

What if BFA programs were done away with? A Whatifesto by Dan Schultz for the 2011 TCG National Conference

What if BFA programs were done away with? Hundreds of colleges and universities offer BFA and BA performance programs that churn out thousands of young actors annually. At their best, these programs offer excellent training. At their worst, they are downright detrimental to the actor. Many of these programs operate at substantial cost to the student. Given the high rate of unemployment faced by actors, and the profession's relatively low full time pay, is it ethical encouraging young people to undertake an expensive education that will likely never be repaid with wages earned in the field?

There are simply too many undergraduate acting programs. This proliferation creates the false impression that there is enough work to be had and that college is the best place to train. Training programs are often revenue generators for institutions; therefore they often exist to serve the college, not necessarily the industry or student. Actors can leave these programs with impeccable alignment, enunciation, and the ability to break down a scene, but they may not be ready to actually collaborate in a real rehearsal process. College theatre is simply a different animal than professional theatre. Unfortunately many actors squander the early years of their careers learning to adapt to the professional world.

Most colleges are ill-equipped to produce career-ready theatre actors. The majority of colleges, even some in major markets, employ academics rather than theatre professionals. Most academics maintain currency through professional development; while this is admirable, it is a far cry from being a plugged-in professional in the real world. Indeed, most professors can't know what it takes to be an actor today as the collegiate life is necessarily different than that of the working actor. Many colleges don't have resources enough to even expose students to working professionals; this leaves graduates at a competitive disadvantage to actors who eschew a four-year degree.

This is not to say actors shouldn't attend college or that college theatre serves no purpose. Higher education exists to broaden the minds of young people, train them to think, and become better citizens of the world – more necessary now than ever. However, the traditional college environment is not the best venue for professional training.

To supplement college training, many students seek acting internships and apprenticeships. Several theatres offer terrific, mind-expanding programs — some even pay a stipend. However, most programs are devoid of systematic training. The bulk last between a month to a year, offer some class, some understudy responsibility, and perhaps a children's show or tour. Some charge tuition; other theatres require interns to work in some other capacity, like ushering or working back stage crew. While these programs can benefit the early career actor, the biggest beneficiary may be the theatres themselves that reap the fees and labor. Some of these interns could even be taking paying jobs away from those that work behind the scenes.

Solution?

Perhaps the proliferation of college training programs should be discouraged along with apprenticeships that do not actually train actors. Instead, theatres themselves should explore the creation of professional actor training programs.

Training with professionals in the real world will allow the young actor to acquire valuable contacts, business skills, and respect for professional processes. This will increase the likelihood that he or she can actually earn a living acting. Professionally prepared actors entering the marketplace will also strengthen the industry. Imagine auditions where everyone is adequately prepared, devoid of the ticks learned and reinforced at Directional State University. Imagine rehearsals where young actors have seen the process beforehand and don't have to learn on the fly.

Similar to many current MFA programs, these professional training programs could provide ready built stables of understudies and serve as a revenue generators through tuition income, like today's intern programs. But instead of ushering students out after a few months, theatres can mold these young artists over a period of years. This way the actor benefits from legitimate training, and the theatre benefits from the involvement of an experienced company member over a period of years. This can strengthen regional markets as actors trained in the regions will have a deeper sense of connection to that community. Audiences, too, are likely to feel a stronger connection to these young actors as their growth can be followed over time. Perhaps these training programs will stem the tide of young actors flowing to New York City and allow more regional theatres to cast locally. Also, actor/educators charged with molding these students can pad their pocket without separating themselves from the profession.

The study of theatre is a cultural must for any informed citizen and should not be discarded. And while the academe is vital to the preservation of theatre, it probably should not be at the forefront of training its young actors. Rather, the professional theatre should consider taking responsibility for readying the next generation of artists.