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Both Sides of the Curtain

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Both Sides of the Curtain

Learning stagecraft in a liberal arts setting has distinct advantages, say School of Theatre Arts alumni.

By Rachel Hatch

In a survey of IWU theatre arts alumni distributed and compiled by Dennis Brown specifically for the summer reunion, Sandra Tappan Tignor '68 wrote that her current job as a retail buyer for hospital gift shops in the Phoenix area relates in surprising ways to her theatre training. "It's all in the presentation," she wrote. "Gift shops are just another kind of stage. You've got to make the audience want to stay awhile, then leave feeling they've benefited in some way. I focus on the visual, and on how to clarify the theme of the merchandise as if each group is a one-act play."

The diversity of theatre arts study prepares students for many challenges, says Donna Griessmer Catlett '67, who went from professional theatre to theatre administration to becoming the assistant to the mayor of Des Plaines. "I have one word for you: improvisation," said Catlett with a laugh. "You never know what the person on the phone or walking into your office is going to say." Catlett appeared in a reunion seminar on applying theatre to the real world.

"Anyone who needs to appear advantageously before the public will benefit from theatre training," agreed Jared Brown. Public speaking is key not just to actors, but almost every profession. Marla Greenspan '83 is a certified AIDS educator who says her acting experience helps her reach a diverse audience. "When you talk to a group and you don't really know your audience, acting really comes in handy."

Even if they pursue other professions, most of IWU's theatre alumni never really abandon their passion for stagecraft. "People are constantly apologizing as though it were a betrayal that they didn't stay in professional theatre," laughed Ficca. "But I know their dedication to the theatre is still there in recreation or avocation."

That lifelong love of theatre may be the most common bond, and greatest gift, that IWU's theatre majors have received across several generations of students. It doesn't matter where students start, said Illinois Wesleyan graduate, theatre professor, and legend E. Melba Johnson



Newly retired Theatre Arts professors Jared Brown and John Ficca (above) on the McPherson stage that has been a springboard for alumni careers, onstage and off. *(Marc Featherly)*

Kirkpatrick '32, for whom the Illinois Wesleyan Lab Theatre is named. All of her students ended up with positive experiences in theatre that helped develop their lives. "We didn't have a drama school back then," Kirkpatrick recalled. "Music majors, English majors, business majors—they all were in plays and working their hearts out. I think it gave them the necessary foundation to do what they wanted to do in life."

The joy of doing what you love was a message conveyed many times during August's School of Theatre Arts reunion, and one that was not lost on current students who attended the two-day event. "The alumni offer us so much," said Sarah Jensen, a theatre arts sophomore at Illinois Wesleyan. "Just seeing how people are making it helps. I'm so glad I'm going to school here."

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James Sutorius '67 (shown above from a 1960s IWU production of Hamlet) was among the accomplished actors who attended last summer's reunion.

the theatre arts graduates who spoke to IWU Magazine at the reunion, and afterwards, agreed that getting a liberal arts degree not only prepared them for the professional world, but also acted as a guide to help find their individual paths.

“These four years are to take you on the journey to let you know if you want to do this for a living or not,” said stage and television actor James Sutorius '67. “After my four years, my passion was all that deeper. It was what I wanted to do.”

Ficca, who helped build the theatre arts school into a premier program, laments actors who will see acting only as a tool. “The best actors are the ones who are the best educated,” said Ficca, who taught at IWU for 46 years before retiring this past spring. “Our program is two-thirds acting and one-third liberal arts. If I ruled the kingdom, it would be a 50-50 split.”

A nervous hand signs a registration form and pulls on a nametag. Looking through the crowd, a glimmer of recognition shines in the eyes. An old familiar name is spoken in question, usually followed by a hug, laughter, and talking of memories, many memories.

Almost 200 Illinois Wesleyan alumni gathered to share memories and honor two beloved professors at the School of Theatre Arts Reunion held on campus this past August. Everyone on hand, from 1932 alumni to current students, came to attend seminars, performances and readings celebrating the talent of theatre arts graduates and the tireless work of retiring professors John Ficca and Jared Brown. Many of those attending—including actors, teachers, lawyers, and business owners—spoke of the benefits they received as theatre-arts majors studying in the setting of a small, liberal arts campus.

