

PLANNING PRIMER

By Leslie Shook, STAGE DIRECTIONS, October 2004

As a high school student, you may be involved in the live performing arts as an actor, director, musician, technician or stage manager. The hard work that goes into every performance can be an exciting part of your life and there are many opportunities to become involved. When you enter your junior year or even before that, you will start thinking about applying to colleges and universities. How do you know if you'll be making the right decision? For what types of careers can you train? What channels will you have for your creative energy? Here are some answers.

Performing arts management is one very viable and exciting career choice with many options. Many performing arts managers who work in the field today came to their profession through an exploration of other career paths and growth within an organization over a long period of time. Today's top managers began their careers as actors, musicians, box office workers, teachers, designers, independent producers or artistic directors. Few of them were professionally schooled in management science or business, but they have one thing in common - a commitment to the arts.

Opportunities for advancement and growth within an arts organization are available today, but the context is different now. Specialized education in this course of study is far more available than it was 30 years ago. Arts organizations are hungry for people who have been schooled in the practice of good, strong business theory, supported by knowledge of and passion for the arts.

"I think arts management in general is an underserved area, and theatre and fine arts offer a wide range of possibilities," says Veronica Claypool, managing director of Theatre Development Fund, the largest not-for-profit service organization for the performing arts in the US. "Employment is available to college students and graduates in general management offices and talent agencies. At the government level, the National Endowment for the Arts and state arts agencies offer excellent options. It is very exhilarating and exciting to be at the table with professionals working in the field."

Everyone in the business knows that this is much more than a nine-to-five job. Successful managers love their work and the people involved. They have a deep commitment to the artists they represent and support. The next generation of managers will have to enhance this passion with the addition of strong business acumen and creativity.

At the age of 18, you don't want to limit your choices. Live performance presents an enjoyable challenge, with friendships and accolades as a bonus. If you enjoy working with people, have a flair for organization, have developed good communication and writing skills and have a lot of positive energy, there will always be a place for you on the business side of the arts.

"In High school, I was not an actor and was not very handy with power tools, so being onstage or on a crew were often ruled out," says Ryan Meisheid, a BFA candidate in Theatre Management at DePaul University's Theatre School. "I did anything I could with my school and local theaters, working on creating and editing programs, creating advertising and completing small details that often got overlooked. I did not know that people in real life held these responsibilities; I thought they were somehow magically completed before opening night. It was and still is thrilling to me that there are people in the world who do this."

Your education is a sizable, enduring investment. Keep an open mind and look into as many avenues as possible. While you are in school, you don't want to be pigeonholed or inflexible.

Look for a training program that offers you a variety of opportunities to experience both the artistic and business sides of the arts. Be sure your degree has a liberal studies component: Studying literature and history could provide the basis for a Pulitzer Prize-winning play or Broadway musical.

“The optimum situation is one in which there is access to professionals who have actually done the work,” says Claypool. You should take full advantage of internships and connections to alumni. Choose a school that offers a wide range of arts activities, both on campus and in the community.

Bill Patterson, associate director of theatre at University of Maryland in College Park, suggests, “One of the things that I have always maintained is that as an undergraduate, you need to learn as much as possible about the art form. Ultimately, you have to know why you are making a management decision. The reasons should be related as much to the art as to the bottom line.”

As you learn more and think about which program will best fit your needs, keep in mind that test scores on the ACT and/or SAT are important for college admission. Approach the interview with enthusiasm and confidence. Bring examples of your high school performance and production work in a notebook or portfolio, organized to highlight your interests and show your range. Good writing samples and artwork strengthen your presentation. Don't be afraid to ask questions about the quality of training, housing and financial aid packages associated with the program.

Once you begin your college career, place a high value on the connections you make with your teachers, fellow students and industry professionals. Make mentors of everyone who is willing to help you. In other words, be a sponge and be sure to thank the people who invest in you.

Learn to recognize your strengths and weaknesses (we all have them!) and find out what you love to do. Develop a vision for your future, knowing that this will change and grow over time. Recognize what you like to do, what activities challenge you and what you enjoy seeing on stage. Identify “next steps” as you progress and solicit help to accomplish them. Express yourself with confidence and listen well.

Continue to be a practicing artist. This is more than just dabbling. It helps to keep creative impulses fresh and alive. Read as many publications as possible about the work that is being produced across the country and worldwide. The Internet makes it easy.

Use the connections at your school to become involved in the community, and make your own opportunities. “As an undergraduate, you should look for every work and internship opportunity in as many different areas of arts management,” says Patterson. “This will help you make the ultimate decision about your career.” Build a portfolio of examples of your work, complete with an always growing resume of jobs, internships and accomplishments.

Explore major metropolitan areas with a vital arts community and apply for internships in regional theatres and in both large and small arts organizations. “The apprenticeship is very important,” says Claypool. “Many college programs offer study abroad as an option; make Broadway your ‘study abroad.’ Consider spending summers or semester in a Broadway office or organization, like a general management office or Theatre communications Group. Organizations like the Spoleto Festival and Black Arts Festivals provide a really good training ground. You can get a firsthand look at the scope of the work that is available and have the opportunity to work at the festivals in productions or management.

Learning, growing and adjusting to your chosen livelihood will be an exciting adventure; and as you travel towards graduation, the four years of training will fly by. You will have honed and enhanced your creative, business and communication skills. Arts professionals will be eager to hire you and encourage you to become a valuable contributor to their organization.