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ACTOR TRAINING IN NEW YORK CITY

Peter Zazzali

Today there are more than one hundred and fifty universities in the U.S. offering either a BFA or an MFA in acting. Nearly all of them are trying to prepare students for work onstage or in film and television. In addition to these programs, there are literally hundreds of undergraduate theatre programs that offer a BA concentration in acting, as well as countless acting studios, academies, and teachers operating privately, all of which add to a growing list of people and institutions that comprise American actor training. In short, the training of U.S. actors is an industry unto itself, a point demonstrated by the ubiquity of advertisements lining the pages of *American Theatre* any given month. Does this country really need several hundred acting schools? Can the profession even remotely provide employment for the thousands of young men and women who graduate from these programs each year? What is the overarching purpose of training U.S. actors, and who is ultimately being served by it?

Because of the sheer scope of the topic, my focus is limited to acting programs at colleges and universities in New York City and its surrounding area. This sampling of the academic structure, curriculum, faculty, and pedagogy of a handful of programs can serve as a general representation of U.S. actor training at the level of higher education. Limitations of space preclude mentioning the numerous acting studios, academies, and private instruction currently offered in New York City. Nonetheless, the reader should be reminded that there are hundreds of businesses and individuals marketing themselves as actor trainers in New York City today, a fact made obvious by a simple Google search of the subject.

Prior to the 1960s, acting instruction at the level of higher education was primarily under the auspices of English and speech departments, whereas privately operated academies and acting schools largely prepared people for the profession. Beginning with the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1884, most of these pre-professional schools were located in New York City. In the middle 1950s, there were roughly fifteen to twenty such schools that ranged from the American Academy to offshoots of the Group Theatre's approach to acting, namely the Stella Adler Conservatory, Neighborhood Playhouse, and Actors Studio. During the 1960s, and in conjunction

with the emergence of the regional theatre movement, U.S. universities started to form conservatories that offered BFA and MFA degrees in preparation for a career in the professional theatre. The reason for this development was, in large part, because private acting schools were not graduating people with the technical skills needed to meet the demands of repertory theatre, whose seasons consisted of a balance of classical European and modern American dramas that ranged from Wilde to Williams.

The lackluster training at these schools was documented by a 1956 Rockefeller Foundation study, in which NYC institutions such as the American Academy were labeled “factories” operating as “commercial enterprises,” whose training paled by comparison to the models being offered in Europe at the time.¹ Thus, universities began to form acting programs that were solely designed to prepare people for America’s repertory theatres, a movement marked by a proliferation of drama departments nationwide, and a corresponding debate regarding the role of theatre training in higher education.

By 1960, there were more than three hundred undergraduate and approximately 175 graduate programs in theatre at U.S. universities, the majority of which were dedicated to training actors. In New York City today there are nearly twenty colleges and universities offering undergraduate and/or graduate degrees in theatre. With respect to the former, many of these are BFA programs intended to serve as preparation for a professional acting career. Six such programs were surveyed for this article, four of which are located in New York City (Juilliard, NYU undergraduate drama, Marymount College, and Pace University), and two from the surrounding area (The University of the Arts in Philadelphia and New Jersey’s Montclair State University). Although each school has its own pedagogical framework, numerous similarities are apparent, especially insofar as all the programs are comprised of a combination of core faculty and adjuncts ostensibly training students for stage careers, despite the sober truth that—except in very rare instances—no one in today’s day and age can make a living as a theatre actor.

These six schools collectively graduate about five hundred students every spring into a professional environment where the median annual salary for members of Actors Equity is below \$7,500, thereby raising questions about the practical and educational rationale of these programs. Nonetheless, they appear to be making a concerted effort to provide their students with employment opportunities. In the examples of Marymount and NYU, professional internships are available to juniors and seniors. The other four all sponsor a graduating showcase for industry personnel at varying levels of success, which is to acknowledge that the attendance of casting directors and agents at Juilliard’s showcase, far outnumbers those present at Pace University’s offering. This fact underscores the hierarchical nature of U.S. actor training, with schools like Juilliard and Yale at the top of the industry’s food chain.

If Juilliard has the best reputation among the BFA programs surveyed for this article, it would seem well-deserved. Founded in 1968 under the joint leadership of John Houseman and Michel Saint-Denis, the Juilliard Drama Division has historically

been recognized as one of America's premiere actor training programs, with accomplished graduates ranging from film stars such as William Hurt and Kevin Kline to stage stalwarts as Patti LuPone and Boyd Gaines. It is highly selective in admitting approximately twenty students each year from over one thousand auditions, and its faculty consists of some of the most renowned specialists in the field, the majority of whom are employed at the school full time.

