

<https://www.northwestern.edu/magazine/northwestern/summer2000/summer00coverstory.htm>

Taking Center Stage

The talented, well-trained students from Northwestern's Music Theatre Program are becoming the talk of Broadway.

by Kevin Johnson

Like overheated hollandaise sauce, Broadway musicals are separating into distinct layers. and performers are wondering what's going to be the next big thing. "There are lots of odds and ends happening, but there's no predominant movement going on," says Gregg Edelman (S80), currently playing Inspector Javert in the long-running production of *Les Misérables* at New York City's Imperial Theater.

Yet an increasing number of Northwestern-trained performers, many of them graduates of the 9-year-old Music Theatre Program, are jumping into this changing, uncertain landscape, intent on making their mark on whatever floats to the top after the current shakeout. On the way out, according to the New York Times (a 500-pound gorilla that can usually make or break a show with its reviews), are big, theme-park musicals, like *Miss Saigon*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Footloose* and the recently closed *Cats*, not to mention *Starlight Express*, which featured singing performers on roller skates.

Then there are the traditional productions and revivals, like *Kiss Me, Kate*; *Jekyll & Hyde*; *The Lion King*; *Les*

Misérables; and perennial favorite The Music Man, all of which are doing respectably at the box office.

And, although they have sometimes struggled to stay on New York stages, the newer works of the last few years — including James Joyce's The Dead, Parade and Floyd Collins — cannot be denied their place in the lineup.

(To add even another layer, there are the stage presentations of song and dance anthologies, like Fosse, Smokey Joe's Cafe and Swing.)

Is the Broadway musical starting to fall victim to a sort of singing and dancing entropy? Tony Award-winning director Frank Galati (S65, GS67, 71) says no. If the future seems uncertain at the moment, it's because "people who create works of art come and go and pass through different periods of taste that have to do with the Zeitgeist. It's just what's in the air and what's in the atmosphere," says the adjunct professor in the School of Speech.

Brian D'Arcy James (S90), starring in a musical version of the 1928 book-length narrative poem, The Wild

Party (perhaps the only poem ever to have been the basis for two New York musicals simultaneously), puts it another way: "The fact is that it's a really, really exciting time to be doing music theater, because people are redefining things. We're trying to find the next wave right now. But we won't know what's happened until we can use hindsight to define it. ...Whatever combination of new and old is going on, it's happening right now, and that's exciting."

If it is exciting, many performers who studied at Northwestern say it's because the Music Theatre Program has prepared them for it. "We have an incredible track record of kids who have graduated and immediately gone on to good shows," says associate professor Dominic

Missimi, the program's founder.

He points to former Miss America Kate Shindle (S99), an understudy in the Broadway musical *Jekyll & Hyde*; Russell Arden Koplin (S99), who understudied in James Joyce's *The Dead* before it recently closed; and Kate Baldwin (S97), an understudy in a new version of *Finian's Rainbow*, which is slated for a Broadway opening this fall. And in lead roles on the Great White Way, there's Heather Headley, playing the eponymous female lead in Tim Rice and Elton John's popularization of the opera *Aida*; Craig Bierko (S86) in the role of "professor" Harold Hill (made famous by Robert Preston) in *The Music Man*; and Kim Varhola (S98) in *Rent*.

"It's amazing to think that there are something like 17 people from Northwestern currently on Broadway. You used to be glad to think you knew one person in a Broadway show," Missimi says.

That's not to mention those in national touring companies. "At one time, we had seven Northwestern alumni in the national tour of *Showboat*," Missimi says. "We had four or five in the *Les Miz* tour." Naturally, if a University graduate is successful (the extra-talented Headley hasn't even graduated yet, though she intends to get her degree eventually), it doesn't mean others get a free pass to Broadway. Each has to prove his or her worth. The thing is, Northwestern graduates seem to be increasingly able to do that.

Of course, at Northwestern, there's a long history of shows going on. Back in 1940, the male swim club decided to put on a performance in the Patten Gymnasium pool. Thus was born the Dolphin Show, which began presenting full-fledged Broadway musicals on "land" in 1970. And the

famous Waa-Mu — named for the Women's Athletic Association and the Men's Union — celebrates its 70th anniversary in 2001.

But it was the introduction of the Music Theatre Program that has really helped students ramp up for the professional stage. That program created a much-needed bridge between two entities, the Department of Theatre in the School of Speech and the School of Music, according to Missimi. In the 1980s, shortly after he arrived at the University to teach acting and directing, Missimi became aware that Northwestern "was very lacking in how we were preparing these kids for a career in professional theater. As talented as they were, they didn't really know how to present themselves in auditions. They couldn't really read music. They didn't dance well enough. They needed more voice teachers.

"If you were an actor in the School of Speech, tough luck: You didn't have a voice teacher." It worked the other way, too: If you were a music student, you didn't have an acting teacher because it wasn't provided for in the curriculum.