“What you got here was encouragement,” said Dennis Brown '67, a screenwriter who now teaches at Webster University in St. Louis. “If you couldn't make it with the kind of encouragement you found here, you knew in your heart you shouldn't go on [in theatre].”

The idea of “breaking into show business” usually conjures up images of struggling actors waiting tables, not attending universities. Yet

Elizabeth Auman '91 believes her liberal arts degree helped her beyond the realm of acting. "Here you are encouraged to explore your boundaries inside and outside theatre," she said. That approach has come in handy for Auman, who works behind the scenes of the theatre world as the general manager of the Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago. "Being a theatre major," she said, "I certainly wasn't trained in accounting or human resources"—skills that are demanded in her current job. But having a liberal arts background helped her adapt to those demands. "The biggest thing I learned at Illinois Wesleyan was how to work and figure out things I didn't know," she said.

Theatre arts professionals who trained at conservatories or acting schools may find work faster than IWU's theatre arts grads. But in the long run, said Nic Dimond '93, it's what makes you a better artist that counts. "Sure, conservatory will put you on the faster track," said Dimond, who was directing a production of Julius Caesar this fall for Chicago's Strawdog Theatre that featured several IWU alumni. "But getting yourself educated—there's nothing more important. Being a director, being an artist, is about having as much different information about as many different parts of life as possible."

Jared Brown—former chair of IWU's School of Theatre Arts, who also retired this past spring—concurred that the art of theatre requires more than learning technique alone. "Everyone worth his salt wants to become a theatre artist, not just a technician," said Brown. That even holds true for more technical areas like sound and lighting design. "A designer cannot meaningfully light a set without understanding the fundamental way in which people are affected by light and darkness," said Brown, "which is an essential psychological question."

That's not to say that IWU's theatre arts majors don't have an abundance of practical stage experience by the time they graduate. Taking to the stage wherever and whenever one can is what develops an actor, said William Duell '49. One of the first Illinois Wesleyan graduates to obtain a B.A. in acting, Duell has won major Broadway and motion-picture roles during his distinguished, 50-year career. "Here you get experience," said Duell, who made his first visit back to campus since his graduation to participate in the weekend's seminars. "If you just go to New York without the experience in the basic groundwork—complete with costume design, stage management and acting—it's tough," he said.

While conservatories can provide that kind of experience, their focus is different, according to Elizabeth Laidlaw '93, a successful stage actress who attended conservatory training before transferring to IWU. After a rattling audition with Jared Brown, she realized that Illinois Wesleyan concentrated less on the technique of acting than on its artistry. "I felt this was a serious place. It was an institution of scholarship and education," said Laidlaw. Playwright Sharmon Hilfinger '72 also transferred from Carnegie-Mellon's conservatory-style setting to Illinois Wesleyan for much the same reason. "At the conservatory it was all 'drama, drama, drama,' which was great fun, but a really narrow focus. Here it was much more nourishing, a really beautiful education."

That doesn't mean that IWU theatre professors are "softer" on their students than their conservatory counterparts. Constructive, and sometimes brutally honest, faculty criticism played a major part in many graduates' decision to stay in the theatre. "You knew if you could make it

by the end of your time here, because no one coddled you,” said Dennis Brown. “If they saw something, they told you. They encouraged you. If they didn’t see something, they also encouraged you to do something else.” After realizing her talents may not lie in acting, Julie Anne Halterman Nelson ’83 came to Ficca. “He said to me, ‘You may not be a star, but there are other things you can do.’ He let me know it was my passion for the theatre arts that was important.” She went on to work as a stage manager in Chicago and then to teach theatre arts in two Chicago area schools.

With that kind of honest guidance, not every theatre arts major turns to acting after graduation. Some work behind the scenes in theatres or teach drama. Others leave the footlights behind entirely and enter the “real world.” Yet even those whose careers strayed from the stage believe the liberal arts and theatre education they received at Illinois Wesleyan has given them a creative advantage. Dave Weiman ’58 intended to have a career in theatre, but instead fell in love with computers in 1960. Now retired from his job as an international consultant, Weiman believes his theatre-arts major gave him confidence in his later pursuits. “It gave me a structure and a broader view of life and reality. When everyone else was falling apart, I knew things were going to get better,” he said. “It’s just like a play.”



The 2002 School of Theatre Arts Reunion was commemorated in a group photo (above) of all who attended. The moment was captured at the back outdoor stage of McPherson, the home of IWU theatre since 1963.