

Choices



Step one:

sorting out the differences among undergraduate theatre programs



If 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 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 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.