"So," Missimi says, "part of my desire was to better prepare our students, who were incredibly talented but rough around the edges. I wanted to give them the professional techniques they needed to make it on Broadway. I'd tell them, 'Your voice is nice, but you need a voice teacher to give it more power, more finesse. And your movement: You've only had one dance class. That's not enough to try to go out and get into an ensemble to get your Equity card.'"

Result: Missimi developed a program — jointly administered by theater and music, each providing 15 new students a year — that produces more completely trained

performers.

"So now," Missimi explains, if you're an acting student who also goes for a music theater certificate, "you've got great acting classes, and on top of it, you get a private voice teacher, you take dance. You take courses in musical theater technique with me, where we actually explore all the different styles in music theater, and students get up and do them, and I give pointers on how to make it better. You study the history of lyric theater. And you learn to play the piano. You have to be able to play the piano so you can plunk out your parts if you get a role and somebody says, 'Your callback is tomorrow, so learn this music.'

"We give them the basic rudiments of what you need to make that transition to the professional theater."

The program, which offers students a certificate but not a degree, is one that choreographer Mark Hoebee (S82) wishes had been in place when he was a student.

"When I was at Northwestern," he recalls, "you honed your talent in one area. If you were a dancer, you studied dance, even though there wasn't a dance major. Or you studied acting if you were an actor. Or, if you were a singer, you studied voice. But the three didn't cross, so you weren't a triple threat.

"Now, students have the best of both worlds — conservatory and liberal arts college. You get a broad base of knowledge because you're not just studying your chosen field, but you also get a concentrated dose of what it takes to make it in musical theater. In fact, I think this has attracted more talented people."

That's true, says music senior Mark Ledbetter of Boca Raton, Fla., but it's more than that. Ledbetter considered several schools that offered music theater degree

programs, but settled on Northwestern after watching a Waa-Mu rehearsal in 1996. "At other schools," he recalls, "there were one or two people who were good, but here everyone in the show was extremely talented. And the energy was amazing."

His time at Northwestern has confirmed his initial observation and shown him something else, too: The University "really trains you to be the leading man or woman you have the quality to be," he says. "It's not like everybody comes out looking like the same chorus boy. I feel like Northwestern has given me everything I need to go out into the professional world and hold my own."

The blending of the two programs also sparked a proliferation of theater events, both school- and student-sponsored. "The number of productions has probably doubled and tripled since I was there," says Hoebee. Indeed, from Waa-Mu, the Dolphin Show and a handful of other productions, the number of campus theatrical events is currently around 80 a year, of which about a dozen are musicals.

"The tremendous number of productions," Shindle says, "pretty much ensures that just about anyone who wants to do theater can do theater in one way or another."

Significantly, the productions are open to any student, unlike the norm at other performance-oriented schools that give priority to graduate students. "It's funny," Shindle says, "because you'd think that a school taking that approach would be overrun with people who are semicommitted to acting. But, honestly, it doesn't work that way."

The large number of productions also ensures that students are exposed to a wide variety of styles and story

lines. This has proven to be especially helpful to alumni who are working in the current theatrical climate in New York, where subject matter for a musical can range from the goings-on at a Christmas party thrown by three elderly sisters (James Joyce's *The Dead*) to gangsters who complicate a production of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (*Kiss Me, Kate*) to the importance of bodily waste fluids as a commodity (*Urinetown!*).

But Northwestern students are accustomed to turning unlikely subjects into entertainment. Choreographer Hoebee remembers doing an original song called "One Hundred Animals," a sports ditty, two years in a row at Waa-Mu. "It said that our football players were really smart and just too nice to win a game," Hoebee explains, "so we needed 100 animals, like gorillas and apes, to come out and mow down the other teams."

(Memory of the song triggers another recollection of the days before the 1996 Rose Bowl Wildcat team. Younger alumni and students "probably can't relate to this," he says, "but one of the big cheers that we used to scream was 'Our SATs are higher.'")

But if making a losing football team entertaining was a good exercise, the inventiveness Northwestern students injected into at least one marketing campaign on campus for a musical would make Madison Avenue types envious. A few years back, when Randy Meyer (S97) produced *City of Angels*, a noir romantic musical set in the 1930s, "a lot of people hadn't heard of it," he says. "So we decided that smoke would be our symbol of the show. A smoking gun formed the title on the posters. We put matchbooks all over campus with a drawing of the detective in the show on the cover. And, to get all the frat boys in, one of our

posters was a photograph of a girl on a bed." (There was no smoke in that case.)

The plays for the musical nobody had heard of worked: The show went on to make a profit of about \$10,000, recalls Meyer, who is currently company manager for *Beauty and the Beast* in New York.

Such experiences help validate the worth of inventiveness and spontaneity for University students who intend to wind up on Broadway. "Those are the skills that I use today in my job," Meyer says. "Sometimes, you can't learn what you need in books or a lecture. You have to throw yourself into it to do it."

But that hardly means books and lectures don't play an essential role, too, in the education of a music theater student. In fact, they enhance it.

