THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS IN A VOCATIONALLY FOCUSED TWO-YEAR THEATER TRAINING PROGRAM

by

SALLY J. ROBERTSON

(Under the Direction of Jay W. Rojewski)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, understand, and document former students' perceptions of the vocationally focused theater training they received at a 2-year community college and to discover how that training helped them meet their goals and expectations for careers in the theater. Listening to individual stories of theater artists revealed an understanding of the personal nature of training they received and how it directed them into the first phase of their careers in live theater.

Several questions guided data collection, including: What benefits have former students experienced on their current and future career path and successes both in work and life that can be connected to their vocationally focused 2-year theater training? What expectations and hopes did former students have for their theater careers? What reflections do former students have on their success in the theater based on their experiences in 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degree programs?

Semistructured interviews explored the perceptions of six former students who completed a career-focused, vocationally based theater training program offered at a 2-year community college in Georgia. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and examined using content

analysis. Each participant's core story was extracted and cross checked with discovered themes. The combined data were woven into a one-act playscript that reflected major findings from data analysis. The play was read out loud by student and community actors with a public audience. Verbal feedback from performers and audience members was collected.

The major themes discovered were skills development, support, inclusivity, confidence, professionalism, community, continual work, creative growth, new career paths, pursuing passion, longevity in field, industry change, and connection. Another important finding was the students' 2-year college experiences allowed for the inclusion of the individual voice of each student to be acknowledged as essential.

Due to limited research attention directed toward training and education of theater artists at the postsecondary level, including almost none on vocationally focused training programs, information on this topic can facilitate an understanding of important aspects of vocationally oriented programs, and generate interest in workforce education training in the performing arts.

INDEX WORDS: Vocational, Theater, Skills-based, Student experiences, Community college, Theater education, Student success, Stories, Qualitative interviews, Theatre training, Artistic work experience, Career longevity.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Jennifer Jenkins, the Angel of Atlanta Theatre, the best audience member one could have, and a tireless supporter of everything theatre. Through her generous loaning of props, costumes, lights, and sets to any theater who asked, and her indefatigable care, feeding, love, and encouragement to actors, directors, technicians, producers, designers, and theatres, she made theatre in Atlanta possible, and so much better. She posted about, commented on, and attended almost every live Atlanta theatrical event for the past 30 years. Jennifer loved theatre in all its forms and worked as the Fine Arts Production Manager at what is now Perimeter College of Georgia State University where she was a powerful force for good in helping students succeed. This dissertation, graduate school, and even my career in higher education would not have happened without Jennifer and her amazing way of helping everyone find their proper place in the world. Jennifer was also my best friend for nearly 30 years until she passed away last summer. She was my biggest cheerleader and always believed in me. As such an important part of my life she should have been here to see me graduate and call me Dr. Robertson, but I have to imagine she's somewhere organizing things on my behalf. She was really good at that. We all miss you so much, Jennifer, but your legacy lives on in all of us. Keep the ghost light burning wherever you are.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

How does someone become an actor? In the early part of the 21st century, in the United States more than anywhere else, that answer is often by getting a college degree in acting (Larlham, 2011). Though a degree is not a required credential, actors are required to possess experience and knowledge of acting (Zazzali, 2013), which can be achieved in a variety of ways. Those who seek a career in live theater, either in front of an audience or backstage, are individuals who want to pursue their life's work in an industry that is as mercurial and unsettled as the life of seasonal farm workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Actors were freelancers, or what are now termed *gig workers*, long before it became common in the modern economy. Actors cast in a play or musical that may have performances for a few weeks, a few months, or several years, but often the open-ended schedule of for-profit theater is dependent on box office success (Reddy et al., 1998). Although a small number of actors become famous or wealthy, the vast majority barely squeeze out a living in the theater and must hold other jobs to make ends meet (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Through the ups and downs of a life in the theater, performers, designers, stage managers, technical crew, and directors usually persevere because of their love for doing theater (Orozco-Valdivia & Schenkkan, 2019).

I grew up in a small Midwestern farming community where most young people did not go to college, or if they did it was to the local technical college for professions in agriculture or trade. Many of my high school friends went immediately into the workforce or enlisted in the military after graduation. My own family was solid working class and former military so by

going to college I did something very different from everyone else. I was the first person in my family to get a BA degree (communication and theater) and then a master of fine arts (MFA) degree in acting. Though both degrees were from public universities that were traditionally focused on the liberal arts, my undergraduate professors found ways to increase our business and professional knowledge with career learning techniques. The MFA is designed as a terminal professional degree for working artists, so it included a focus on work as the main goal after graduation. My career in the theater started quickly after I completed my degree and over the years blossomed into a livelihood that included working in many areas of theater in addition to acting. For 20 years, I worked in professional live theater in Atlanta and the southeast as an actor, then as a director, a theatrical producer, theater founder, artistic director, and sound designer. The skills and talents learned early in my career led eventually to postsecondary teaching at a community college. I often think about the conscious choice I made in college to pursue a career as a professional actor, with full understanding of how hard it would be to make a living. Everything I had read and seen and been taught by my teachers told me it would be nearly impossible to make a successful career as an actor, but it was what I loved and I was good at it. I had considerable success as a professional actor, and I still act when I have the time now that I don't need acting income to support myself. I have seen theater colleagues and my own students struggle to find satisfying success in the industry. Wondering why and wanting to know more, I decided to design a research project to investigate how theater students were trained for success and longevity in theater.

The study described in this paper focused on theater actors, whose job is dependent on others producing theater, and who were rejected more often than in any other known job. Actors have a 2% employment rate (Williams et al., 2019). It was important for me to study theater

students, graduates, and young career professionals to better understand their experiences and thoughts on their careers to help theater educators reconsider how theater is taught and how students might be better served in their careers. Stories of former theater students may also provide the general public with knowledge of the challenges artists face when they pursue a career in theater. Connection and empathy could lead to understanding and support of an often-misunderstood artistic career choice (Bhatnagar & Manchanda, 2013; Cowart, 2013), which may lead to a general positive change in perceptions of theater education and student career choices. A look at how actors are educated for a long-term life of satisfying work can hopefully give us a different viewpoint from which to examine what teachers and students of theater are doing.

Background of Study

What is it about a career in theater that is so elusive? Why don't most people understand the complexities and challenges theater students and professional actors face every day? Many people have been involved in theater, either by being cast in a school play, attending as an audience member, or having a friend in theater; yet, few people have a real understanding of what it means to pursue a professional theater career and how one even prepares for it. Theater, as with most arts-related work, involves the production of aesthetic works that are distinctive in some way and is fundamentally a collective effort (Reilly, 2018; Skaggs, 2018). Theater is art, and those who create it are artists, but they are also craftspeople who must train properly to better use their artistic abilities (Guthrie, 2011). Theatrical performances use "learned skills that draw upon centuries of rich history for inspiration and guidance" (Fisk & Grove, 2010, p. 653). Part of my research project examined the dichotomy of "actor as artist" and "actor as craftsperson" and how that dichotomy has led to a split in how actors and other theater practitioners are trained and educated in U.S. higher education (Zazzali, 2016).

I chose to look more closely at the 2-year postsecondary model of theater training, especially programs that train actors to enter the theater job market with skills in character analysis, vocal performance, movement or dance, resume writing, business building, career networking, and auditioning while also completing core classes that teach problem solving, critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

What does actor training look like today in one community college? How does someone with an interest in the performing arts, particularly theater, find training or education to best prepare them for a theater career? Does training even matter when talent is the first requirement to be a successful actor? Although a common assumption is that to be a successful actor one must be born with talent, this is a false belief held by those outside the field who think acting is a magical thing most people cannot access. Amazing acting abilities certainly involve a basic level of talent but also a high level of skill honed and perfected by training. Talent is any natural aptitude or skill and reflects a hard-wired genetic inheritance which is different from knowledge or training. Talent is at least partly instinctive and there are degrees of talent as there are degrees of anything (Donahue & Patterson, 2012). Considerable research has sought to determine whether talent or training is the best predictor of success (Bailey & MacMahon, 2018; Baker, 2012; Ericsson et al., 1993; Zhao et al., 2014;). Overall, research shows four things predict success in high performance careers such as sports and performing arts: (a) talent, (b) training, (c) consistent practice, and (d) determination to succeed (Ackerman, 2014). Whether or not one has acting talent usually comes down to the professional judgment of industry gatekeepers, directors and casting directors, and to individual audience members who decide if they find the actor compelling (Subotnik et al., 2019).

In this study, I explored theater training as the main focus of how success is experienced for performers, and looked specifically at a career-focused, workforce education inspired system at a 2-year college and how participants of that program viewed their training and subsequent theater careers. I chose a 2-year college setting to examine because that is where I have the most experience teaching theater in higher education, although as a graduate of two different public university theater programs at the bachelor's and master's levels, my understanding of multiple modes of theater instruction gave me a stronger connection to understanding the similarities and differences and informed the study.

What then does effective theater training look like for someone with basic talent and a strong desire to succeed in the industry? Do they need 4 years of liberal arts higher education or 2 years of college-to-career theater skills training that sends them into the job market? Do actors need a graduate degree that specializes in one or two performance areas to continue to get jobs in professional theater in the United States? Is there a middle ground where mixing these models would benefit students and allow them to find success? Do they even need formalized theater training? These questions all have answers, but the research literature that addresses them is sparse. Available information is mostly anecdotal or does not take the many variations of training and working in theater into account.

It is commonly understood in theater training, "Students enrolled in professional undergraduate degrees are expected to develop the knowledge, skills, concepts, and sensitivities essential to the life of the theatre professional" (NAST, 2019, p. 91). The model of theater training I examined is used at a 2-year community college near a large urban city-center with a thriving community of professional theater companies and access to film and other entertainment industries in which graduates can find employment. Not all 2-year colleges have the benefit of a

diverse industry on their doorstep, but the participants in this study did, which made this research even more interesting and necessary to pursue for theater students.

Historically, community colleges have provided a gateway to opportunity for many young people who otherwise would have been denied access to higher education because of finances, family situations, gender, or race (Phan, 2018). The first community college was established in 1901 when Joliet Community College added years 5 and 6 to its high school curriculum (Drury, 2003). Known early on as Junior Colleges, to differentiate them from the Senior Colleges at research universities, their existence came from a desire to move the first 2 years of postsecondary education out of the responsibility of universities so they could focus on the last 2 years of a 4-year degree and on graduate students (Beach, 2011). From the 1930s through the 1950s, job training became more popular in community colleges, and by 1980 they enrolled 4.3 million students per year (Kasper, 2003). Today community colleges are still an important part of their local community, connecting students and citizens through internships, service learning, fine arts performances, academic events, and other services. For students seeking a college education they offer baccalaureate transfer pathways, workforce training, and corporate training to over 5.4 million students as of Fall 2019 (NSCRC, 2019). The arts have been part of the community college course offerings since early in its history, but it was not until after World War II and the influx of students into 2-year colleges that the study and training of students in theater programs became common (Taylor, 1970). Though performing arts are considered part of vocational training in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, and Asia, the performing arts have not been included in most U.S. workforce training programs and are usually housed in the communications, humanities, or fine arts departments on college campuses (Toohey & Doran, 2013).