The latter criterion is significant in comparison to the other undergraduate programs in this study, insofar as their faculties consist largely of adjunct instructors and part-timers. Less than a third of Marymount's faculty is full time; about half of Montclair's as well as the University of the Arts (UArts); Pace appears to have only a single full-time person on the BFA faculty, with no less than seven adjuncts otherwise listed as acting teachers alone. One of the problems with having so many adjuncts is that it compromises a program's pedagogical continuity and consistency. Judging from the biographies of Pace's faculty listed online, one could readily question the pedagogical responsibility of its BFA program, insofar as their divergent backgrounds extend from director/choreographers and Shakespeare specialists, to teachers of the Method and a cameraman. While there are perhaps some benefits to having a plurality of approaches to acting instruction, the most effective training has proven to have a foundation to it, in pursuit of clear and identifiable learning outcomes. Furthermore, the coursework should bear a complementary relationship within the context of a shared pedagogy. Indeed, much of Saint-Denis's curriculum for Juilliard remains intact today and has been the blueprint for a great many conservatory-styled acting programs since the 1970s.

In the case of NYU's undergraduate drama program, its fifteen hundred students are placed in privately run NYC acting schools, such as the Stella Adler Conservatory and Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute. While one can assume that there is a pedagogical consistency to each studio, the sheer number of acting majors makes it impossible for the department to cater to the individual needs and development of its students. By 2009, in fact, NYU had jettisoned the positions of "Artistic Director" and "Coordinator of Professional Training," both of whom functioned as liaisons between the department and the studios. Furthermore, when considering NYU's tuition is in excess of \$45,000 a year, and that to enroll independently at one of the aforementioned studios would be a fraction of the cost, the undergraduate drama program appears to be guilty of price gauging.

Of course the NYU student is working towards a degree, however, whereas someone attending a private acting school will be awarded a mere diploma upon graduation. In addition to the studio work, NYU actors take a balance of liberal arts courses taught both in-house with the Drama Department and at the university at large. A similar situation exists for the other schools surveyed for this article, with about a third of the course load for Juilliard and Montclair students committed to liberal studies, whereas Pace and Marymount evenly split their core curriculum and academic offerings, and UArts students enroll for fifty liberal arts credits out of the 124 needed to graduate.

The importance of a liberal arts curriculum to an actor's training cannot be underestimated, most especially at the undergraduate level. We are, after all, developing artists who presumably will make some sort of creative contribution to society. A vibrant intellectual and interdisciplinary education therefore is crucial to achieving learning outcomes that will enable students to compete and succeed both within and outside the acting profession, a point not lost on the theatre scholar/practitioner, Lissa Tyler Renaud, whose article "Training Artists or Consumers?" poses a challenge to develop American actors first and foremost as artists who possess an intellectual curiosity, as facilitated by an interdisciplinary course of study:

Our challenge now is to train a generation of actors who do not know what an artist is. That is, we are asking young people to specialize in one art form when they do not have a general understanding of the arts, or the larger role they play in society. They do not have a coherent sense of the actual work of an artist in any discipline.²

Perhaps specialization in the art of acting should be exclusively reserved for graduate study. Even so, there are far more MFA acting programs in the U.S. today than the market can withstand, many of which are located in the New York City area. For the sake of this study, I have surveyed seven such programs: Yale School of Drama; NYU Graduate Acting Program; the University of Delaware's Professional Theatre Training Program; and the respective offerings at the New School, Brooklyn College, Pace University, and Columbia University. Like the BFA examples already covered in this article, many of these programs rely on more adjuncts than full-time personnel to teach classes. In the cases of Brooklyn College and the New School, there appears to be only one full-timer, who likewise serves as the program head in both instances, whereas no less than fifteen adjuncts teach a range of courses from Stanislavsky-based acting to Fitzmaurice voice work. In the case of Brooklyn's MFA program, a pair of adjuncts is also listed on the faculty rosters at two other schools included in this survey, thereby reinforcing my earlier claim that relying on guests to define the pedagogy of an acting program is a dicey enterprise.

Columbia and NYU have a more foundational core faculty consisting of proven professionals, such as Kristen Linklater, Richard Feldman, and Mark Wing-Davey. Yale and Delaware likewise have a full-time faculty of established personnel who have been at the forefront of U.S. actor training for decades. Pace University's MFA acting program is outsourced to the Actors Studio, and therein relies entirely on its faculty and methodology. In every instance, the schools surveyed for this report cater to a small enrollment that ranges from ten (Brooklyn) to twenty (Pace) towards three academic years of training, with the exception of Brooklyn, which is a four semester endeavor. Delaware has the unique arrangement of taking a class once every four years, so in effect there is only a single group being trained at one time. The pedagogical approach of these programs consists of a balance of acting, voice/speech, and movement courses, with opportunities for production experience. A Stanislavsky-based approach is widely practiced, with Pace obviously being the

most “Method-oriented,” given its alliance with the Actors Studio, and Delaware and Columbia more focused on a Continental model that is grounded in physical and vocal technique.