"You're allowed to explore many avenues and become a multifaceted person," says junior Willis White of Blue Springs, Mo., who is majoring in political science and vocal performance. Roughly two-thirds of the courses music theater students take are in the liberal arts.

On this topic, Shindle knows whereof she speaks: "I believe the academic approach that Northwestern takes — I actually think I heard [theater chair] Bud Beyer say this — is that teachers figure if you have the academic ability to be at the University, then they can help you to become an actor, because they know you have the equipment.

"I think an academic approach to anything complements the artistic approach," she says. "It adds to it, enhances it and makes it a lot less one-dimensional." Shindle regularly draws on her sociology coursework to help her understand characters that she is playing.

She recalls one character — "very complicated" and not

very likable — she played in a staged reading of the movie *Urban Cowboy*. "She had the potential to be a one-dimensional, home-wrecking shrew," Shindle says.

"I was worried that by the time she got to sing her big second-act ballad, the audience would be just waiting for the main characters to come back on and live happily ever after. So I was led to really look deeply into what I thought this woman's background was." That research helped her give the character some likable aspects.

Paradoxically, the other main benefit to the University's academic emphasis lies in the fact that, unlike schools that are more strictly focused on performance, Northwestern offers no academic credit for acting in musicals and plays. Why is that a benefit? It weeds out those who aren't so bent on being performers from those willing to try out for theater roles despite the considerable time and work they require beyond the already substantial course load.

"The toughest thing about choosing a life in theater," explains Hoebee, "is that first of all, you're always searching for a job. No matter how old you are, you're always unemployed, so perseverance is the key."

"I've thought a lot about why so many good people come out of Northwestern," adds stage manager Meyer. "I think one element of it is that you develop a strong work ethic."

"It takes constant reevaluation," Shindle says. "It's pretty much all on you to make the decision as to whether or not you want to continue with this, and, for a lot of people, every time a decision like that is made, it strengthens their resolve to be part of the program. And if people don't want to do that, they just take themselves out. It works."

Those who know her say Shindle is a good example of this self-selection process. Her voice teacher, lecturer Kurt

Hansen, worked extensively with her on the song she chose ("Don't Rain on My Parade," from *Funny Girl*) for the talent segment of her Miss America competition. Hansen has worked with a number of contestants in state beauty pageants — "I've done all the 'I' states except for Idaho," he jokes. But Shindle was different. "While the others were women who knew exactly what they wanted to get out of the pageant — they had their heads screwed on real straight — they had other majors, like journalism, special education or the like, and they sang on the side," Hansen says.

"Kate was a theatrical person. This is the thing she wanted to do. So, while candidates in the past were often willing to work on the music and get better, at a certain point, you could tell that the repetition was getting to them.

"But Kate really... understood what it meant to repeat the same material over and over until it was so good that someone could nudge her at 3 a.m., and she could come up doing this piece cold and just knock everybody's socks off."

That's the way Shindle is, Hoebee says. "Somebody else might have said, 'Let's do a publicity stunt where I'm working as a waitress [see sidebar].' But she was thinking, 'No, I've got to earn a living, and this is the job that's available right now.' And all the while, she was also pounding the pavement like everybody else, waiting for her talent to speak for her."

So, will the combination of theatrical training, academic instruction and persistent determination that so many Northwestern-graduated performers are steeped in continue to pay off, even in the changing environment of the New York theatrical scene? Missimi, naturally, thinks

the answer is yes. "I think we're still at the wonderful cumulative stage where more and more people from the University seem to be getting roles," he says. "People are saying, 'I know Brian James is from Northwestern. Is Heather Headley also from Northwestern? Oh, and this Craig Bierko, is he from Northwestern? Is everybody from Northwestern?'"

The three names cover a lot of musical territory: James' *The Wild Party* is an untraditional musical. Headley's *Aida* is a rock-oriented version of Verdi's opera. And Bierko's *The Music Man* is as traditional as they come.

Northwestern alumni can handle them all. A New York agent confided last year to Missimi that, of several hundred students who had auditioned for his agency, he had only offered to represent 12. "And four of the 12 were from Northwestern's Music Theatre Program," Missimi says. "That was very nice to hear."

Kate Baldwin is familiar with such reactions. Last year, she was invited to audition for one of the shows in New York's well-received "Encore" series, which presents neglected musicals in a semi-staged format, with minimal costumes and scenery. The emphasis is on the music.

Baldwin was auditioning for *Babes in Arms*, the musical that gave the world "My Funny Valentine," among other well-known numbers. "I sang two songs for him, and he asked me to sing the second song in a different key, just to heat it up a little bit.

"Afterwards, he said, 'Wow! You mixed that really well. I guess all you Northwestern kids are just amazing that way. You can really handle it.'" Indeed. ([NU musical theater](#))

Kevin Johnson is the Chicago correspondent for the *Life*

section of USA Today. He is also Webmaster of the Spizzerinctum Page, an obscure-word Web site. [Editor's note: This article mentions just a few of the hundreds of alumni who have gone on to careers in musical theater.]