Research is scant on the training of theater artists in general and even more so on training that reflects vocational or workforce education environments and perceptions of theater training. The *2018 Southern California Theatre Alumni Survey Repor*t surveyed 600 alumni of more than 30 colleges and universities in southern California to better understand the scope of career-training provided to early career theater artists, technicians, and managers both in and outside of higher education institutions (Orozco-Valdivia & Schenkkan, 2019). Overwhelmingly, recent graduates stressed the importance of financial literacy and understanding the economic realities of making a life in theater. Contract negotiation, salary and payment best practices, and basic financial literacy topped the list of training respondents wished they had received before entering theater. Overall, improving access to career training, especially topics related to financial literacy and money, may help students, and particularly more diverse students, stay in the live theater field by providing tools for navigating a challenging profession (Orozco-Valdivia & Schenkkan, 2019).

Educating students for a career in theater is not so different from educating students for any career that combines intuitive, critical thinking and problem-solving with creativity and mind-body connection. Engineers, lawyers, doctors, and football coaches have many of the same skills as theater artists; they are simply focused on a different goal (Berkeley, 2008). Research and understanding on the topic of training actors would benefit from including community colleges, vocational and technical colleges, embedded training programs in bachelor's degrees, and traditional college theater programs that use constant improvement research to make valuable changes in their actor training models (Buckler, 1996).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

I interviewed six former students who completed a 2-year vocational theater training program at a 2-year college in Georgia. All were currently employed in some aspect of theater with 5–8 years of work experience. I wanted to learn about their perceptions of the training they received on their theater careers and on feelings of success.

The research questions for the study were as follows:

1. What benefits have former students experienced after completing a vocationally focused college program that emphasized career training in theater arts combined with more traditional mind-body actor training?
2. Do differences exist in the perceptions of former students on their success in the theater based on their experiences in 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degrees in theater?
3. Using their individual stories as a guide, what were the expectations, hopes, and plans of former students as they continue to pursue a career in the theater and how might these findings be incorporated into a theater training program?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework steers the entire research activity and serves as a map that will guide the researcher use realizing the study's objectives or intent (Regoniel, 2015). Merriam (2009) described a conceptual framework as the structure, scaffolding, or frame of a study. A framework allows researchers to start with a broad outlook that progressively narrows as key themes were drawn out and acknowledges central assumptions and beliefs. In this study, the research questions and research design were informed by my own theater training and experience teaching theater at the college level for more than 20 years. A conceptual framework may change during the course of the study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

This study used a conceptual framework where the researcher truly is the instrument through which we seek to understand and explore the inner world of select individuals through the lens of current postsecondary theater training and education models via each of their life stories as they pursued their theater careers. My 3 decades as a professional actor, director and educator in theater allowed me to use my extensive experience and knowledge of the field to process and analyze the data revealed through qualitative interviews. Using this framework, I looked at two approaches to actor training, vocational, or skills-based, and degreed education and explored the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative for students on their career journey to professional actor. The study sought information on the benefits students experienced while in a college program that emphasized career training combined with more traditional mind-body actor training.

The process I used disclosed how the students' training assisted them in navigating obstacles to success by helping them become adept at directing their theater careers while dealing with outside influences and managing their personal life experiences. The documentation of students' experiences in a vocationally focused theater program and their feelings of success in their theater career will fill a gap in the knowledge about training programs for actors that fall outside the usual 4-year liberal arts degree.

Importance of Study

There is limited literature about the training and education of theater artists at the postsecondary level. Even less information is available that examines vocationally focused training at the college level. Additional research is needed to give credence to vocational theater training and to open-up interest for others so they might add to our understanding, especially on the topic of workforce education training in the performing arts. My study gives guidance to

those in higher education on how students experience more traditional theater training programs and how theater training could change to better serve students and the theater industry.

Additional qualitative studies can help pull back the curtain on the *magic* of becoming an actor, which is not magic at all, but training, determination, and some talent and allow those in and outside of the theater industry to understand what students and professional actors actually do in theater. I hope this study will focus attention on a career in the theater as a part of our nation's workforce and on the needs of the theater industry to have highly trained creative workers. In the pandemic-focused world in which this study took place, the work actors and other artists created and continue to create has taken on a new importance in the physical and mental health of millions (Cull et al., 2020) as people viewed plays, musicals, movies, and creative workshops online during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The cost of college was also considered in this research because it is poised to become a hotly contested topic in higher education in years to come (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). For the past 30 years, there has been increasing concern about the high cost of college, especially in specialty fields like theater where jobs remain scarce and the career successes and failures of acting students will be a defining factor in how we teach theater in the future (Wills, 1989). Students' goals for acquiring a bachelor of arts (BA) degree have shifted from developing intellectual qualities to preparing for economic security (Koeppel, 2004). In the performing arts, many colleges and universities offer a BA, a more general degree, whereas the BFA, or bachelor of fine arts, has more specialized subject-specific courses that focus on building skills for actors and other theater performers. The BFA often takes a year longer for students to complete due to the additional specialized courses which also add to their college debt. If the BFA is a standard

degree for entry into the theater job market, where does that leave students who now have thousands of dollars in educational debt and little chance of regular theater work?

This qualitative interview study sought to explore the experiences of six former theater students who went into the world to seek their futures and careers in theater and allied professions. Their stories contribute to a larger discussion in both the professional and academic training fields, and as educators we need to consider how we might better prepare students for a professional career in performing, with the focus on helping them maintain a lifelong career in the theater. Recognizing these students' feelings and experiences of their success allows educators to include that information in future discussions on education and training for the actor. One of my goals was to explore and understand the inner world of individuals (Czarniawska, 2004) and to show the life story as a snapshot of an evolving story that changes throughout life. The discussions I had with these former students, now career theater creatives, has given me insight into their lives and experiences helps me consider how to move forward to change and improve theater training for the next generation. I looked at student experiences in their programs of study and how that program led them to their current situations, and their current expectations of their future career. This rich information about individuals has allowed me to share their stories with an audience of theater educators, arts administrators, and interested others to more fully understand current performing arts training in one university so we might consider the future of that training to benefit students and their experiences of success.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature exploring the education or training of theater artists at the postsecondary level was a challenge to find, whereas over 25,000 studies on theater in secondary education, STEM learning, student retention, emotional learning, and special education were found with a quick literature search using *drama education* as a starting point (Carter, 2014; Loyd, 2013; Stagg, 2019; Whitfield, 2016). These studies offered valuable insight that support the use of drama in K–12 classrooms, but provided little information to understand and authenticate the training of artists, especially performing theater artists. This research adds the experiences of theater and performance students on their training, how they use training, and how they manage their careers.

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore and understand students' experiences in the vocationally focused theater training program at a 2-year community college. This study also sought to determine participant's perceptions of the impact of their training on achieving personal goals and expectations for a career in the theater.

This chapter describes the history of performing arts education in the United States, summarizes current connections between postsecondary training and acquiring work as an actor, and provides background that illustrates the importance of theater professions for those pursuing a career in theater, those who teach theater postsecondarily, and the public. College- and university-based education, conservatory training, and community college pathways to careers in theater were also examined. A brief history of European and U.S. theater and acting is provided

for context. Possible reactions to the lack of innovation in university theater training (Berkeley, 2008; Lazarus, 2012; Weltsek, 2018; Zazzali & Klein, 2015) actor employment, and costs of training were also addressed.

The conceptual framework of this study explains the perceptions and experiences of successful graduates of a 2-year, vocational preparation program in theater careers through the lens of current postsecondary theater training/education models with a focus on individual life stories. By examining historical and current states of theater education in the United States and relating this information to common education/training models in Australia and Great Britain, similarities and differences in curriculum, program length, program cost, and student expectations and outcomes were identified and applied to the realities experienced by study participants. I used my own experiences in professional theater, as well as 20 years of teaching theater in higher education to give additional context and history to the current theater training situation and found changes that could be made to improve theater training for more students.

The literature search strategy was guided by identification of keywords used in databases searches. Keywords included, but were not limited to theater education, performing arts training, theater training, vocational theater training, 2-year performing arts education, arts conservatories, career-focused theater training, and history of theater training. The ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCOHOST, SAGE, and Google Scholar databases were searched. Sources of information included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government statistics, theater industry websites, and dissertations. Over 150 sources, dating from the 1930s to the present, were identified as containing relevant material. A majority of these sources were published between 2009–2020. Older sources were included to provide a perspective on the longevity and history of the topic and provide the foundation of the literature review.

Most people think they understand an actor's job because they see them on stage or screen regularly, but seeing someone do work does not always equate with understanding that work (Avenanti & Urgesi, 2011). What does an actor do? They perform plays, scripts, and scenes in live theater, live entertainment venues, at private events, on cruise ships, in film or television, and on the internet. The occupational information website O*NET, sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), explained that actors:

> Collaborate with other actors as part of an ensemble; portray and interpret roles using speech, gestures, and body movements, to entertain, inform, or instruct radio, film, television, or live audiences; work closely with directors, other actors, and playwrights to find the interpretation most suited to the role; perform humorous and serious interpretations of emotions, actions, and situations, using body movements, facial expressions, and gestures; study and rehearse roles from scripts to interpret, learn and memorize lines, stunts, and cues as directed. (para. 2)

Success as a professional artist requires focus, sacrifice, and dedication to the art of performing while being a personal salesperson and self-manager in a highly competitive field (Lindgren, 2007). Compared to workers in other industries, creative artists are often passionately persistent in their focus on succeeding partly because their identities are so closely tied to the activity of performing and because their physical and emotional selves are also the product on the line every workday (McRobbie, 2002; Umney & Kretsos, 2015). When discussing artists and their work the question of talent comes up and how important it is in an actor's success. There seems to be a prevailing idea that only the most talented succeed as actors in theater. Philosophers as far back as Diderot (1883) distinguished between good, mediocre, and poor actors. In his writing, Diderot identified the greatest actors of his time but provided no criteria for explaining what he meant by

the designation of being a great actor. The absence of criteria is also characteristic of contemporary writing with theories of good acting or dramatic ability still going undefined as recently as 20 years ago (Schonmann, 1997). Gagne (1985) suggested talent refers to "performance which is distinctly above average in one or more fields of human performance" (p. 108). The judging of talent and ability is highly subjective and often personal. It has been shown that just as often motivation, dedication to training, and a growth mindset leads to as much or more success than simply being talented (Gagné, 1985; Rea, 2014).

Having talent does not necessarily equate with longevity in the field, which can only happen through a combination of training and perseverance (Rea, 2014). The skills that allow actors to work in the field for a lifetime include (a) learning how to create a character, (b) how to use one's body and voice as needed, but (c) also how to market themselves, (d) how to change with the times, and (e) to grow with changes in the industry. Today, student actors usually attend a 4-year university theater program where they take many hours of general education classes and hopefully learn the skills along with the theory they need as an actor. Though the 4-year degree is an option for some students, the needed acting skills can also be learned in a vocational theater training program or a 2-year degree program that offers that focus. Currently, postsecondary vocationally focused actor training is not commonly offered in the United States. To be considered vocationally focused a training program should be skills-based and limited in program length, usually 2 years. Actors would need basic training in creating a character, vocal health and articulation, stage movement, analyzing a play, auditioning, as well as dance and singing if they are musically inclined. Additionally, actors need to learn the business of acting and how to market themselves and their work to casting agents, directors, and other hiring departments in theater or live entertainment (Lemack, 2018).

