



PART I

Setting the Stage for Understanding and Appreciating Theatre Arts

Why Study Theatre Arts?

Asking why you should study theatre is a good question, and it has an easy answer. Study theatre arts because it has something for you regardless of your major in higher education. Study theatre arts because it will improve your skills in communication, problem solving, critical thinking, as well as your ability to appreciate the arts. Do you want to impress a significant other? Study theatre arts because it will give you an ability to speak intelligently about the arts in general. BTW, did you know that theatre is the only art form that involves all other art forms; music, painting, design, sculpting, creative writing, and dance? Cool, huh? Study this subject, with this text, because you'll learn something that will be applicable to your own life, regardless of your chosen vocation.

Here's a more concrete answer to the question of why you should study theatre. Do you realize that professional colleges in medicine and law, as well as others, recruit heavily from the ranks of graduates who major in theatre arts? It's true. Why? Because studying theatre instills particular skills applicable to professional occupations; skills that most undergraduate non-theatre programs fail to provide their students. I've already alluded to these special skills. Medical schools, for example, teach human anatomy and physiology, and about treating all manner of human suffering, but these institutions often fail to teach the skills that are unique to the truly exceptional medical doctor, such as the ability to communicate with everyone, to think creatively, or to work in a team environment to solve complex problems. I believe you cannot be a successful surgeon if you don't understand how to work collaboratively with other professionals to address sophisticated medical issues. These problem-solving creative-thinking, team-effort skills are routinely taught in the theatre arts major.

Theatre happens because artists collaborate, bringing their individual skills and talents to bear on solving the complex task of producing a play. This is a basic foundation of the art. Theatre is always a team effort.

Similarly, you cannot be a successful surgeon, or engineer for that matter, if you can't effectively communicate your ideas—as all theatre arts students learn to do. Success in any professional field also requires the ability to think creatively, outside the box. Every new theatre production forces students to think in innovative, creative ways. Without exception, every single production in the hundreds I have worked on in my



Belles: A play in two acts and thirty-nine phone calls, Northern Arizona University, Directed by Dr. Mac Groves, Image courtesy of Dr. Mac Groves

professional and academic career required me to confront and solve new and unique challenges. There is nothing cookie-cutter about theatre arts.

More simply stated, you should study theatre because it will help you to excel in your professional career—no matter what your career choice. New discoveries in all fields arise from creative thinking, and most disciplines do not teach this skill. So, if you want to invent a new artificial heart, or win the Nobel Prize for your ideas on global economics, then learn to open the right side of your brain. Study theatre, because it will enhance what you learn in any other discipline.

All theatre productions demand and require creative, problem-solving thinking, as well as a talent for collaboration. These are just the obvious benefits to anyone who studies theatre. There's so much more. Theatre arts students routinely learn a plethora of skills that are applicable to anyone's life.

Theatre is also a deadline-oriented discipline. Planning for a new production, or season, begins a year or more in advance. We know that the play opens on Friday night, May 3rd at 7:30 P.M., even if that date is thirteen months away. We dedicate ourselves to that date and time. Think about it for a moment: We've spent a lot of money and time advertising Friday night, May 3rd, 7:30 P.M. in newspapers and magazines, and in radio and television advertisements. We've sent thousands of mailers to season subscribers and sold tickets for months. To not open on that date and time would be a disaster.

Acquiring theatre arts skills, then, will force you to focus on deadlines and to complete tasks in a timely, successful manner. Tasks in other professional occupations are also routinely time sensitive and deadline oriented.

Do you realize that the cumulative GPA (grade point averages) of theatre arts majors is often the highest among ALL majors at colleges and universities? And, as many will suggest, it's not because theatre is an easy major. Keep in mind that undergraduate theatre students take the same general education courses in the sciences, social sciences, languages and humanities as all other undergraduate majors. Theatre arts courses are

not any easier. Actually, studying in the theatre arts is far more time consuming, and requires creative as well as intellectual skills. The time commitment, as noted earlier, is enormous in this field. Theatre arts majors, therefore, are generally intellectual over-achievers.

Theatre arts majors *choose* to study in this field, even though they often could excel in any other discipline. To decide to study theatre, a profession that is incredibly competitive in the professional marketplace, is a calculated decision. So, it's no wonder that theatre arts majors are generally very, very smart about a lot of things. And these skills and this knowledge can be applied to any profession.

Great thinkers, politicians, world leaders throughout history have mastered the arts. Sir Winston Churchill was an exceptional painter, John Kennedy was an award-winning writer long before his White House years, Ronald Reagan was an accomplished actor, and William Jefferson Clinton plays a mean saxophone. If you want to be a great thinker, then master an art, any art. Write poetry or music, learn to paint well, or study and do theatre.



