

WHAT THEATRE GRADS NEED TO KNOW
by Kent Lantaff. STAGE DIRECTIONS. October 1996

What do theatrical employers believe actors need to learn from actor training programs?

We asked a sampling of those who do the hiring in the theatre -- directors, casting directors, producers, and agents -- what they think acting schools and conservatories should teach acting students. In other words, what do they expect from those they hire?

It's an important question for the current and prospective student. With nearly 400 actor training programs in American colleges and universities, as well as independent conservatories and countless private acting coaches (particularly in such actor-intensive cities as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago), aspiring actors have no shortage of choices of places to receive training. But which one is the right one? By weighing the opinions of those who actually do the hiring, students can better guide themselves in finding exactly the kind of acting program that will work for them -- now and after graduation.

Expanding upon the obvious -- the need for actors who are well-trained in the expected basics of speech, movement, and acting -- those we talked to also offered some unique and useful opinions about what other skills they feel students should have when they enter the real world.

SKILLS FOR SURVIVAL

"Students need survival skills, both financial and psychological," says Marc P. Smith, Executive Producer and Artistic Director of the Worcester (MA) Foothills Theatre Company. Smith feels programs should teach the aspiring actor "what the lifestyle is all about," and that students need to be "buttressed for the tough life ahead of them."

A majority of those we interviewed agree with this assessment.

New York agent Lewis Chambers of the Bethel Agency believes the most valuable schools teach students about the "business end of the business." Chambers favors those programs that teach "the actor the basic things needed to succeed, like what a good resume looks like, how to pick a headshot, how to audition. also things like, 'Do you do a broad mailing to 300 agents because you're in a showcase or is it better to do a selective mailing to only a few?'"

Roger T. Danforth, Artistic Director of the Drama League's Director's Project in New York City and form artistic director of the Cleveland Playhouse, says students need to be taught about the "read world" of landing work. "They need to come out of school with the very different and special skills needed to succeed in an audition." To Danforth, these skills include advance study of the play and the director, as well as looking and dressing appropriately for the play and the role.

Acting grads also need to know -- and be able to get ongoing career advice from -- successful alumni already working in the field. Helping with networking -- creating those relationships with the alumni -- should be an integral function of acting programs.

That's what we heard from several professionals, including Broadway and regional theatre director Michael Montel. Montel says he likes to see "some sort of system in place so the grads know where to go and who to talk to." Montel also says actors should know what to do between jobs: "How do I support myself when I'm not working? Should I wait tables? Sell books? Do carpentry? Should I take more acting lessons? Dance Classes? Find a voice teacher?"

In her DIRECTORY OF THEATRE TRAINING PROGRAMS, editor Jill Charles has compiled a comprehensive listing of some 420 programs, most of them in colleges and universities. Along with supplying data -- such as faculty, facilities, and courses offered -- the directory also lists each school's "statement of philosophy." An analysis of these statements turns up a variety of educational objectives: "creativity," "student's individual growth," "command of craft," "the depth of human understanding," "cultural enrichment," as well as many other laudable program objectives. [Theatre Directories, P.O. Box 519, Sordet, Vermont 05251; 802/86 7-2223.]

In her preface, Charles also advises the student shopping for an actor training program to "look for evidence that you will be taught about the business of theatre during your time in college, and also that you will be well served by some sort of alumni network on leaving." Columbia University's Hammerstein Center for

Theatre Studies, for example, "accepts the responsibility for its graduates in locating a position." In general, the conservatory-based programs -- as opposed to the broader, more liberal arts approach -- tend to emphasize professional objectives and career orientation somewhat more.

The University/Resident Theatre Association, a consortium of 31 Master of Fine Arts training programs, encourages its members to be "professionally, practice-oriented," according to Executive Director Scott L. Steele.

U/RTA's guidelines require a university applying for membership to offer, in addition to traditional acting classes, courses in "career entry" and counseling aimed at "aiding graduates to enter the profession."