The lack of attention to “acting as a job” rather “acting as art” means educators may not be using all teaching options we have to train our performance students including teaching them the business side of acting as well as what to do when the jobs do not show up. All actors are thought of as artists, but I believe it is more correct to say all actors are craftspeople who strive to become great artists after years of work in the field, after dozens of acting roles in different plays, and after years of practicing their acting skills so they are at a level where the technique happens automatically, so the artistic creation can flourish. All of us in theater want to be seen as capable (if not great) artists, but to be allowed the opportunity to become better artists we must first learn and hone our skills as actors. In teaching our students skills first we teach them how to develop their working technique (memorization, analyzing a character, building their physical talents, staying healthy) which is their foundation to begin building their artistic process and exploration. Training actors as simply artists are one-dimensional and short sighted. Training artists to pursue a trade as a craft gives them multiple skills and opportunities by giving them the solid foundation on which to build their artistic house (Orozco-Valdivia & Schenkkan, 2019).

A lack of attention to vocationally focused actor training is evidenced in various ways in the profession. The leading national theater educators research organization, *The Association for Theatre in Higher Education* (ATHE) annual summer conference does not provide breakout sessions for vocational theater training, although sessions were available for liberal arts and conservatory training. The two quarterly professional publications of the ATHE, *Theatre Topics* and *Theatre Journal*, have published no articles on vocational theater training in the 20 years of their publication (ATHE, 2020).

A better understanding of students’ perceptions of their experiences in a vocationally focused actor training program may lead to a deeper understanding of this approach in training

actors because each student's story will build the knowledge piece by piece for the reader. The Strategic National Arts Project (SNAAP) Special Report (Frenette et al., 2020) examined the reasons expressed by individuals who either stayed or left careers in the arts by analyzing data from students who studied the creative arts at the postsecondary level in visual art, art history, architecture, theater, music performance, dance and arts education.

Though the report looked at all creative arts areas, the data are valuable as we look at this issue broadly, and the individual discipline data are also available to look at theater students singularly (Frenette et al., 2020). The report compiled survey data from 52,000 midcareer artists to determine what factors influenced whether they stayed or left the field, satisfaction with their college degree if they had one, and the elements that led to a sustained career in the arts. Significant predictors of persistence in an artistic field included timely completion of a postsecondary degree, securing an advanced degree, and pursuit of personal connections and internships. Distressingly, the odds of women alumni staying in arts-related occupations (after entering a career in the arts) were lower than for men. The odds of people of color staying were lower when compared to White alumni. Alumni with large amounts of student debt (over $50,000) were significantly more likely to leave the arts than individuals with lower levels of debt (Frenette et al., 2020). The love of the art was an invaluable aspect of their educational, professional, and cultural lives, but respondents overwhelmingly wanted more preparation in the hands-on training aspects, business fundamentals, and entrepreneurship skills of their field, as well as to leave college with less debt (Frenette et al., 2020). The fact that many of these students have remained in theater is worth noting and studying and I asked my participants about their experience with college debt, staying in theater, and how they feel their race played a part in their educational experience.

Performance study has changed very little since the 1960s and knowing more about the current needs of the field may support students, professionals, and educators in an examination of theater education in the United States and in determining ways to improve it for the next generation of theater artists.

Theater and Early Actor Training

A central focus of actor training is the discovery of one's personal creative process that leads to the embodiment of a character. Training is also more broadly concerned with the transmission of technical skills that may include projection of voice, expressive movement, sensitivity to the ensemble, and organization of the body in a space, to name a few (Aquilina, 2019). Actors have not always received formal training in their craft. The history of Western European and U.S. theater traditions began 2,500 years ago in ancient Greece with actors who were untrained, unpaid, and required to pay a fee to be part of the annual state play festival honoring Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility, wine, and theater. During the Middle Ages in Europe, theater was a secular activity. Performers were wealthy male citizens who volunteered their time to community plays as part of their civic responsibilities. Training for these performers would be ad hoc depending on what was needed for the type of play being performed (Brockett & Hildy, 2007).

Acting in 16th and 17th Century Europe

In the late 16th century, professional actors first began to appear on stages in England and Europe. The definition of professional actors at the time was that acting or performing was the primary source of income and some type of basic training was received in vocal projection and stage movement through on-the-job training (Barrie, 2008). In England, William Shakespeare's Globe Theatre is perhaps the most famous example where a troupe of actors were paid a weekly

wage to rehearse and perform plays during the warm weather season. The job of the playwright was also recognized by being paid by the play rather than weekly. As a result, writers often became theater producers to keep funds flowing (Brockett & Hildy, 2007). Actors were a scraggly lot, often sons of prostitutes, orphans, and guild-less men, without standing in their community and regarded as dishonorable vagrants (Preiss & Williams, 2017). All male adults were required to be members of a Trade Guild composed of workmen from specific trades and crafts. Established in the Middle Ages, the purpose of guilds was to defend the interests of the trade, regulate the quality of workmanship and the training of new members, and provide support and welfare for their members, similar to modern labor unions (Gelderblom & Grafe, 2010). However, in England, actors were not allowed to hold membership in a trade guild leaving them open for abuse by the local constabulary. To counter this issue, theater owners negotiated patronage and protection of high-ranking nobility of the time such as the Queen, King, or the Lord Chamberlain. Although all classes of people attended the theater, from peasants to royals, those on stage were not allowed to mix with upper-class society (Smith, 2010). During 16th century Europe the urban upper classes attended performances in specially designed indoor theater spaces, whereas working classes were limited to attending outdoor street theater called Commedia dell'arte (Hamill, 2010). Actor pay could be earned by passing a hat in the streets, a regular payday for male actors, or by having a wealthy patron to support one's acting work if you were a woman (Preiss & Williams, 2017).

In 17th century England, women were not allowed to perform on the professional stage until the monarchy of Charles II and the Great Reformation in 1664 (Brockett et al., 2016). Up to that point young men and boys played all female roles for which they received specific training on how to portray women realistically. This idea of realism bears little resemblance to actual

women but rather a man's view of what women should be according to the society of the time (Chernaik & Johnson, 2003). Roles played by young men were approached quite seriously requiring training sessions to learn to portray women on stage. Women were allowed on stage in European theaters, though they were still not considered equals to their male counterparts in talent, experience, or pay. This is perhaps the first recognizable moment of theater as occupation with requisite training and pay for work on the stage (Brockett & Hildy, 2012).

Acting in and After the 18th Century

In the 18th and 19th centuries there was little thought to training actors in anything beyond strong vocal projection and posing attractively on stage. Acting was about being seen, being beautiful, funny, entertaining, and recognized for one's ability to gain fans, patrons, and followers (Donohue, 1979). This started to change near the end of the 19th and into the 20th centuries when the idea that acting was a craft needing specific training became the norm (Meeuwis, 2012). Until the late 19th century no common recognition existed of nonperforming jobs in theater such as costume and set designers or directors. These jobs weren't recognized until the introduction of modern theater in 1860. In Russia, a new genre of playwriting emerged known as *theatrical realism* (Romantsova, 2020). Theatrical realism was about creating a slice-of-life on stage for the audience to experience as much realistic truth as possible while still maintaining the excitement of a live play (Brockett & Hildy, 2007). Anton Chekov was the first known playwright to write this new type of play which explored humanity and all its abundant details. Constantin Stanislavsky developed an acting system to train actors how to properly approach these delicate new characters who looked a lot like regular people instead of the typical stock characters (Carnicke, 2009). This was a monumental change in how theater was written, rehearsed, designed and presented. Chekov and Stanislavsky were the first to work together to

create a model of theater that they felt was real and truthful with no covering up of what they considered the brutal realities of life (Romantsova, 2020). Though the realistic theater movement began in Northern Europe and Russia, U.S. playwrights and directors embraced the movement and Stanislavsky himself.

Acting in the 20th Century and Constantin Stanislavsky

Stanislavsky's aesthetics as both an actor and director revolved around the *psychophysical* aspects of human behavior. As part of his research into the nature and processes of performance, Stanislavsky invented the term *psychophysical* to describe acting focused equally on the actor's psychology and physicality (Hornby, 2010). He asserted an actor's task was to make each character plausible on stage. His system of training was an all-encompassing activity from formal acting school to the development of actors in rehearsals, to continual actor development through performing and repeat performing productions in repertory over many years (Shevtsova, 2014). Stanislavsky's acting theories have been more popular in the United States than possibly anywhere else in the world including his native Russia (Romantsova, 2020). The connection goes back to 1922, when Stanislavsky, in the aftermath of a devastating war, two revolutions, and 4 years of civil war in Russia, took his Moscow Art Theatre on tour and came to the United States. Hornby (2010) stated:

> The beauty and subtlety of (Anton) Chekhov's and (Maxim) Gorki's playwriting, along with the intense, spontaneous, yet carefully orchestrated acting (the result of months of rehearsal, far longer than anything Americans were doing) made Stanislavsky's company a model for what the American theater might achieve. (p. 294)

The influence of Stanislavsky in the United States has been, and continues to be, extensive (Romantsova, 2020). Even before his visit to the United States there had been great interest

among U.S. intellectuals in this new theater of Europe, with its daring modern playwrights like Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, and Chekhov, and with its new, noncommercial theater companies like Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater. The U.S. theater, long dominated by commercial investment business firms like the Theatrical Syndicate and the Shubert Brothers, had achieved little of importance, especially in playwriting, until the new theater movement finally reached New York around 1915 (Hornby, 2010).

This new type of theater only worked in combination with specially designed sets, lights, and costumes created for the specific production of each individual play to translate content into poetic space using the centralized vision of a director and actors who were connected to the characters and story in the most visceral way possible (Bisaha, 2015; Durbin, 2008; Simonson, 1973). This was a completely new way of producing theater; it was no longer acceptable to reuse sets and costumes from past plays that might vaguely fit the subject of this new play as was common from the Middle Ages through the mid-19th century (Durbin, 2008). The specificity of production design also necessitated a change from a presentational style of performing to a more realistic one, so a training model for the new form was open for change to go with the new style of theater. Stanislavsky's training methods gave actors the professional boost needed to take on the mantle of creatively trained artist in the then modern world (Hornsby, 2010; Romantsova, 2020).

Theater Training in Higher Education

In the United States, the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) was the first postsecondary educational institution to offer a bachelor's degree in music and drama through its College of Fine Arts conservatory degree programs. The university awarded the first U.S. bachelor's degree in drama in 1914 (Carnegie Mellon University, 2019).

The term *drama* was often used by older established schools, although many have since changed their program names to theater, because of a belief the new term encompasses more modern approaches. Many secondary schools still refer to teaching theater as drama, but in the professional field and at the university level people prefer the term *theater*, or sometimes *theatre*, due to a growing awareness of nondramatic forms and a discipline understanding of drama referring to history rather than performance (Weltsek, 2019). Recently, many universities have moved beyond the use of theater and shifted to the more profession-oriented title of *performance studies* for professional actor training to differentiate it from the academic and theoretical side of theater education (Freeman, 2012).

Theater BFA and MFA

Following the early 20th century path of the Carnegie Institute of Technology, a handful of U.S. universities began forming drama schools that offered bachelor of fine arts (BFA) or master of fine arts (MFA) degrees designed to prepare students for not-for-profit professional theater now found in every major city in the United States (Zazzali & Klein, 2015). The availability of BFA and MFA degree programs in universities marked an institutional and pedagogical shift from private studio and academy models of developing actors to a university-based model that taught professional courses in theater and actor training. The initial university teachers of theater were neither actors, directors, nor playwrights. Rather, they were historians and theoreticians with an ability to see performance as an enriching area of study, devoid of and quite separate from the craft of vocational actor training (Freeman, 2012). Over the decades those who teach theater in college have changed along with how theater is taught. The modern university theater program includes instructors with professional theater backgrounds and a terminal MFA degree, as well as historians and theoreticians with PhDs. According to Freeman

(2012), without the current and former theater professionals teaching future professionals, university programs run the danger of remaining "embedded in a legacy of tradition, characterized by hierarchical, imitative and paternalistic structures" (p. 5).