In all cases, the curriculum is squarely designed to train actors for professional careers, without any attention paid to liberal arts courses, thereby contextualizing each as a vocational school of sorts. Delaware and Yale have professional theatres on site as an important part of their training regimen, Columbia has an active affiliation with New York’s Classic Stage Company, and the others have no apparent connection with an established troupe. Tuition and ancillary expenses would appear to be most burdensome to Yale, Columbia, Pace, NYU, and the New School students, where the cost of a private university and limited scholarship availability could easily make for a challenging financial situation. As a public school, Brooklyn is more reasonably priced, and Delaware provides fully funded packages to its student actors.

This cross section of MFA acting programs is a mere fraction of the myriad choices available nationwide. To quote the well-known acting teacher, William Esper, the U.S. has a “bewildering array of conservatory and university-based MFA programs,” and thus, “America must have more per capita than any other nation in the world.”³ The question therefore remains, should U.S. higher education be in the business of training professional actors? At the outset of the proliferation of university-sponsored acting conservatories in the 1960s, W. McNeil Lowry warned against the “uneasy alliance” between academia and the creative arts in declaring that “the university [had] largely taken over the functions of professional [theatre] training.”⁴ Lowry was prescient in calling this development “irreversible,” as today there are more than five hundred degree-granting theatre programs in the U.S., and again, that does not account for the additional private acting studios and individual teachers peddling their wares.

Perhaps the best role for theatre education—and by extension the training of actors—at U.S. universities can be developed at the undergraduate level by focusing not on the conservatory-styled BFA, but on its likeness, the more academically rounded BA degree. Most BFA programs accept people coming out of high school, without any previous instruction at the college level. Moreover, nearly all these students, quite frankly, do not have the life experience to begin effectively exploring the craft of acting; much less can they put their artistry in the greater context of society.

A number of schools in the New York City area offer BAs with this goal in mind, several of which have been surveyed for this article: Fordham University, Fairleigh Dickinson University, and a pair of colleges operating under the umbrella of the City University of New York (CUNY). Fordham offers a BA in performance that provides a range of classes in acting, movement, and voice as part of a program that is “committed to teaching the whole person and fostering rigorous intellectual, creative, and socially engaged artists.” Like the many BFA programs mentioned earlier, it too is guilty of relying on a corps of adjunct instructors to teach most of its performance courses. However, because Fordham is dedicated to a liberal arts curriculum, the bulk of the student actor’s 124 credits needed to graduate come from classes taught by full-time

professors across a wide range of departments and disciplinary backgrounds. Thus, coursework in history, theology, and the social sciences complement the performance curriculum. Also, many of the theatre requirements are scholarly classes designed to develop the student actor's knowledge of theatre history and its role in society, as suggested by offerings such as "Theatre as Social Change" and "Theatre and Justice in Latin America."⁵

The Fordham actor will presumably graduate with a well-rounded education balancing liberal studies with a baseline of performance training. Students therefore are afforded more options than their BFA counterparts when it comes to furthering professional and artistic life, one of which might very well be to attend graduate school. The latter is indeed the goal of Fairleigh Dickinson University's BA Theatre Program, as noted by its director, Stephen Hollis, who states: "After leaving us, we strongly encourage students to pursue their training at either a conservatory or in graduate school." Like Fordham, Fairleigh Dickinson balances a multi-disciplinary range of courses in conjunction with the student's chosen area of concentration, such as acting. In addition, the department provides students with the opportunity to study abroad at its campus in England "located just outside Stratford-on-Avon," the very birthplace of Shakespeare and "home of the Royal Shakespeare Company."⁶ This sort of experience, again, would seem to provide aspiring actors with a balanced undergraduate education, from which to jointly foster their intellectual and artistic acumen.

Fordham and Fairleigh Dickinson are private institutions with costly tuition expenses, and therefore may not be affordable for some students. A more reasonably priced set of options, however, exists in the CUNY system, which has seven colleges offering undergraduate degrees in theatre, two that have been surveyed for this report. CUNY's Hunter College and City College (CCNY) each enroll over 150 majors as part of a liberal arts curriculum that requires nearly two thirds of the course load to come from outside the theatre department. The two colleges have a core faculty of professionals and/or scholars who teach the lion's share of upper level courses, with a goodly amount of adjuncts covering the rest of the curriculum; in both cases, the latter outnumber the full-time faculty. They offer several opportunities to audition and perform in departmental productions each year, a trait that is likewise practiced at Fordham and Fairleigh Dickinson. CCNY has a specific track for educational theatre, and Hunter's website emphasizes that "some of [its] students continue their creative study in conservatory or MFA programs." At an annual tuition rate of less than \$6000, it would appear that the CUNY schools offer a bargain to the aspiring actor looking to ground his work in a balance of scholarship and artistic praxis, as identified by a well-rounded liberal arts education.

