



LAURA C. KELLEY

# Choices

## *Step one: sorting out the differences among undergraduate theatre programs*

**I**F YOU'RE A high school senior who expects to be studying theatre in college at this time a year from now, you probably already have a pretty good idea of the dimensions of the decision that you'll be making in the next few months. It's a complicated question.

There are so many variables, and so many possibilities, with more than three thousand colleges, universities, and professional schools in the United States. Finding one that's right for you involves sorting through information about the course offerings, faculty, facilities, location and setting, cost, financial

aid, and many less tangible qualities of dozens of schools.

And if you want to prepare yourself for a career as an actor, director, or designer, it's more complicated than that. Unlike your friends who plan to major in pre-med, engineering, or poli sci, you have a choice to make at the outset, before your first class as a freshman, about how to pursue the skills and knowledge you will use in your working life.

The choice:

- You can pursue professional training immediately in a four-year Bachelor

of Fine Arts or two-year conservatory program.

- Or you can begin by getting a broad liberal arts education, while also studying theatre, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in theatre. After completing that four-year degree, you can then, if you choose, enter a professional training program at the graduate level.

The B.A. and the B.F.A. represent two fundamentally different ideas about how theatre artists should be trained. As defined by the National Association of Schools of Theatre, 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. B.A. theatre students should develop basic technique and get production experience in an environment that “lead[s] to a fuller intellectual grasp of the art,” NAST says in its standards for degree-granting institutions.

The B.F.A., on the other hand, places “primary emphasis... on the development of skills, concepts, and sensitivities essential to the theatre professional.” NAST recognizes six different theatre B.F.A. concentrations: acting, design and technology, film and video production, theatre for youth, musical theatre with a theatre emphasis, and musical theatre with a music emphasis. (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 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 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 remaining 10 or 15 percent 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

# Questions

## *About a hundred things to ask school representatives*

YOU HAVE questions. So do we.

The process of selecting a place to study theatre is a two-way street. The school wants to know if you’re the kind of student who will do well in its program, and it seeks to find out by asking you to fill out an application, supply your grade point average and SAT or ACT scores, audition, and interview. Similarly, you need to find out everything you can about the education and training you will receive at a school you’re considering. You do that by talking to school representatives and asking penetrating questions.

What should you ask? We asked some of our friends in colleges and universities and others who spend a lot of time helping students make these difficult decisions to give us some questions that will help you focus your investigation of theatre programs.

### **First, what do you want?**

Your first questions should be ones that you ask of yourself, to help you understand what you are looking for in a college theatre program. Among them:

What do I want to get out of college theatre training? Do I want to learn more to see if it’s an area I might want to pursue professionally? Or do I already know this is what I’m going to do and want the best training I can get in professional skills? What do I want to be doing when I finish school? Am I more interested in film and television or in theatre? Do I want to teach theatre in schools?

Do I want to study in a liberal arts or a conservatory setting?

What size program do I prefer?

What kind of environment best suits me? Urban setting? Small town? Large state university? Private college? How far from home?

How big of a gap between the total annual cost and the financial aid package can I afford?

### **General questions**

Here are some general questions to keep in mind as you check out schools that interest you. You’ll find the answers to some of these questions in a course catalog or simply by paying attention when you make a campus visit. Others you’ll need to put directly to faculty members. They boil down to this single query: What can you do for me, for my career in the field of theatre, that puts you above other schools? Consider the answers to *that* question closely as you make your final decision.

What training and education approach do you offer, liberal arts (with a B.A. degree) or conservatory (B.F.A.)?

What is the mission of the department?

What is your philosophy of training in theatre?

What is the ratio of academic study to practical work and production?

How is the overall program divided among dramatic literature, acting, theatre history, technical theatre, directing, playwriting, theatre education, theatre administration, production (course requirements, number of majors, number of faculty, etc.)?

What are the professional credits of your faculty and what are they doing professionally *now*? What are their areas of specialty?

Where are your recent graduates now, and what are they doing? Were they accepted to grad school?

***Turn to Questions, next page***



Playboy of the Western World at Case Western University.

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 more than ninety conservatory programs and university theatre departments that offer B.F.A. or M.F.A. degrees, from Fairbanks 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 the past ten years, 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

### Questions, from page 7

What is the ratio of faculty to students? To majors? To minors? What is the size of theatre classes?

Where do your students come from? Is the student body geographically, ethnically, racially, culturally diverse or limited? What is the percentage of minority students enrolled in the program? What is the male to female ratio of students enrolled in the program?

Can I double-major in another area? Minor?