Berkley (2008) stated training in all the arts, not just in theater, rose out of necessity after World War II when there was a great need for new methods of teaching in U.S. colleges and universities. "The humanist axis in theater curriculum was manifested in an aesthetically oriented curriculum in teaching the values of 'art for art's sake'. The utilitarian axis produced after World War II, a market-oriented curriculum characterized by professionalism and vocationalism" (p. 4). This need allowed theater to be more sustainable, as they were now part of educational reforms and funding systems in U.S. education (Graham et al., 1966).

As the U.S. system of higher education expanded after World War II, training actors in theater and film also expanded due to a period of new play creation by U.S. playwrights (e.g., O'Neill, Williams, Miller, Hansberry, Albee) in what some consider the golden years of U.S. theater (Ackerman, 2005). By 1960 more than 300 college programs equivalent to an undergraduate major in theater existed. Almost 7,000 courses in specific theater subjects were listed by the 900 accredited colleges and universities offering instruction in theater (Graham et al., 1966). The most numerous offerings at that time were in acting and theater technology, the designers and technical crew needed to run a production (Staub & Hillyard, 1986). Nearly 100,000 undergraduates were annually involved in play-producing activities in campus theater, where approximately 1,500 full-time teachers and half again as many part-time instructors supervised and assisted with classroom or production work (Graham et al., 1966).

In 1965, a two-phase developmental conference was organized by the Arts and Humanities Branch of the U.S. Office of Education which brought together high-profile U.S.

theater educators and theater professionals. Their charge was to examine and discuss how their two groups, professional theater, and academic theater, could work together to bring the professional theater into new relationships with theater in institutions of higher education to train performers for the expanding professional theater market. That conference significantly influenced the ways actors and technicians were educated for the next half century (Zazzali, 2016). The 43-member participant list included great theater trainers and producers (albeit primarily white and male with only four women) from a seminal period of modern theater training history. Much was discussed and taken away from this conference, including a comment on the "unknowability" of the best theater training types. "Variety must be sought in the development of training programs, not only to meet the requirements of individual and distinct theater programs, but also because as yet there is no certainty what the best training procedures are" (Graham et al., 1966, p. 317).

A 73-page report was published after the conference with a plan to develop professional training for actors and other theater workers to remake theater training in the United States. The new approach to theater training prepared student artists to realistically create roles for regional not-for-profit professional theaters by training them in body-mind acting via the Stanislavsky model. This also meant establishing a curriculum of courses every student would take with little difference in pedagogy across the United States (Graham et al., 1966). This proposition was implemented in colleges, universities, conservatories, and other schools responsible for "the education and training of actors and the role of the professions of theater and education therein" (Graham et al., 1966, p. 329).

The expansion in postsecondary theater training that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century was in response to the population expansion following WWII with an increase in

popularity of entertainment in theater (Zazzali, 2016). This boom led to an equal increase in the number of theaters that came into existence from 1950–1980 and an increase in the number of students trained to go into the world as professional actors (Larlham, 2011). However, a steady decrease in the number of regional theaters in the United States occurred in the first decade of the 21st century with a subsequent decrease in the need for actors. Even so, a similar decrease in the number of students attending college in theater degree programs has not been experienced (Zazzali & Klein, 2015). Despite what seems like an enormous boom in entertainment outlets in the last decade with streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, as well as Disney theme parks, cruise ships, and other live venues, acting jobs in theater have not grown much since 2000 (AEA, 2019).

At present, 188 accredited theater training programs exist in postsecondary institutions in the United States, and many more remain unaccredited (NAST, 2019). The growing disparity between demand and supply is a problem university theater training programs are beginning to face. A key issue is providing career opportunities for students educated and trained in theater. The current limits on large gatherings due to the COVID-19 global pandemic will likely hobble live theater into the foreseeable future. With many theaters permanently closing and Broadway theaters remaining shuttered until September 2021 (The Broadway League, 2020), along with closings by Disney, Broadway tours, cruise ships, and other typical outlets for acting jobs gone, where will new theater graduates work? How can theater programs continue to graduate actors knowing they will likely work in a field other than the one for which they trained?

In 2022, the market-driven nature of theater training in the United States determines how actors are educated and for what media. Many of Stanislavsky's original methods of body and mind actor training are still being taught today even though Stanislavsky and some of his

adherents have recently come under criticism for racism, misogyny, and anti-Indigenous rhetoric (Freeman, 2012). It is important current theater educators pay attention to issues of large societal change that affect how students are taught and trained in their field, including removing or limiting the use of texts and teachers who were racist, homophobic, or misogynistic. This may mean extensive changes in how educators teach and train future theater students, but change is neither good nor bad, simply necessary (We See You W.A.T., 2020).

The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival is a nationwide program involving hundreds of theater schools. Their artistic director, Gregg Henry, commented on the discussion about artistic versus vocational training in an interview with the New York Times saying, “It's a big, internal curricular wrestling match. How do we effectively prepare our students for a career that has no interest in them being part of it? And how do you plug that into an effective undergraduate education?” (Weber, 2005, para. 6). It is a dilemma both for educators and for some professionals, who fear, on the one hand, that vocational training robs student actors of necessary artistic exploration and, on the other, that schools have to do a better job of preparing actors for the grim realities of professional life. I wanted to know what we can do as educators and theater professionals to balance between properly preparing student actors for their career while allowing them the space for artistic discovery. We need to know what we are preparing students for, exactly. It may be work in a busy commercial theater market like Broadway, or the nonprofit regional theater, or as community theater makers and advocates. All options have pros and cons, but students are not going to know at 18 or 19 years old what they should study to be successful in a highly competitive field. The reality is most students who show up in a beginning acting class in college want to continue a successful high school artistic activity they love or find fame and fortune, or both. As theater educators, it is our responsibility

to show them the reality of their dream and give them other options if they find out the reality is not for them.

What benefits exist for the of focusing on training students in the basics of becoming an actor, including creating a character, improving their voice and movement, plus also teaching them auditioning techniques, marketing and business basics, and also creating their own work in the slow times? Perhaps apprenticeships could be better used, allowing young actors to learn while they work on small roles, to build the layers of knowledge and work practice they need to be hired professionally. They would also get to see how more experienced actors work and create their artistic practice. Perhaps we should look at the long game of theater training for students by giving them tools they need to create in theater for a lifetime rather than preparing them to become another actor in the cog of the commercial theater industry.

Performing Arts Conservatories

This discussion about training actors would be incomplete without a basic discussion of the performing arts conservatories. In 2022 most of these are private schools, sometimes attached to a private university but existing as a separate entity. The fine arts conservatory, whether for music, art, or theater, has been around in one form or another for over two centuries as a way to teach specializations in the arts. In the past they were not, however, connected in any way to traditional colleges or universities. Initially, theater training in modern conservatories was the first attempt by educators at trying to balance academic ideals with practical actor training preparing for regional nonprofit theaters (Berkeley, 2008). The connecting of private conservatories to larger private universities gave the conservatories the benefit of the known and respected name of the university, and the university benefited by getting a highly profitable department. Often faculty were classified as guest artists rather than tenure-track faculty at the

university. Today this is a much more complex situation with different types of faculty being shared between the conservatory and the department and positions being moved from one area to another depending on undergraduate and graduate enrollment numbers (Larlham, 2011).

The formation of resident acting companies at regional theaters throughout the United States began in 1947 with Margo Jones' regional theater movement, which was seen as an alternative to Broadway's commercial offerings. Jones was an actor, director, and theater producer who saw a future where higher education and professional theater were intertwined. Her vision of devising university theater training to circulate actors into local and regional nonprofit theaters grew into a reality during the 1950s and 1960s, which led to a resulting need for psychophysically trained stage actors. Psychophysical actor training is based on Stanislavsky's work using techniques to explore the mind-body connection in creating and portraying characters on stage. Those actors also had to meet the demands of the challenging repertoire of plays then being produced by not-for-profit professional theaters (Zarrilli et al., 2013).

A handful of universities in the United States began forming conservatories dedicated to acting that offered BFA or MFA degrees and prepared students for the emerging not-for-profit professional theater movement (Berkeley, 2008). University-sponsored degree programs typically offered a training approach that balanced mind and body connection work, pioneered by Stanislavsky, with other coursework that developed technical skills needed for presenting the largely classical repertoire performed in theaters at the time (Romantsova, 2020). Beginning in the mid-1960s, several universities formed conservatories that trained actors to meet the needs of resident theaters, including the Carnegie Institute of Technology and the Yale School of Drama,

both of which were founding members of the League of Professional Theatre Training Programs (Zazzali, 2016).

The League of Professional Theatre Training Programs originated in 1971 as a consortium of university-sponsored conservatories granting BFA and MFA degrees in acting. Initiation of this consortium marked an institutional and pedagogical shift from the private studio and academy models of developing actors. It also reflected a causal relationship with the emergence of the U.S. regional theater movement, which needed classically trained actors to fill their repertoires (Zazzali, 2016). League programs such as Juilliard and the Yale School of Drama were the first to begin implementing psychophysical training curriculum to meet the casting demands of regional theaters in the United States. These programs were not profitable enterprises for a university, as many are today (Canning, 2018) but were created to stand separate from the university associated with it.

Theater Training in the 21st Century

Graham et al. (1966) clearly summed up the training situation in the 1960s, noting, "Theatre has been a fragmented profession for at least 17 centuries" (p. 323). Today, postsecondary theater programs come in many types, shapes, and sizes (e.g., celebrity-founded training schools, private liberal arts colleges, public universities). The *Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) College, University and Training Program Directory* (2021) provides an easy reference for students looking for theater training in college, university, conservatory, and other advanced training institutions. Actor training in the United States is more varied than ever. In a typical training program, core classes in scene study, voice, and speech are supplemented by specialist courses in mask, clown, dance, singing, stage combat, games, improvisation, and perhaps also in yoga, Suzuki, Feldenkrais, or other form of specialized physical training.

Training actors must include techniques in voice, body, and characterization, as well as script reading, theater history, and business practices, to be worthwhile. Techniques, exercises, and philosophical principles are most valuable in their ability to unlock expressivity and creativity in the artistic practice (Larlham, 2011). Although a degree is not required to be an actor, director, or other creative in theater, many people still want a college degree because it is usually necessary for other types of nontheater jobs. As the SNAAP Special Report discovered, artists often have to pursue non-art jobs to make ends meet while they work on their creative career (Frenette & Dowd, 2020).

The bachelor of fine arts (BFA) degree is a preprofessional degree in a number of fields that include performance or production elements of theater. The BFA follows a trade-school paradigm by focusing on professional hands-on training by performers for performance (NAST, 2019). Graduates are prepared to work professionally in the theater after receiving the BFA (Larlham, 2011). Students must audition and interview as part of their college application process because schools that offer the BFA seek the highest quality prospects in talent and ability to succeed not simply at completing school, but excelling in the professional theatrical complex of Broadway theater and beyond.

