



A GLIMPSE INTO THE  
THEATRE PROGRAM.  
BY JENNA MILLER

# Behind



THE



# Curtain



My parents used to take me to plays when I was young. I remember sitting in my seat and wondering about the actors' real names and personal lives, knowing them only through the characters they portrayed. It never occurred to me, though, that I was watching honest personal expression; I was seeing the actors communicate to the audience the emotions and the appreciation they had gained by being their characters throughout the course of the production.

Theater isn't just about drama and entertainment—it's about forging connections with other people and learning about life, even for the audience. And the people of the Iowa State University Performing Arts Department thrive on that.

"Theater allows not only the actors,

but the audience [as well] to travel to a new world and experience something new, even if it's just for a short time, said Matt Meldrem, freshman in performing arts with an emphasis in acting and directing. "It opens up perspectives that a majority of people don't see."

Meldrem, who is from Grinnell, Iowa, said he loves to act because it allows him to become someone else.

"The greatest part about it is that you can come back to yourself, that it's just pretend," he said. "It's more than just memorizing lines."

Jane Cox, professor of performing arts, thinks the actors' enthusiasm is contagious and is what makes a production come to life for the audience.



INTERESTED IN ACTING, DIRECTING, DANCE OR THEATER DESIGN? JANE COX GAVE SOME TIPS TO HELP YOU FIND OUT IF A FUTURE IN THE PERFORMING ARTS SUITS YOU.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU CAN ACT?

"We all have every human emotion within us, but because of our personalities, backgrounds and genetics, some of them are trapped down so deep they never appear. What an actor has to do is pull up some of those emotions that might not be on the surface very often and learn how to communicate them. Unless you have a little of that inside you, not even the best teacher in the world can bring it out."

WHERE DO ISU PERFORMING ARTS GRADUATES GO?

Cox's former students have gone into teaching, acting in touring companies, working backstage or as actors on Broadway, wig making, directing, lighting design and scene design.

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED IN THE ISU PERFORMING ARTS PROGRAM?

Students of any major can take acting, directing, dance or theater design classes. Anybody can audition for a backstage or on-stage part in any production. To find out about auditions for future productions, go to <http://www.theatre.iastate.edu> or look for notices in the Iowa State Daily classifieds section.

HOW DOES AN ACTOR GET HIS OR HER CAREER STARTED?

Networking. Performing arts majors are required to have two internships, one of which must be outside Iowa. Internships help students not only to see how different companies work, but also to establish connections outside the school.

"If you know somebody who knows somebody who can recommend you, that's hugely important. Most people in theater do not go to one job and stay there for a long period of time. A production reaches the end of its run, and you have to find some other work. The more networking you can do, the easier it's going to be for you," says Cox.

"My favorite plays show the triumph of the human spirit. I find it so inspiring," Cox said. "I wrote a production about Iowa World War II veterans. We went out and interviewed veterans, and we got students to play those roles. The students met with the veterans, and they learned a lot about each other. Some really close friendships were formed. I think the audience felt very inspired at what people from their state had accomplished."

Kelly Teitsworth, is a senior in performing arts with an emphasis in acting and directing. Teitsworth said it's more fun for her to entertain people rather than inspire them.

"I really love the 10-minute plays we do here, but they don't allow for a lot of in-depth experience. Most of it's just getting through the plot," she said. The 10-minute plays are student-directed projects that are performed at the Maintenance Shop on campus.

So what separates inspiration-driven theater from entertainment theater? Cox said the more artistic type involves the mind and soul of an artist, while entertainment theater's purpose is to give the audience a break from life's daily grind.

For a work to be considered art, "there has to be a feeling of beauty, not cute or pretty, but beauty that is so profound that it makes you think of something above yourself. We spend a lot of time thinking about ourselves, but every now and then we get that feeling. True art does that: It teaches people something about themselves, about life, about people around them or about the world. They walk out knowing something they didn't know before they came in," she said.

Meldrem has a more comprehensive take on theater as art.

"The trick is to take the inspirational, thought-provoking art form that is theater and make it into pop culture. The adventure is how to combine the two to get people to think," Meldrem said. "That's what theater is about, creating emotions in people and getting them to see something from a new perspective."

Cox is fluent in the language of new perspectives, as she's written many one-woman plays in her career. Her work focuses on historical figures who are absent from history books, yet whose achievements can't be forgotten. The events of the life of Carrie Chapman Catt, the famed ISU alumna, grace the pages of Cox's first one-woman play.