Steele, however, raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of career counseling in any actor training program. "At school many students are totally focused on the next role," he says, "and frankly [they] just don't pay attention to courses and seminars about the near future, the different kinds of auditions or interviews they'll face, and the process of developing their careers once out of school. Even graduates have admitted that while at school, they can be very shortsighted about these matters."

In general, however, our experts seem to agree students with professional aspirations considering training problems should look beyond the coursed in acting, voice, and movement and see exactly what kinds of instruction the institution offers in auditioning, career counseling, and other survival skills that will be needed after graduation. Their prospective employers will expect it.

A KNOWLEDGE OF STYLE

Several industry insiders also wanted to see program graduates with a strongly developed sense of theatrical styles.

Young actors should be able to work in "different kinds of style," said Worcester's Smith. "A knowledge of style, and especially high style, can translate into an ability to capture the physical and vocal essence of a character. Being able to handle the high style of Noel Coward can translate into a facility for doing a 30-second commercial. Too many actors are only being trained in the naturalistic, Actors' Studio style of acting.

Melia Bensussen, who recently directed at Primary Stages in New York, agrees that "most graduates think naturalism is the only way to act. They need to have a knowledge of style and how style works," she continues. "They need to understand there are heightened forms of acting that can be just as truthful as naturalism."

Danforth of the Drama League says actors need to "understand that style is imply an agreed-upon code of manners and behavior for a class of people. John Gielgud defined style as simply knowing what kind of a play you're in. This is not just a problem for such heavy-style plays as the Restoration, but also for Wilde, Shaw, even 20th-century playwrights like Philip Barry [THE PHILADELPHIA STORY] and Kaufman and Hart [YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU]. It's a foreign world to many contemporary actors."

LITERACY CAN BE KEY

Acting grads coming out of training programs should be literate and well-versed in literature, say several professionals.

Director Bensussen says that by using references to characters in dramatic or prose literature she has been able to help an actor get a more specific handle on characterization. If the actor has little knowledge of literature, however, the technique won't work. Bensussen says this recently happened during a rehearsal of BALTIMORE WALTZ: "I was trying to help an actor get through a tough moment by using allusions from some well-known classical texts. But the actor just couldn't relate."

Director Michael Montel says student actors need to "appreciate the power of words." He would like to see students read more and develop a better appreciation for words. "Many of them look at words as the enemy," he says, "and this comes from not fully dealing with the classics. The British have a history of familiarity with language that we lack."

Lewis Chambers, the New York agent, notes that graduating actors know Mamet and Shepard, but they also need to know an earlier generation of playwrights, "Lillian Hellman and Sidney Kingsley, who wrote the socially significant plays of their time."

Steven Wolf, Artistic Director of the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, recommends young actors and students "read a major metropolitan newspaper every day. Find out what's going on in society. Stay informed. The theatre is a social art. Too many students get insulated. Actors need to stay literate and sharp. I like to work with that kind of actor."

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

The producers and directors we interviewed also had some additional comments about the ways training programs can help prepare students for a fruitful career.

Danforth says young actors need to have strong vocal ability. "They have little idea of how to use the voice effectively. It is particularly hard to find an actor who has any idea of how to handle a classical text."

"Students need to learn how to get the story out to the audience, both physically and vocally," comments Woolf. "They are often trained in small rooms and studios and they're not being trained to fill standard-sized theatres. They find a 700-seat theater like ours daunting to fill."

According to Smith, "Students need to have an understanding of their type. If you played King Lear in college, don't assume you'll play Lear in a professional production."

"I want to see people dedicated to the theatre as a craft and a career and not just as a stepping stone to film and television," says Bensussen. "I'd like to see more of a commitment to the theatre as a long-term profession and not just as a means to fame and fortune."

Finally, Woolf would like to see more young actors with "passion. too many graduates don't really understand theatre is about making a deeply involved emotional commitment -- that's the core of why we work in the theatre and why audiences attend it."