Bachelor of arts (BA) programs in theater emphasize education across the arts and sciences in humanities, literature, foreign language, and other competencies in addition to specialized courses in theater. Theater education at the BA level reflects the actual nature of a complex society that is informed by contemporary awareness to become critical thinkers as well as artists (Bridgstock, (2011). The goal of the BA is not to train actors to a profession but to educate students broadly and prepare them for graduate school, theater apprenticeships, or other professional opportunities. According to the SNAAP Special Report, most working artists with a

general education such as a BA felt better prepared for a generalist career in the arts, including nonprofit administration, arts history, advertising, and other tertiary arts careers and did lead to students maintaining a longer career in the arts (Frenette & Dowd, 2020).

At the graduate level, the MFA is a terminal degree for many areas of study in the theater such as acting, dance, directing, and design. For these professional areas, there is no corresponding PhD or doctoral degree offered nor expected so the MFA is the degree end point for most actors, directors, and designers in theater. Many graduates continue to train throughout their careers taking courses in the private sector but returning to graduate school is not typical once an MFA has been achieved. In contrast, the masters of arts, or MA, degree focuses on advancing depth and knowledge in areas of theater arts and drama (usually less performance- or production-based), is more academic in nature and many students will continue on to get their PhD after the MA. A PhD is considered the terminal degree in theater arts and drama education and is geared for someone who is knowledgeable in all areas of theater arts and drama with specialties in theory, history, and criticism.

For students pursuing a BA degree, the possibility exists for acquiring a 2-year associate of arts degree (AA) at a community college. Because the goal of most students is to complete a 4-year BA or BFA degree, what benefit is an AA degree be for performing arts majors, especially if the degree has a vocational focus on preparing students for the workforce with business knowledge as well as artistic technique? Community colleges, which have broad missions to serve both the local community where they are situated as well as students near and far, may be better positioned for efficient, comprehensive training for the performer (Beach, 2012; Weltsek, 2019). They are often a useful option for nontraditional students who may not initially consider going to college. They offer courses for degree credit, certificates, diplomas,

and associate degrees, as well as noncredit courses and business and industry training. Community colleges in the United States serve 45% of the nation's undergraduates, many of whom are minority, low-income, and older students, those historically underrepresented in higher education. Their accessibility creates interesting possibilities for a merging of the professional actor training model and vocational theater training. By leveraging the assets of affordability and flexibility, 2-year colleges may offer a unique bridge for U.S. educational systems, workforce, and the economy (Crawford, 2013).

Given a competitive, technologically driven world, community colleges may be the preferred academic venue for immediate work training, and the most responsive option to community education and workforce needs (Zeidenberg & Bailey, 2010).

Vocational Theater Training and Financial Considerations

Limited literature exists that discusses training professionals for theater careers through a Career and Technical Education (CTE) or vocational training path. CTE curriculum teaches specific career-oriented skills through practice and hands-on experience in middle school, high school, and postsecondary institutions. CTE is split into 16 career clusters, or tracks, that apply to different high-demand careers. One of the 16 tracks is Arts, Audio Visual Technology, and Communications. The focus of this pathway is usually on teaching the technology that helps create today's entertainment, and less often on artist preparation (Stauffer, 2020). Stauffer (2020), also wrote that although CTE may include some theory-based learning, it is focused on skills which differs from traditional and university-based education which is primarily theory. Practice, hands-on experience, and application tests make up the bulk of CTE because most CTE careers require workers to have experience in their field before starting a career. Though theater does not require actors to have experience, it certainly helps. Technical crew and designers are

expected to have work experience of some kind before being hired professionally (Jaen et al., 2020).

Two-year vocational theater programs were explored but on a limited basis simply because these types of training programs are not easy to find in the U.S. postsecondary education market. Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, California offers a 2-year associate in arts (AA) degree in theater for students transferring to a 4-year degree program, and a 2-year vocational certificate program for students going directly into the job market. The vocational certificate program develops the skills in acting or technical theater necessary for aspiring theater artists to pursue a career in professional theater. Students enrolled in the vocational program receive instruction from theater professionals who are company members of the Pacific Conservatory Theatre of Allan Hancock College (Allan Hancock College, 2019). PCPA began in 1964 as a resident theater company connected to Allan Hancock College. PCPA claims it is the only training program of its kind offered at a community college in the United States, offering artistic experiences for the community while preparing actors and theater technicians for a career in theater (Pacific Conservatory Theatre, n.d.). For California residents, the cost of tuition for 18 units per semester at PCPA/Hancock is $828 or $46 per unit or approximately $5,000 for professional theater training (Allan Hancock College, 2019). A degree or certificate that prepares a student for the professional world at a reasonable price point would be a valuable option for many students.

The U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (2020) indicated actors today earn a median of $20.43 per hour, often have some college education, and can receive long-term on-the-job training. The Actor's Equity Association, the union of professional U.S. actors, collects work data on all stage actors in their membership. Their data indicated members worked an average of

17 weeks during the 2018–2019 theatrical season (AEA, 2019). This number is basically unchanged during the previous 10-year reporting period. Actors typically do not work 50 weeks per year with 2 weeks' vacation. They are hired for a job which may have an end date of a few weeks, or it may be a successful Broadway show that has been running for years. Using the average hourly rate and multiplying by the U.S. Labor standard 40-hour work week but limiting it to the 17 weeks worked per year, an average theater actor earns a salary of approximately $14,000 per year. Because $14,000 per year is not enough to live on without assistance, most actors require additional jobs to make ends meet, either in theater as a technician, designer, or educator, or outside of theater entirely. Given the reality of work in the industry many students seek ways to train for a successful career in theater while avoiding a staggering amount of college debt that will take them decades to repay. This is where vocational, or career-focused, training for actors can be a beneficial method of getting trained performers into their careers to continue on-the-job training successfully.

Although there are many methods of theater training in the world today, in the United States a student will usually attend college for 4 years to obtain a baccalaureate degree in theater or attend a conservatory for 3 years for a specialized career certificate (Freeman, 2012). There are students who completely forgo formal theater training and seek auditions for jobs with no prior experience. If a college degree is not required in an industry such as theater, which it is not, then career training may be a stronger choice for students in commitments for time and money. Knowing what students need to learn before they enter the workforce is of great importance to both student and industry.

The recent Southern California Theatre Alumni Survey Report in 2019 provided information about what theater students want to learn before they enter the labor market. The

survey was designed by the Center Theatre Group to better understand the scope of career training currently being provided to early career theater artists, technicians, and managers, both in and outside of higher education institutions. They also looked at what career-related skills students felt were critical to their success in pursuing a live theater career, as well as any barriers they identified to entering that field. The survey collected over 300 responses from alumni representing more than 30 colleges and universities across Southern California. The results provide a sample of graduates in an area of active theater training that can help us understand the wider picture of theater training in the United States (Orozco-Valdivia & Schenkkan, 2019).

The Southern California Theatre Alumni Survey is helpful at compiling information about graduates personally and professionally, but especially about whether or not they believed they were prepared for their theater career immediately upon graduation. Almost universally, survey respondents agreed there were gaps in their education when it came to career readiness. Although 73% of alumni reported they were continuing to pursue a career in live theater, many expanded their career goals from what they initially studied (e.g., acting) to a broader focus (e.g., acting/producing/writing/online content creation). Learned skills most respondents found missing in their education were financial literacy training and other financial management-related skills, including knowledge of contracting, taxes, and negotiation, all of which would have been beneficial. Correspondingly, the greatest challenges participants identified in pursuing a career in live theater were finance and lifestyle-related and included low pay and unreasonable work/life balance. I would like more details about this data and how respondents were doing as individuals. If they have continued in their theater career what they do regularly to keep alive that spark of joy and interest? Does what lead them to a career in theater still drive them forward? Do they still have a love for the theater after however long they have been struggling or

succeeding at it? How have they compensated for any lack of knowledge they perceive in certain areas? If they knew then what they know now would they do it all over again or change some part of their experience? By focusing on a smaller group of participants in individual interviews I will be delving deeper into each participant's feelings and experience of success to consider how early career-focused training was encountered by them and if it may be a beneficial choice for other students embarking on a career in theater.

Part of this process of research was to use my own experience of success in professional acting and directing as well as my 20 years as a teacher of theater to augment my understanding and presentation of the results to an appropriate audience. My hope is this will also lead to consequent changes in how theater training and education is viewed and studied by theater colleagues.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore students' experiences in the vocationally focused theater training program at a 2-year college, and to determine students' perceptions of the impact of participation on achieving personal goals and career expectations in the theater. Listening to the individual stories of theater artists trained with a vocational focus provided me the opportunity to understand the nature of the training students received and to delve deeper into how students were prepared for a lifetime career in the world of live theater. A multitude of training methods and styles exist for actors and performers from the 19th century's Stanislavsky into the 20th century and Hagen, Chekov, Delsarte, and Meisner, to name but a few (Davis, 2001; Kirby, 1972; Maria i Serrano, 2006). Although no one right way exists for educating everyone, more beneficial methods for particular students exist. These interviews allowed me to gather the individual stories and experiences of former students and determine that a vocationally focused 2-year theater program was useful for them.

Research Design

The design for this study employed qualitative interviews to explore the lived experiences of students who completed a vocationally focused theater training program offered at a 2-year community college. Individual face-to-face interviews via Zoom videoconferencing software with six former students served as the source of the research. The original plan included only five interviewees but one of the participants suggested a sixth student who fit the requirements and had a different experience since they started as an actor and then became a theater

technician. The data acquired during the sixth interview added depth to the research and were included in the final stories.

Qualitative interviewing is a process of investigation into how individuals make sense of their lived experiences that creates fully formed stories, or narratives, with data (Rocco, 2003). Each interview was between 50 and 75 minutes for each of the six research participants. A qualitative interview structure allowed me to gather rich, descriptive data on students' beliefs, feelings, and perceptions and I presented it in a narrative fashion to admit readers into the lives of students engaged in a theater program. Every person's story is valuable for the information it contains and the emotions it evokes in the reader. For this reason, I shared participants detailed, individual stories. Qualitative interviews allowed for the amplification of the lived experience stories of research participants, and as a researcher with a personal understanding of what theater students and young professional actors experience in their lives added depth to the final narrative (Giacomini & Cook, 2000). A well-written or well-told story can draw us in and make us care about an issue never considered before. It can help us understand others' experiences more deeply and teach us how to develop empathy with others (Suzuki et al., 2018). This research tells the stories of participants so others might connect, empathize, and understand them. Because I examined both past and current experiences, there was a combining of retrospective and present-day responses, which made narratives fuller and more three-dimensional. Interviews allowed a way to gather differing perspectives which reflected how participants think and feel and delved deeply into a subject that reflects some breadth but little depth in the current research literature.

A benefit of using qualitative research is that it supports simplifying and managing data without destroying complexity and context (Atieno, 2009). When researchers want to learn from participants about their experiences, the meanings they attach to those experiences, and their

interpretations of those experiences, research methods must be used that allow for discovery and justly present individual perceptions and reflect the complexity of interpretations.