President William J. Clinton and friends, © Reuters/Corbis

We all have this creative imagination within us. We're born with it. Everyone is born with an intellect and a soul. Knowledge touches the intellect and the arts touch the soul. Study theatre because it has the potential to enrich your life in ways you hadn't imagined. Study theatre arts because you'll be a better thinker, a more creative individual.

We all may have been born with a creative imagination, but, for some reason, most of us learn to stifle this imagination. Maybe we get a glint of our creative imagination when we hear a new song or we see a really cool painting hanging on the wall of our friend's home. If we don't work in the arts, calling upon our creative imaginations on a daily basis, then we're likely to lose this very human part of who we are as human beings. Study theatre because it will awaken your instinctive, creative imagination, and I assure you that it will make you more successful at whatever you do.

Did you know that scientific studies show that if children in elementary school participate in a performance, singing, acting, playing a musical instrument, memorizing lines, or learning to read music, and, very importantly, are given an opportunity to perform for an audience, these students will do significantly better in the sciences and mathematics when they go to a college or university? It's true.

There is an undeniable connection between learning an art, like theatre, and learning in general. A final note before we delve deeper into this discipline. It might help you put the importance of studying theatre arts in perspective if you realized that all disciplines (different areas of study) were, at one time or another, classified as art forms: medical arts, military arts, culinary arts, legal arts. Today, some theorists classify disciplines into one, or more, of three classifications of art: Spatial Arts, Temporal Arts, and Useful Arts.

Spatial Arts: These art forms have the characteristic of occupying space for them to be realized. Examples of spatial art forms would be sculpture, architecture, and paintings. They all need space to showcase their creation.

Temporal Arts: These art forms must use time to fulfill their purpose. Examples of temporal art forms would be books or literature, music, dance, and theatre. (Notice that dance and theatre both need space, as well, but time is a critical element for them to come alive.) It takes time to read a book, watch a play, listen to a song, or perform a dance.

Useful Arts: These art forms have practical application; they serve some other purpose, such as health (medical arts). Other examples include culinary arts (food preparation), architecture, and military arts.

As noted, some art forms fit comfortably into more than one classification, but that's not what is important in presenting this information. The ability to classify all disciplines, all talents, into some artistic structure emphasizes that all skills, at least historically, embraced the belief that something creative and artistic played a role in their discipline. Medical professionals, for example, thrive in a creative environment. The brilliant Chinese military strategist, general, and philosopher, Sun Tzu, changed the world with his text *The Art of War*. And the great chefs of the world will be the first to tell you that their creations are works of art—delicious, but a feast for the eyes, as well as the tastebuds. The architectural achievements of Frank Lloyd Wright are considered works of art. Artistic achievement awards are given each year to new buildings where the architects apply such criteria as spatial considerations, shape, line, natural environment, color, contrast, and/or composition to create a functional (Useful art), towering (Spatial art) structure of beauty.

David Brooks, writing for the *New York Times* (June 7, 2010), refers to something he terms “emotional knowledge.” He writes about “learning to feel different emotions, rehearsing different passions, experiencing different sacred rituals and learning to see in different ways.” Brooks is speaking generally of the study of any discipline in the humanities, but his words are very applicable to why we should study theatre arts. Brooks goes on to talk about what he calls “The Big Shaggy”:

. . . studying the humanities helps you befriend The Big Shaggy . . . Over the past century or so, people have built various systems to help them

understand human behavior: economics, political science, game theory and evolutionary psychology. These systems are useful in many circumstances. But none completely explain behavior because deep down people have passions and drives that don't lend themselves to systemic modeling. They have yearnings and fears that reside in an inner beast you could call The Big Shaggy . . . this tender beast is also responsible for the mysterious but fierce determination that drives Kobe Bryant, the graceful bemusement the Detroit Tigers pitcher Armando Galarraga showed when his perfect game slipped away, the selfless courage soldiers in the Afghanistan show when they risk death for buddies or a family they may never see again. The observant person goes through life asking: Where did that come from? Why did he or she act that way? The answers are hard to come by because the behavior emanates from somewhere deep inside The Big Shaggy. Technical knowledge stops at the outer edge. If you spend your life riding the links of the Internet, you probably won't get too far into the The Big Shaggy either . . . But over the centuries, there have been rare and strange people who possessed the skill of taking the upheavals of thought that emanate from The Big Shaggy and representing them in the form of story, music, myth, painting, liturgy, architecture, sculpture, landscape and speech.

Studying theatre is going to the core of Brook's The Big Shaggy. It will give you those skills, talents, and knowledge that will take you deeper into whatever field of study you pursue.

Chapter 1—Potential Exam Questions

Here's what you should know after reading this chapter:

1. Specific reasons why studying theatre arts can be beneficial to anyone.
2. Why professional schools recruit students with theatre arts undergraduate degrees.
3. Why theatre arts majors often don't join fraternities, or go to college football games.
4. Why theatre is considered a collaborative art form.
5. Why theatre is considered a deadline-oriented discipline.