



WHAT THEATRE MAJORS LEARN

BY LOUIS E. CATRON

I SPOKE TO A GROUP of business leaders about our college's theatre program not long ago, and after my remarks we had an interesting discussion about what theatre students do and learn. The executives were particularly interested in qualities like discipline, dependability, loyalty, and leadership, qualities that theatre students must have to be effective members of a production team.

One told me that her company has found that theatre-trained applicants become valuable employees because they're energetic, enthusiastic, and able to work under pressure. They generally have polished communications and human relations skills, and they're experienced at working as members of a team toward a common goal. Most importantly, she said, theatre graduates have a can-do confidence based on their experience of successfully meeting difficult challenges. "Theatre students have done extremely well with

us," she said, "and we usually hire them because they're well-disciplined workers who learn quickly and give of themselves to the company."

Not all managers are as enlightened as that executive about the value of a theatre education in many apparently unrelated kinds of work. But the conversation started me thinking about what theatre students learn. It seems to me that, quite apart from the special skills that they learn to use onstage and backstage, theatre graduates enter the job market with a couple of important points in their favor. First, theatre classes give them the broad vision that all liberal arts students are supposed to acquire in college. Second, theatre's special hands-on, learn-by-doing environment gives them training, experience and skills that can be valuable in any number of careers.

An examination of a theatre degree's value in finding work outside of theatre is important both for students who are determined to study theatre and make it their life's work, and for those who are only considering a theatre major among a number of other options. For the first group, it is highly likely that at some point in their lives they'll have to seek non-theatre employment, either permanently or as a way of keeping body and soul together while they pursue a theatre career. For the second, "What can you do with a theatre major?" is a question of fundamental importance.

John Munschauer writes in *Jobs for English Majors and Other Smart People* that there are just two types of jobs: "professional work" that requires special training in law school, medical school, architecture school, and so forth, and "trait-oriented work," for which employers seek workers with special traits, such as communications skills, imagination, reasoning ability, and sound judgment. Theatre training can be valuable preparation for many of the innumerable careers that fall in the second category.

Here's a list of twenty-three skills, traits, and qualities of personality that are usually well-developed in individuals who complete four years of undergraduate theatre study.

1 Oral communication skills. Many students find that theatre helps them develop the confidence that's essential to speaking clearly, lucidly, and thoughtfully. Acting onstage teaches you how to be comfortable speaking in front of large audiences, and some of your theatre classes will give you additional experience talking to groups. Oral communication skills are so important to some employers that they often send management trainees to special workshops.

2 Creative problem-solving abilities. Most people expect theatre students to

exhibit creativity in such areas as acting, design, playwriting or directing, and many companies do recruit creative thinkers. But employers are not always aware that theatre experience also helps you learn creative problem-solving techniques. Tech theatre work—building scenery, hanging lights, making props and so on—is a particularly good way to learn how to think on your feet, to identify problems, evaluate a range of possible solutions, and figure out what to do. Most major companies believe that a creative problem-solver will become a good employee.

3 Motivation. Being involved in theatre productions and classes demands commitment and motivation. These are qualities that college theatre faculty members and, in some measure, you and your fellow students, probably already possess. By example, we teach each other that success comes to those who are committed to the task at hand. Many theatre students learn to transfer that attribute from theatre to other activities such as classes and jobs.

4 A willingness to work cooperatively. Your work in theatre companies teaches you how to work effectively with different types of people. Theatre demands that participants work together cooperatively for the production to succeed; there is no room for "we" and "they" behavior and your colleagues will usually let you know when you violate the team spirit of a production. In theatre, it's important that each individual supports the others involved. Employers will be pleased to know that you understand how to be a team player.

5 The ability to work independently. In theatre, you're often assigned tasks that you must complete without supervision. It's left up to you to figure out how best to achieve the goal. The ability to work independently is a trait employers look for in their workers.

6 Time-budgeting skills. When you're a student, being involved in theatre forces you to learn how to budget your time. You need to schedule your days very carefully if you want to keep up your grades while you're busy with rehearsals, work calls, and the other demands that theatre makes on your time. Good time-management skills are enormously important to employers.

7 Initiative. Personnel managers call people who approach work with initiative and enterprise "self-starters," people who do what needs to be done without waiting to be asked. The complexities of a theatrical production demand individuals who are

willing to voluntarily undertake any task that needs to be done in order for the production to succeed. In theatre, we're all self-starters.