In the limits of a study design, there is some room for the art of interviewing to come into play. Interviewing is an art governed by certain scientific principles. The interviewer's art consists in creating a situation in which the respondents' answers will be reliable and valid (Dean, 2007). Interviewing six people did not give me a general understanding of a broad segment of the population, but it did allow for a deeper, richer knowledge of a small and similar group and how they have experienced certain phenomena. Getting and sharing their personal stories illuminated the data in ways that made it easier to see and hear for more people. It is important to mention that this study did not seek to define student success, nor to determine if the participants have been successful based on common metrics often used for such research (Museus, 2014). I have told the rich and nuanced stories of six people who received training that was centered in a career mindset and how that training helped them not only create success but to understand and experience their own feelings of accomplishment.

Qualitative interviewing involves deep listening to participants' stories and seeking to understand the context and ways that stories were constructed and presented. I was able to ask follow-up questions based on initial responses to create a fuller narrative of individual experiences that went into detail and depth of understanding. Qualitative researchers promote a reflexive approach that involved critical examination of the nature of the research and the role of the researcher (Larsson et al., 2013; Stern, 2005). Reflexivity is a common qualitative practice in which researchers, as instruments of data collection and analysis, consider ways their subjective experiences shape interpretation of participants and their realities. I found this particularly relevant as I looked into the lived experiences of former students who learned much of their

beginning theater training from me. This knowledge and transparency gave me a better understanding of my participants and their stories. Reflexivity gives us a reflection in which researchers consider who they are in the world through perspectives, beliefs, ideas, and how it informs the research from its conceptualization to analysis (Berger, 2013; Damsa & Ugelvik, 2017).

One way to encourage reflexivity is by using a research journal throughout the process which allowed me keep my focus on the data collected and to maintain transparency with my own beliefs and biases. Reflexivity challenged me as researcher to examine how my research assumptions, personal beliefs, and emotions might have entered into my research, and kept track of my written thoughts and ideas (Meyer & Willis, 2018).

Participants

I assembled a sample group that included graduates of a 2-year college theater program who went on to seek another college degree, as well as those who immediately entered a career in theater. Women and men were included and students of different races, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds created a truly inclusive and diverse narrative. The presence of diverse voices in our scholarly spaces is important not only to hear and listen to these perspectives but also to actively promote diversity (Sousa & Clark, 2018).

All participants were currently working in theater, film, or ancillary fields (including education in a theater context) as their primary occupation. Although some participants do have other jobs outside of the theater, especially during the COVID-19 environment, it was important to hear from those who maintain their work in theater and have a goal to continue their theater careers for the long-term.

Creswell (2006) asserted researchers should use one of various sampling strategies such as criterion-based sampling to obtain qualified candidates who provide the most credible information and were willing to openly and honestly share information or their story.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Participants have graduated from or completed all theater courses in the Associate of Arts in Theater Pathway at a 2-year community college in Georgia between 2007–2016.
2. Upon graduation, participants have maintained a career in theater as a professional actor, director, stage manager or other theater or performance-related job. This does not eliminate work in film, television, and other closely aligned performing areas.
3. Participants were varied to include as many experiences as possible, including diversity in age, sex, race, ethnicity, those who continued on to complete a bachelor's degree, and one participant who did not continue for an advanced degree.

The three sampling criteria produced a purposive sample of former students who decided to continue in a theater-related career after completing the program. Continuing to pursue work in theater is not a given for program completers, because the career is a challenging one, especially for new graduates, women, and people of color attempting to secure an audition, get a job, and then repeat the process when current work is finished (Zazzali, 2016). By interviewing participants who meet all three criteria, I was able to gather data about former students' views of their training, determined if a vocational focused theater education was meaningful and helpful to them, and whether the program provided a strong foundation to start and maintain a theater career. The selected period, 2007–2016, reflects the time when the vocational-focused training program was implemented at the institution. A 5-year period between eligible participants and

the present allowed time for individuals to complete a 4-year degree or gain traction as an actor in professional theater. My interest was in the ongoing experience of their training and education and how they perceived its effects, rather than an immediate response from recent graduates who may be struggling with the postgraduation job search.

Homogenous purposive sampling is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most proper application of available resources (Etikan et al., 2016). A primary reason for conducting qualitative interviews with a homogenous sample was to obtain a better understanding of the overall perceptions among the participants lived experiences. Creswell (2013) stated it is essential for all participants to have similar lived experiences of the phenomenon being studied. All of my participants were connected by the theater training they received and has given me a better overall picture of how a vocational focus worked for a similar, yet diverse, group of students.

Data saturation is the most commonly employed concept for estimating sample sizes in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2020). Data saturation is linked to sampling strategies and sample size because sufficient sample sizes are necessary for quality data. Data saturation occurs when no new information is obtained from interviews and/or observations (Morse, 2000). Five interviews were the starting point for my research, and after completing five interviews, one of the participants gave me the name of a sixth person who fit the requirements but had chosen to pivot from acting to technical theater after graduation. This additional participant gave me a clear point of data saturation with the repetition and verification of the previous five participants. Therefore, six completed and analyzed interviews led me to the data saturation point near the expected number I started out with (Burnard et al., 2008; Gill, 2020). There is no one-size-fits-all method to reach data saturation because study designs are not universal. However, researchers do

agree on some general principles and concepts: no new data, no new themes, no new coding, and ability to replicate the study (Guest et al., 2006). No new themes go hand-in-hand with no new data and no new coding (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). That point was reached at the sixth interview so that became the final interview of my research.

Data Collection

Though I much preferred to conduct interviews face to face in a comfortable location chosen by each participant, the rapidly changing and open-ended restrictions on travel and meeting in groups due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (CDCP, 2020) led me to conduct all interviews via Zoom, a secure, online, video conferencing system that is accessible to all parties. Participants chose a comfortable location from which to meet online and all interviews occurred without technical issues. According to Archibald et al. (2019), Zoom is a useful method for conducting qualitative interviews and is a preferred method compared to in person interviews, telephone, or other videoconferencing platforms. The convenience, ease of use, security, interactivity, and its ability to facilitate personal connections between users made Zoom a highly suitable platform for collecting qualitative interview data for this research.

My qualitative data collection methods included audio recorded semistructured interviews, direct transcriptions of each interview, member checking, inductive interview coding, and a researcher journal. Interviews were the primary data source. Interviews were used to become reacquainted with each interviewee, explore meaning and perceptions, and gain a better understanding of participants' lives and experiences (Ryan et al., 2009). Talking with people in this manner was an excellent way of gathering information, and really listening to each person was my primary focus and goal of these interviews. The experience of talking and listening to these participants was informative, enlightening, and thoroughly enjoyable.

Semistructured interviews are sometimes referred to as informal, conversational, or soft interviews, but there is power in listening and paying attention (Krueger, 2009). Individual in-depth interviews allowed me to delve deeply into social and personal matters and contribute to the research with a conceptual body of knowledge based on meanings that life experiences hold for interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). My interviews were between 50 and 75 minutes and included time for participants to ask questions about the process. I asked planned questions and responded with follow-up questions as was appropriate for clarification or deeper understanding. Interviewing offered an inherent flexibility to change direction to probe a topic or deepen a response, and to engage in dialogue with participants to uncover feelings and reactions to questions (Galletta & Cross, 2016). Qualitative research interviews are conversations with a purpose that are informed by a research question (Smith & Eatough, 2012). The same questions were addressed in each interview, but the order of the questions varied slightly for each participant based on the conversational direction as it progressed to keep the casual conversational nature of the interview.

Every interview was audio recorded and transcribed using Zoom's integrated features. Member checking was used once all interviews and transcriptions were complete. A relatively common practice in qualitative research is to involve participants after data collection through member checking in which participants are invited to check, comment on, or approve the researchers' data or interpretations to confirm whether they are correct and meaningful from participants' viewpoints (Candela, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All interviews took place in a concurrent 6-week period in May and June 2021. Once the transcript of an interview was complete the participant was emailed a summary of the interview for review and comment. The participants reviewed their summary and added or edited only small bits of demographic

information, such as dates and ages, as it suited their memory of the question and their experience. None of the participants requested a full transcript of their interview review but all were offered one.

The Interview Process

Each participant was interviewed live online via Zoom videoconferencing software, which provided a recording of the interviews and was easily accessible for everyone. Each participant was interviewed in a 50 to 75-minute block of time. Questions were open-ended with other questions that came up depending on how individuals answered. In a semistructured approach, as researcher I asked a standard set of questions to collect data, but provided opportunities to ask additional questions when an interesting or new line of inquiry developed during the interview process (Drever, 1995). The flexibility of asking questions in response to unique interviews helps researchers discuss particular topics in depth. This is one reason I chose the semistructured interview method for collecting data.

I started each interview by reviewing (a) the informed consent form (see Appendix A), (b) the purpose of the study, (c) the right and ability to drop out of the study at any time, and (d) asked each participant to choose on a pseudonym to represent them in the study. Only two participants chose their own pseudonym, whereas the other four asked me to choose for them. All forms and information items were presented digitally before any interview questions were asked (see Appendix B). Robson (2011) recommended qualitative interviews be divided into five phases which I used thusly:

1. Introduction: As the interviewer, I introduced myself and described the aim of the interview. I was previously known to all participants, so we spent 3 to 5 minutes catching up on life events since we had last spoken.

2. Warm up: I started with easy questions to ease the situation from the beginning using Questions 1 and 2.
3. Main body: I focused on the main topic of my study with Questions 3 through 13.
4. Cool off: again, simple questions which concluded the interview and left space for the participant to ask questions about the process or to clarify anything they wished. This was Question 14.
5. Closure: I thanked the interviewee for his/her valuable contribution and time and reminded them to look for their interview summary to review in 2 weeks' time.

To avoid yes or no answers I prompted the interviewee with extended questions based on the original in-depth interview question. See Appendix B for the list of specific questions.

Interview questions started with inquiry around background information about the participant's training and education so I knew what, if any, training they received after leaving their 2-year college theater program. The questions then followed a path to discover their current career situation, how well prepared they thought they were to launch their theater career after college, and how their current reality synched with their career and life goals. I also sought their thoughts on how the COVID-19 theater closure had affected them, what they have accomplished artistically since March 2020, and how their 2-year college theater training helped them in any ways they can identify. I also asked them about their ideal college theater program if they were to create one from scratch. The big picture goal for my questions was to discover if their experience of theater at their 2-year college gave them an informed view of success in theater and if what they learned might be enough to drive them forward in their theater careers though all the changes that come at them over their lifetime—including life changes, ageing, and even the COVID-19 global pandemic.

A few unpredictable responses did come up during interview sessions but nothing far off from what was expected. The question relating to the debt they owed for their college education led all discussions down an interesting path about the futility of worry on things one cannot change. Aside from a desire to do another research project exclusively on the subject of college debt for artists we were not derailed in the data collection process. Alase (2017) advised qualitative researchers to be prepared to expect the unknown when it comes to the actions and/or inactions of their research participants in an interview session. Having extended questions ready helped me not worry should a problem occur, but there was no need for them in the end. See Appendix C for optional extended questions prepared in case they were needed.

Research Journal

It is important to distinguish between the voices of participants and researchers. Therefore, I used a research journal before data collection began and throughout the data collection and analysis process to record my experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the study, participants, and my awareness of any conscious biases discovered. The journal was primarily autobiographical in nature and created a record of my emotions, observations and thoughts, feelings, and decision-making processes throughout data collection. I kept this journal with me throughout the data collection process and regularly recorded what I was thinking about my own insights, described my reactions to interviews, potential paths followed, connections to literature, and challenges to a system of learning I helped to put in place at the college.

