be able to use your body when you act.

IT'S ALMOST application time. You now have a good road map for the process, and I hope you have a better understanding of what lies ahead. It's time to saddle your horse and "prick the sides of your intent," as a famous Scottish king once said. There's a lot of work to do before the long winter siege. Preparation is where the victory begins!

*The first part of this two-part series on selecting a college theatre program ran in our October issue. Watch for our annual College Theatre Directory next month.*

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