This sample of programs in New York City and the surrounding area can be seen as a representation of U.S. actor training at large, at least as it applies to colleges and universities. While each program has its own distinct features, the fact remains that in most instances these schools are preparing students for stage careers when the competition is fiercer and employment opportunities fewer than at any time in

U.S. history. The job market for acting in theatre or on-camera is at one of its lowest points ever, as indicated by Twentieth Century Fox's Vice President for Feature Casting, Nancy Foy, who laments the challenges that await aspirants leaving drama school:

There just aren't jobs for all these kids. The motion picture and television has contracted. I see so many kids coming out of these programs and I wonder how many of them are going to work. That's just a fact of life.⁷

To be sure, there are a great many highly qualified teachers and professionals who take their work seriously and are committed to providing their students the best possible chance for a successful acting career. However, there are not enough jobs to accommodate the thousands of students graduating from America's colleges, universities, and privately run academies and studios each year, all of whom are adding to an employment pool oversaturated by graduates from years past.

Perhaps we need to re-examine our definition of "success" relative to actor training and the profession. Instead of narrowly identifying a successful career with work in the field's conventional mediums, we should expand our understanding of how to employ and deploy the skills and techniques that we teach our students. Surely, someone who has learned how to speak verse or collaborate in an ensemble can transfer her talents within an ever-evolving job market that transcends how we commonly conceive professional acting. Should we not at the very least make our students more aware of the sheer number of actors—trained or otherwise—with whom they will be competing for very few jobs? We should therefore better educate them about the business of acting, a practice that seems at best tepid in most theatre programs nationwide.

Finally, there are plainly too many BFA and MFA conservatories at present. For every institution such as Yale with a reasonable track record of alumni working in film, television, and theatre, the number of programs attempting to emulate it—and doing so to little effect—is exponentially greater. Instead of following the conventional methodologies and pedagogy practiced by actor trainers across the country, a new approach founded on the principles of intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and artistic practice, within a learning context that redefines what it means to be successful, could be a start to creating a more responsible model. For example, actors coming out of Juilliard at present are not just prepared for stage and on-camera work, but they are taught how to effectively balance multiple sectors of the profession, such as becoming a teaching artist, a voice over talent, or a community organizer. This point is underscored by the Drama Division's current director, Kathy Hood, who claims that while Juilliard actors are indeed given "the craft and skill to succeed professionally," they are "not beholden to the entertainment industry," and thus they follow a curriculum that "facilitates their curiosity and their openness, and develops their intellect to the fullest possible extent."⁸

Building on the Juilliard example, one suggestion would be to shift some of our attention to fostering teachers and arts organizers as a complement to a pedagogy

that has traditionally trained people for stage and film performance. A more entrepreneurial approach to U.S. actor training is therefore needed. Through the prism of a well-rounded education that somehow balances theory and praxis, students should be taught to see their training and artistry in the context of society, and how they can serve it through a multifaceted career. The ultimate goal should not necessarily be to land an agent from a graduation showcase, but to figure out how one's training can be deployed as a professional service to others, thereby making a positive difference in the world and resulting in gainful employment. Only then can we begin to justify our positions as actor trainers in the face of a professional landscape that is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate.

NOTES

1. Robert Chapman, "An Unofficial Report on the Organization and Methods of Some Drama Schools in the United States, Great Britain, and France" (unpublished report, October, 1956), Juilliard School Archives, Office of the President, General Administrative Records, 1933–1985: Drama Division, box 33, folder 3.

2. Lissa Tyler Renaud, "Training Artists or Consumers?: Commentary on American Actor Training," in Ellen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renaud, ed., *The Politics of American Actor Training* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 86.

3. William Esper, "A Final Thought: To MFA or Not to MFA? That is the Question," *Backstage* (November 12–18, 1993).

4. W. McNeil Lowry, "The University and the Creative Arts," *Educational Theatre Journal* 14, no. 2 (May 1962): 106.

5. Quoted in Fordham University's website at <http://69.7.74.46/section12/section82/program19.html> (accessed July 29, 2012).

6. Stephen Hollis, interview with author, July 28, 2012.

7. Nancy Foy, interview with author, January 24, 2012.

8. Kathy Hood, interview with author, July 19, 2011.

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