Journals and notebooks allow researchers to reflect on how the process of inquiry takes shape and what emergent patterns, categories, themes, and concepts they notice in the data (Saldaña, 2016). I recorded interactions with participants including descriptive notes during interviews, questions participants asked, and details about their experiences. These notes were

kept in individual sections dedicated to each participant. I also noted when our conversations deviated from the interview protocol. Data from the journal is presented with interview data and used in how participants' stories were told. Due to the very personal nature of the data involved, all research notes, transcriptions, and recordings will be securely stored for 3 years in case of research inquires, then safely destroyed (DHHS, 2018).

Logistics and Timeline

When planning interviews, the participants' schedules were considered as was their access to the internet, and the researcher's schedule. Logistics managed via email and direct text message to arrange schedules.

Interviews were scheduled and carried out beginning May 10, 2021 and all interviews were completed by June 25, 2021. After each interview each was transcribed, I began looking for common themes. As each transcription was finished, I wrote a summary of the interview in paragraph form which was emailed to the participant, and it was requested they respond in a week to confirm if it was an accurate representation of their interview responses. They each agreed their summary was accurate with only small information changes. I then proceeded with writing each of their narratives. They were also given the option to review the full verbatim transcript but no one requested that option.

Data Analysis

Six semistructured interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Content analysis was applied to each qualitative transcription. Content analysis is the process of reviewing any type of media to evaluate what it says and how it says it and focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Qualitative content analysis goes beyond simply counting words to

examining language for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into categories that represent similar meanings to uncover experiences and themes (Weber, 1990).

My textual analysis was conducted using both hand coding and computer coding methods looking for commonalities in codes and themes. Prior to hand-coding, transcriptions were processed through the NVivo (QSR, 2020) software which facilitated the generation and storage of coded and themed data, organized codes by content and themes, and linked codes to the transcribed interviews. Following the initial round of identification of different codes and characteristics in the data, this process was repeated in an iterative fashion as data were analyzed to illuminate patterns found in the transcriptions and identify emerging patterns or themes in the words and phrases used by the participants (Warnick et al., 2016). Themes are broader patterns of shared meaning that illuminated the research question (Charmaz, 2006) and allowed the final, written narrative to connect these people in how they experienced their studies and their craft. The similarities and differences in their lived experiences gave a fuller story of this research and allowed the reader to engage with the narrative and understand the perspective of the speaker (Coplan, 2004). The NVivo (QSR, 2020) software was used to organize data through most-used words which made it simple to group them together into themes for use in writing the story of this data. Coding program NVivo's word cloud function was then used to create a visual image of the themes. This step was mostly for my own visual reckoning to allow me to quickly confirm themes the program executed as a list of words and phrases.

Hand coding then commenced. Each interview transcript was read three times, with each reading making note of words that repeated in and between interviews. The code words were grouped into larger themes in the margins such as *success, involvement, understanding, connection, wandering, direction, skills, grit, passion, continuance, strength, focus, and*

determination. Additional hand coding of data via colorful sticky notes and a two-foot by three-foot display board was used to gather a visual picture of the data. Common words were printed on each sticky note keeping like-words in the same color scheme then placed under the participant's name in a column. This allowed me to see the similarities and to then create another group that combined individual themes into common group themes. These visual props helped me see the big picture of the data in one place as I worked with transcripts, codes, themes, and observations.

As someone who is a strong visual organizer, putting the entire collection of data on wide display let me see everything together at the same time and still allowed me to zoom in on smaller sections as conclusions were drawn from the data and discovered categories, or themes, of student experiences around theater education and training. Research themes are topics, ideas, and patterns that came up repeatedly in the data. Identifying repetitions, unique group word use, metaphors and analogies, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, and missing data allowed for deeper understanding of the data (Bernard et al., 2016). This became my hand-written theme board which I then compared to the computer-generated word list and word cloud. Using the two different methods of coding substantiated the needed similarity to give me confidence that the data revealed was sound. During the hand-coding process, standard sheets of 8.5 x 11-inch paper, sticky notes, and a large format display board were used. The physical act of writing themes, codes, and observations on sticky notes, arranging sticky notes, and rearranging them encouraged a slower and more meaningful interaction with the data (Maher et al., 2018). This longer period of sitting with the data gave me time to think, and because thinking is research (St. Pierre, 2020) that extra time was used to consider the best method for sharing the data with the preferred audience. According to Sievers-Hunt (2021), not all are

privileged to be able to read academic journals, especially in the arts, so we need to meet our readers where they are. This led to the decision to present the data in the form of a play which allowed it to be more accessible as a document. The final play was then presented at a public reading and made available separate from the academic paper for interested readers.

Coding is a key stage of qualitative data analysis where data are sorted and organized into categories or groups of ideas (Maher et al., 2018). The coding process allowed for examining and interpreting the data to create full, rich narratives for each person and to pull research themes, or fundamental concepts, from those narratives on which to build interpretive insights. Once the list of themes was pulled from the data I returned to the transcripts and began the process of filling in the spaces around the themes by writing the stories of each participant. Rather than simply reporting on the data findings in a usual way I wanted to meet my audience of theater educators in the theater with a play written around the data discovered in my research. Baker (2018) wrote that playscripts are research artefacts in their own right by showing how an initial research question informs the writing of plot, characterization, setting, dialogue, spectacle, etc., and the knowledge produced by exploring that idea permeates every aspect of the play. Hall (2013) noted:

> *Writing* is verb and practice, and *textuality* [emphasis in original] the general outcome of all writing, a second or third nature that weaves through the world as the already written, reactivated every time an act of reading or textual memory takes place. Textuality is produced and reproduced through writing and reading, its material and aesthetic forms proliferating without any sign of decay. (p. 358)

The play scripts produced with a practice-led research framework can spread knowledge in the context of narratives which readers directly experience, thus providing an alternative way of

coming to understand the themes investigated in the research (Baker, 2018). Writing a playscript using the data found was a more accessible, yet still rigorous, way to present the information to the theatrically minded audience I wanted to reach. Using found interpretive insights the process began of writing a script using allegory to represent the data spoken by the participants through their interview answers. Allegories and their characters are fictional tales that convey meaning not explicitly set out in their narratives. In writing them, researchers move beyond the real story to frame coherent metaphors and symbols and to offer a multilayered truth that lies between the lines of understanding of which we are often unaware. Allegories serve as simplified expression of truths or generalizations of human experience through symbolism and enable the audience for the research to see the essence of experiences and derive new meaning in these truths (Kaarst-Brown, 2017).

Themes come from the data in inductive approach, or from prior theoretical understanding in deductive approach. The inductive approach, used in this research, is most common and involves analyzing data with little or no predetermined theory, structure or framework and used the actual data to derive the structure of analysis. This approach was comprehensive and time-consuming but was most suitable where little or nothing was known about the study phenomenon, as in this case (Burnard et al., 2008). By creating a setting for the action, characters who speak the data and give context through dialogue, monologue, and other theatrical narrative techniques allowed me to present the findings creatively and with a new eye to using the theater itself to tell these stories. By writing up the findings as a play there was also the opportunity to present the data for review, to hear the play read aloud, take comments from the readers and audience, and use the play reading process as part of the research (Hundt et al., 2019). This research-based theater falls into one or more of four theater genres identified from

the literature as theater for knowledge transfer/translation in social science research: nontheatrical performances, ethnodramas, theatrical research-based performances, and fictional theatrical performances. Nontheatrical performances are conversational or poetic monologues between researchers. Ethnodramas are largely based on the methodology of Augusto Boal and involve data-based vignettes. Theatrical research-based performances "are informed by the research process, but do not strictly adhere to the data as script . . . this genre may move away from realism and verisimilitude toward the aesthetic and creative power of Theatre as an interpretive, analytic tool" (Rossiter et al., 2008, p. 136). Using the research to inform the process, my play was created using a theatrical research-based model. Two presentations of the work were presented, the first was a virtual presentation for a small group of colleagues in September 2021 and the second was in person at a local theater with both a live and virtual public audience in February 2022. A second performance seemed necessary to present the changed version of the play after the revision following the first performance notes.

Evaluation of research-based theater is challenging. In postperformance evaluations, there is feedback on both the content and aesthetics of the play. Three main methodologies have been used for evaluating knowledge transfer in theater: unstructured feedback as informal discussions, structured open-ended questionnaires, and structured quantitative surveys (Rossiter et al., 2008). The data for the postperformance evaluation consisted of audio-recorded postshow discussions between the audience, cast, and researcher to capture the feedback. The oral comments of audience members were reported here as said. There was no follow up with individuals following the postshow discussions. The quotes represent their immediate responses to the event rather than a reflective discussion after a filmed presentation (Adams et al., 2015).

Observation of participants is often combined with qualitative interviews to acquire more perspectives or in-depth information on an experience. Field notes and interview transcriptions are considered to be equivalent texts and provide a complete body of material for analysis (Polit & Beck, 2004). Researcher observation notes were made immediately following each interview while the interview was still fresh in mind and to catch first impressions. Notes were made about the appearance of the interviewee, their apparent comfort or discomfort, the general atmosphere, their disposition to talk, gestures, nonverbal signals, eye contact, and interactions during the interview. These observations were then used in the writing process for each character in the play to give them more depth of personality. Although the play's characters were allegorical, meaning they stood in for multitudes in their name, they were still based in realness of those participants interviewed.

As soon as possible after each scheduled interview they were transcribed verbatim to a paper copy and then analyzed by using a color-coded categorization for analyzing common themes that emerged. The process of narrative analysis began with reading researcher notes and interview transcripts from the first participant. From interviews and observations, a narrative was constructed for each participant that captured the experience each of these students had in their theater program and in their careers as it was lived in rich description, observation, and interpretation in the telling of the story. As in live theater experiences, this created possibilities for others to empathetically experience what happened and to make their own connections (Gair, 2011). The primary goal of constructing the illustrations was to provide as much information about participants as possible, so readers understand the place vocational theater training holds in participants' current career situation. Qualitative researchers use narrative approaches to explore the stories of participants and to understand ways these stories were constructed and positioned.

Critical reflection was used to provide a framework for deconstructing the stories and exploring assumptions about knowledge, power and reflexivity (Hickson, 2016).

Trustworthiness of Study

Glesne (2005) explained, "A common mistake in interviewing is to ask questions about a topic before promoting a level of trust that allows participants to be open and expansive" (p. 84). She advised researchers "to be mindful of status differences inherent in any research interaction and work to minimize them when possible" (p. 99). All participants had completed their 2-year theater degree a minimum of 5 years ago to distance the student from the instruction and instructors. Interviewees were encouraged to be open and forthright in their answers without regard to how they might think they were expected to answer to create openness about issues that might be sensitive. They were all open and forthcoming with their answers and were not averse to telling me about negative aspects of their education journey. Our conversations were professional but had a familiarity of experience which allowed a high level of comfort and trust for the participants. The participants were instructed they were free to not answer any questions they chose for any reason without consequences, but no one took this option and all questions were answered by all participants in an open and engaged manner.