She said that entertainment media such



as TV, movies or iPods will never replace theater because they water down the authentic interactive experience that theater offers.


"I always say there's nothing like the real thing. There is so much more of a tie [at a live show]. But there's so much entertainment that's so easily available now that people don't feel it's worth the effort to get up from their chairs and go out and do something. People are becoming technology-oriented instead of community-oriented," Cox said.

She said she has faith that if even the most technology-oriented people experience a full-scale production once, they'll want to come back.


### WORK TO PERFORM

More work is required than audiences may guess for the cast and crew to perfect a production. About 50 people contribute to each production, yet in an average play there are only 15 actors. Behind-the-scenes crewmembers include lighting designers, stagehands, stage managers and directors. A play takes about two and a half months to complete from start to finish, and it's no cakewalk: Student actors devote up to 15 hours per week rehearsing, many of them juggling jobs on top of class and rehearsal.

Meldrem said the first week of rehearsal doesn't involve much acting at all. Instead, the cast assembles around a table to dissect the script and pinpoint who the characters are, their motivations, their backgrounds, the setting of the show and other details.



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"There's obviously a lot of creative freedom when it comes to interpreting your characters. You want them to be unique," Meldrem said. "We decided that [Fall 2008 production] 'Tartuffe' was going to be set in Greenwich Village. I had to say, okay, I'm playing a police officer in Greenwich Village

in 1959. What would that person be like, how would he talk, how would he act?"

Sometimes the characters can be tricky to interpret. Teitsworth recalled that while preparing for the department's most recent production, "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail," the cast had to overcome a few obstacles.

"Henry Thoreau is an idealist, and he wants to commit adultery," she said. "So our lead actor was like, 'I can't figure this out!' There is always honest effort, so when something goes wrong it's really frustrating."

The director herself must have an especially thorough understanding of the script and its context in order to produce a successful show.

Cox said that directing is "a very time-consuming thing. Anthony Hopkins once said that he prepares for a role by reading the script 50 or 60 times. To really understand a script, four or five times aren't enough. There's a lot of preparation that goes into it."

All this work requires that the people in performing arts be enormously committed to each other and to the production—there's none of the stereotypical, wishy-washy artist's attitude here.

"Sometimes I have people come in who say, 'I want to change my major because it turned out to be work to be in the performing arts, and I thought it would just be fun,'" Cox said.

"There are people who actually want to do the work and are committed to it, and then there are people who like to think of themselves as artistic although they might not really be. They spend a lot of time on the way they look and act and not so much time on actually doing work. It's so much easier to change the outside of you than it is to change the inside of you," she added.


### SMALL COMMUNITY

However, since Pearson Hall houses only 63 performing arts majors, the students are able to keep each other in check. "We all know each others' lives inside and out. Most of my friends here are majors," Teitsworth said.


Meldrem regards the lesser size of the program in a positive light. "As far as availability for roles and things for me to do, it's better for me. With the proper attitude, the right training and the right desire, you can come from a place not considered to be the right atmosphere for an actor, and you can make it," he said. "It might be a little bit of a disadvantage, but I

can't change the fact that I'm from Iowa."

Teitsworth said that the smaller program means more honest learning. "We can have intimate classes and grow. It's not just pumping out performers as opposed to artists.



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There is a level of pretention that comes with some [actors], but fortunately that doesn't happen here. Everyone's really cool," Teitsworth said. Her favorite class, Directing II, had only eight students. As a result, "we all grew a lot as people, and as directors."

Spending dozens of hours a week in class or rehearsal with the same people can lead to the occasional quarrel—but the fundamental rules of the program insist that students learn to be supportive, not hurtful, and not to waste time on trivial problems.

"There are a lot of big personalities in the theater department, and we usually get along great, but every once in a while there's a standoff. Collaboration is what makes theater fun, because it's everyone working together, and if you're anxious and try to dominate everything it just sucks the fun out of it," Teitsworth said.

"You get annoyed with people often because the stress of being in school and also in shows with those people can be overwhelming," Meldrem said. However, he said knowing the people in his department so well also makes them more likely to forgive temper tantrums.

"I don't whine anymore when I can't figure something out, because no one wants to tolerate that. It saves a lot of time when you have confidence that you'll figure it out," Teitsworth said.

And after the show is over? "Theater people party harder than anyone else on campus," Meldrem said. **E**