Can I design an independent study if there isn't a course in something I'd like to study? Are there opportunities for studying at nearby colleges? Study abroad?

What do I get to do? On what level are undergraduates involved with department productions? Do they perform, direct, design these productions? Do freshmen get to perform? What is the educational basis for that policy?

What are your class, performance, rehearsal, shop, storage, and lounge spaces like?

Are there mainstage and black box opportunities to stretch one's craft?

Would there be opportunities for me in various areas of theatre production, or will I be limited to a specialized area? Does the department encourage study of various aspects of theatre?

Does your school have a theatre space for the staging of student-directed productions?

What types of plays do you do? Do you produce/provide training in musical theatre?

Who directs your shows?

How are shows selected?

Are there off-campus internship possibilities available through the department that will allow me to obtain hands-on professional experience? Can I do an internship for credit? Do I have to pay tuition to do that?

Is there community theatre near campus?

How well does the professional training this department provides fit into a liberal arts life?

Do you have a retention program? How many theatre majors graduate in four years? How many transfer?

How do you aid students in making the transition into professional work for internships, summer work, and after graduation? Grad school? Job fairs?

Does your school have any contacts with professional theatres?

Does your school have a summer theatre program where I could get experience?

Do you have a graduate program? May undergraduates enroll in graduate level courses after fulfilling the core requirements?

Do graduate students teach undergrad courses?

What are my chances of getting into the department? Does the audition date make a difference?

What financial help does the department offer?

Do you foresee any changes in the department over the next few years? For example, are any faculty planning to retire?

May I speak to some of this year's freshman class, seniors, recent graduates?

### For acting students

Turn to Questions, page 10



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.

- Many B.F.A. programs graduate actors who are indisputably well-trained. An actor who earns a liberal 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, of course, is that the B.A./M.F.A. actor will have delayed the beginning of her career by two years, and probably will have several thousand 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. For that reason, you should be very certain that you really want to spend your life in the theatre before committing to a professional program.

- 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. 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.

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. You'll find that, as a group, the representatives of college theatre programs are refreshingly open and candid. It's part of their job to recruit students for their schools, but more importantly, they're interested in recruiting students who will succeed. It's important to them, too, that you make the right decision.

### Questions, from page 8

Do you offer a (New York) senior showcase to help the transition from college into the profession?

What influences will I experience in the sequence of acting classes? (Meisner, Chekhov, Viewpoint, Suzuki training, Hagen, Method, etc.)

Is there a voice production component to the training? Will I be taught dialects?

Is there a movement component to the training?

Will I have the chance to learn stage combat?

Is there an auditions class?

Do you have class in business skills for the actor?

How much crew work is required of acting students?

Who auditions for department shows?

Do acting classes perform scenes or showcases for the department or the public?

### For theatre education majors

How many faculty members are in theatre education?

How many majors are in theatre education?

Is there a specific theatre education curriculum?

Do theatre education majors get to participate in productions and performances?

Are there specific theatre education productions and if so what is their purpose?

Are there opportunities to be in the schools prior to and in addition to student teaching? How much will I get to work with students and in the classroom prior to student teaching? If I'm working on a K-12 certificate, will I work with students K-12?

Are students screened into the program or can anyone be in theatre education?

Is there adequate opportunity for me to learn technical theatre, acting, and directing in the course and production work?

### For playwriting students

Is it possible to major in playwriting or to have a concentration in playwriting within the theatre major?

What kind of playwriting classes are taught? Are there independent studies as well as regular offerings?

Does the program provide exposure for playwriting students through readings and/or productions of student work?

Does the department enter student playwriting work in competitions such as the American College Theatre Festival or any similar programs?

For a list of suggested questions for design and production students, see "The portfolio," page 14.

### Contributors

*Catherine Bloch, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Nancy Brennan, John Stark Regional High School, Weare, New Hampshire; Scott Dahl, scenic designer, Minneapolis; Sandy Duke, Western Michigan University; David Edgecombe, University of Alaska Anchorage; Richard Hess, University of Cincinnati—College-Conservatory of Music; Karen Husted, University of Phoenix; David Leong, Virginia Commonwealth University; Bruce Miller, University of Miami; R. L. Mirabal, Lake Braddock Secondary School, Burke, Virginia; Bill Myatt, Pleasant Valley High School, Bettendorf, Iowa; Teresa K. Pond, director, Irvine, California; Janet Rubin, Saginaw Valley State University, Michigan; Michael Wright, The University of Tulsa; Dramatics editorial staff.*

Originally published in *Dramatics* magazine. More info: [Schooltheatre.org](http://Schooltheatre.org)