8 Promptness and respect for deadlines. Tardiness is never acceptable in theatre because it shows a lack of self-discipline, and more importantly, a lack of consideration for others. Being late for a rehearsal or a work call or failing to finish an assigned task on time damages a production and affects the work of many other people. Theatre demands that you learn to arrive on time and meet scheduled deadlines. Employers appreciate workers who are on time and do their work as scheduled.

9 Acceptance of rules. In theatre you work within the structure of a set of procedures and rules that deal with everything from shop safety to behavior at auditions, rehearsals and work calls. Theatre teaches you the importance of rules, a concept that's important in any organization.

10 The ability to learn quickly. Theatre students, whether they're memorizing lines or learning the technical aspects of a production, must have the ability to absorb a vast quantity of material quickly and accurately. Your work in college theatre will show that you have the ability to grasp complex matters in a short period of time, a highly-valued trait to employers.

11 Respect for colleagues. In theatre you discover that a successful production requires contributions from everybody who's involved. Mutual respect is essential. Working on a production teaches you to respect and trust the abilities and talents of your colleagues. A prospective employer will appreciate the fact that you have learned the importance of respecting your co-workers.

12 Respect for authority. Only one person can be in charge of any given portion of a production. Theatre teaches you to willingly accept and respect authority. Being a reliable follower is a trait employers look for in their workers.

13 Adaptability. Theatre students must be adaptable and flexible. You need to be willing to try new ideas, accept new challenges, and have the ability to adapt to constantly changing situations and conditions. In one production you may be a member of the prop crew; in the next, perhaps you're in charge of makeup, publicity or the box office; in a third production you might have a leading role. A

worker who is versatile and flexible is highly-valued to most employers; both traits prove that you are able and willing to learn new things.

14 The ability to work under pressure. Theatre work often demands long hours. It's important that everyone involved with a production be able to maintain a cooperative and enthusiastic attitude under pressure. The ability to remain poised under such tensions is an asset that will help you cope with stress in other parts of your life, including your job.

15 A healthy self-image. To work in theatre, you must know who you are and how to project your individuality. But at the same time, it's important to recognize the need to make yourself secondary to the importance of a production. This is a tricky balance that, although difficult to accomplish, is a valuable trait.

16 Acceptance of disappointment. Theatre people learn to deal with dashed hopes and rejection on a regular basis. Who hasn't failed to get a role he or she really wanted or a coveted spot on a tech crew? You learn to accept that kind of disappointment and move on and try again. Employers need workers who are resilient enough to bounce back from this kind of frustration.

17 Self-discipline. Theatre demands that you learn how to control your life. More than other students, you are forced to make choices between keeping up with responsibilities and doing things you'd rather do. An employer will respect that ability.

18 A goal-oriented approach to work. Many aspects of theatre involve setting and achieving specific goals. In employer's terms, you've learned to be task-oriented and capable of finding practical ways to achieve goals.

19 Concentration. Busy theatre students, involved in a production or other theatre projects while also taking a heavy academic load, must learn to concentrate if they are to succeed. Acting classes in particular stress concentration, and once you have learned that skill as an actor, it can be transferred to other activities.

20 Dedication. As you work in theatre you learn to dedicate your energy—your very being—to doing your best to create a successful production. Many theatre students discover that committing oneself to a given task is deeply rewarding.

Employers respect workers who have learned the value of dedication.

21 A willingness to accept responsibility. Theatre students sometimes have an opportunity that is seldom given to students in other disciplines—the chance to take on sole responsibility for a special project. You can expect employers to value this unusual ability.

22 Leadership skills. In theatre you also have the opportunity to assume leadership roles. You may, for example, assist a director or designer and lead other volunteers, serve as a crew chief, or even design or direct a production yourself. Leadership training like this can open the possibility for comparable opportunities in a company that hires you.

23 Self-confidence. Theatre training teaches you confidence in yourself. Your accomplishments in theatre show you that you can handle a variety of jobs, pressures, difficulties and responsibilities.

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It seems almost incidental at this point to mention that theatre majors also learn a lot about theatre. Most students who choose a theatre major do so because their

training will prepare them for a career in the theatre, and it will. Theatre students learn to use their voices and bodies and minds to make magic onstage.

Clearly, though, they learn much, much more. Few people choose to set out on a difficult, demanding four-year course of theatre study because it will make them good candidates for employment in other fields. But it will.

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