Validity, subjectivity, and trustworthiness need to be addressed in any qualitative study to demonstrate results were credible and meet standards of quality (Creswell, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Validity refers to how accurately participants' responses represent their actual realities (Creswell & Miller, 2000), and subjectivity refers to inferences drawn from data. Trustworthiness is a concept that addresses issues of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is achieved when research findings represent the correct interpretation of participants' original views. Transferability is the degree

results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or with other respondents. Dependability allows for verification of finding and confirmability is the degree to which research findings can be confirmed by other researchers. This is accomplished when interpretations were clearly derived from data and not researcher biases (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

To manage and address concerns of validity and trustworthiness member checking was used, as was rich descriptions of data, and peer review through a public staged reading with an after-play discussion with audience, actors, and playwright-researcher. The method of returning an interview or analyzed data to a participant is known as member checking. Creswell (2007) described member-checking as sharing data and interpretations with study participants to ensure researcher interpretations were consistent with participants' intended meaning. Member checking is used to validate, verify, or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking in this research occurred when a completed interview summary was returned to participants via email. They were asked to check the summary to determine if what was summarized agreed with what they said in their interview. Participants were asked to comment on and adjust the summary to better reflect their personal story. There were no big adjustments requested only small notations of timeline, dates, and order of activities discussed. Allowing and encouraging the participants to be part of the process of determining their story accuracy enhanced accuracy of the data (Brit et al., 2016).

Finally, trustworthiness of results was bolstered by a meaningful disclosure of my position and connection to the experience of study. In qualitative research, researchers are the primary instrument through which data are collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For this reason, it was particularly important to clarify my history and viewpoints.

By understanding my perspectives, consumers of the research are better positioned to evaluate my influence on the study and make informed decisions about the transferability of findings to outside settings.

Fook and Gardner (2007) argued critical reflection should be used by researchers to acknowledge the values from which they are operating, to look at the variety of points of view offered, and to be open to new understanding or knowledge about what is happening and why. Researchers using critical reflection need to be reflexive, appreciating the influences of the researcher's own background, assumptions and expectations on the research process and outcomes. My own theater education and experience involved study at a public university for a BA degree, and completion of my MFA at a large public university. I have also obtained additional professional career certificates to fill in gaps in my experience and training. My appreciation for my liberal arts education is great, but I also understand it did not prepare me for the rigors of becoming a professional actor. There is intrinsic value in a general liberal arts education which builds critical thinking, problem solving, imagination, and empathy for others (Nussbaum, 2010; Wintrol, 2014), and creative fields such as art, theater, and music should be studied in that way. However, attending to education for a creative field while not giving attention to professional skill training leaves a large gap for students to navigate. Based on current research on the topic students need instruction both on being an artist and creating something artistic, but also to the craft and trade of building necessary skills (Berkley, 2008; Coromel, 2009). In particular, I used myself as the researcher component when I made the decision to present my Chapter 5 findings in the form of a written play script. This came out of my desire to find a literary bridge to other theater educators that would speak to them in their own language. The research paper is not a common method of information sharing in the

performing arts and I was concerned my research might languish and go unread by theater educators. Reading several qualitative dissertations that used poetry, literary narrative, and drama as vehicles for presenting findings led to finding what I had been searching for, and immediately started writing up the research findings as a playscript. Because qualitative researchers are themselves a primary instrument in data collection, they rely partly or entirely on their feelings, impressions and judgement in data collecting (Gall et al., 2014). I have relied heavily on my own interpretation in understanding the meaning of the data found and have used my extensive experience in theater to collate, interpret, and present that data in a format that speaks to me on a core level. One of the first skills I learned in college theater was how to read a playscript. This is a skill everyone in theater uses whether actor, director, designer, or educator.

The role of the researcher is to identify and add to existing knowledge with an objective to give a new perspective and maintain respect for views held by others (Creswell, 2013).
I set out to discover if a focused, vocational, professional program of theater training at a 2-year college may support fulfilling and successful life-long careers in theater by giving students a foundation in theatrical technique and an awareness of the creativity that must continually be developed. Five of the six participants themselves suggested the 2-year college community college was the ideal venue for such a training program and would be more accessible to students who might not otherwise be able to attend college because of a lack of finances or a challenging life situation. I sought out the experiences of former students of such a program to discover the full story of their lives and careers after training and to confirm recent research findings to deepen our understanding of students' experiences.

Assumptions and Limitations

Qualitative research looks deeply into smaller pieces of gathered data by interviewing or observing a very limited number of participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000). According to Eisenberg et al. (1997), the essence of qualitative research is to view events through the perspective of the individual people who were being studied to better understand the way they think, and their view of the world. By interviewing six former students for this research specific information was gathered on those students' experiences, but not all student experiences. The small sample size of this study means findings from this study cannot be extended to a wider population with the same degree of certainty that is found in quantitative analysis (Atieno, 2009). Size is a limitation of the external validity in this research study because six participants were interviewed.

One goal of this research was to allow the reader to better understand these students' stories and connect them to the rich information unearthed about vocational theater training. According to Lewis (2011), humans are drawn to stories through our daily residence in narrative life. We take in stories, our own and others, and tell them back to ourselves in a recursive process that augments our understanding. We absorb information from plays we see on stage and from reading them on the page. Plays are data rich and written precisely to make an audience interpret the data given to them (Haimbach, 2006).

Examining the findings through writing a play allowed for a deeper dive into the data using the very tools of theater (Brown, 2015). Using a group peer-review process of response discussions after a public reading of the play allowed for a deeper examination of the data. Two readings occurred, one in September 2021 and again in February 2022. Reading a play aloud in a group is a common process used by playwrights when they are writing a play. Plays are unique

in that they always go through a rigorous write-read aloud-edit process that iterates until the playwright is ready to work with a theater to produce the play on stage. Each stage production gives the playwright a chance to make changes, tighten the story, and make the play better with each audience who hears it until it is finally ready for print. Sharing my data as a theatrical play scripted opened up the data for more readers, particularly theater professionals who naturally process information in script format (Brown, 2015).

After a thorough examination of the literature it was painfully clear limited research attention has been directed toward the training and education of theater artists at the postsecondary level, particularly vocationally focused training programs. My hope is information on this topic may facilitate understanding of important aspects of these programs and generate interest in workforce education training in the performing arts. Adding my research allows higher education theater instructors to examine how their students are prepared in traditional theater training programs and find ways to enhance the experience of students so they may achieve success in their lives and work. Results of my research may accelerate the momentum of vocational-based theater programs and inform particular audiences, including theater educators and program leaders, as they reinvent and realign their theater training models to better connect higher education to the world of professional theater. Having sought information to illuminate the experiences of former students who completed a 2-year theater education program with a vocational focus and use the data determine how their lived experiences of that training supported them in their career and life goals.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore students' experiences in the vocationally focused theater training program at a 2-year college, and to determine students' perceptions of the impact of participation on achieving personal goals and career expectations in the theater. Listening to the individual stories of theater artists trained with a vocational focus provided the opportunity to understand the nature of the training students received and to delve deeper into how students were prepared for a lifetime career in the world of live theater.

In-depth, qualitative interviews gathered data to answer the following research questions:

1. What benefits have former students experienced after completing a vocationally focused college program that emphasized career training in theater arts combined with more traditional mind-body actor training?
2. Do differences exist in the perceptions of former students on their success in the theater based on their experiences in 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degrees in theater?
3. Using their individual stories as a guide, what were the expectations, hopes, and plans of former students as they continue to pursue a career in the theater and how might these findings be incorporated into a theater training program?

This part of the chapter provides a profile for the six individuals interviewed for this study. Participants completed their theater coursework between 2007 and 2015 from a 2-year community college in Georgia, United States, some of whom who went on to seek another college degree and others who immediately embarked on a career in theater. All participants

were currently working in theater, film, or ancillary fields (including education in a theater context) as their primary occupation. Primary in this context is relying on theater for at least 50% of their annual income.

One 50–70-minute interview was conducted with each participant and all interviews were conducted via the internet using Zoom conferencing software. Each profile provides information to paint a picture of the person while maintaining anonymity. The descriptions of the participants were based on our interaction during the interview and on my past experiences with each of them. Table 1 shows the age, race, gender, and year they graduated with their associate of arts (AA) degree from a 2-year college.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Year graduated
Arthur	29	White	Male	2015
Bernard	30	African American	Male	2009
Matt	30	Middle Eastern	Male	2007
Cru	28	African American	Female	2015
Penelope	30	White	Female	2008
Orlando	33	Middle Eastern	Male	2009

Participant Profiles

Each participant described in this chapter was given a pseudonym to maintain their anonymity. Participants were interviewed virtually using a qualitative interview format, a method which allows for an in-depth look at the unique experiences of people and their perceptions of studied events (Turner, 2010). Qualitative interviews were semistructured in nature and allow for flexibility during the data collection process. This structure allowed me to

use a preplanned list of questions and let the actual interviews be less scripted and more conversational in tone compared to other types of interviews (Yin, 2016).

Arthur

Arthur is 29, is a cheerful, focused, engaging young White man who often uses humor to lessen the tension in a situation. He cares deeply about those around him and strives to grow and to be his best self. When discussing his time in college he refers to himself as a nontraditional student due to starting college later (age 24) and because he was fully responsible for his finances during that time. After graduating with his AA in theater he went on to complete his bachelor of arts (BA) in theater at a public university in suburban Atlanta. He currently works as an actor in the Atlanta metro area, and as a personal trainer in his own athletic business. I was the instructor for most of Arthur's advanced performance classes and I directed him in several plays during his time at the college. He has almost no remaining college debt because he has been paying off what he did have from his 4-year school at an amazing pace. He will be education debt free by Summer 2022, which clearly makes him happy. The timing of the COVID-19 global pandemic seems to have discouraged Arthur more than any other person interviewed. He has not progressed in his career at the rate he planned when he was younger, and it clearly bothers him. His income prepandemic was 50% theater (i.e., acting and singing gigs) and 50% personal training. His short-term goals include doing more theater that will support him both financially and as a positive career move. He also hopes to continue with his personal training because he enjoys it and thinks of it as something he created on his own with his theater background as support.

Bernard

Bernard is a gregarious, funny, and outspoken young African American man who loves what he does and surrounds himself with those who make life better. By his own admission, he is an accidental student having gone to college because it seemed the only option for him at the time. Upon completing all required theater courses at the 2-year college, he transferred to a private 4-year college in suburban Atlanta. He is outspoken with me about his time in school and said he did not find his 4-year college education nearly as valuable as what he got at the 2-year college. He currently works as a professional actor, puppeteer, and theater for youth educator. I was the instructor for most of Bernard's advanced performance classes and I directed him in multiple plays at the college during and after graduation. His first professional theater job was summer theater in 2010 postgraduation, something he is very proud of. He spoke consistently of the high level of professional preparedness he got while studying his community college, mentioning attending professional theater as part of class requirements:

> What a great way to network and communicate and build a rapport with not only theater companies, but with other theater artists. So, you're always kind of in the know, you're always aware, and you're making your face noticeable. So, when you do decide to have those opportunities where you can audition for certain shows, or there's certain scenes you might be interested in, they say, "Hey, I met you at this night." And, you know, this business it is all about that.

Bernard did not have any education debt after graduating with his 2-year associates degree, but he did acquire debt after completing his 4-year degree. He considers education debt a necessary thing and didn't let it bother him as he pushed forward in his career plans. His prepandemic income was 100% from theater-related employment and he sees that returning as

time moves on and the pandemic restrictions recede. His usual work includes acting in theater, teaching acting to kids and adults through the Alliance Theater School and at Jerry's Habima Theater in Dunwoody. He created and runs a weekly mental health and sexuality podcast and recently won a grant for his work. His short-term goals include returning to puppetry theater, something he used to do a lot of, and creating more new content for people around self-discovery. When asked about what he created in 2020 during the COVID-19 global pandemic, he told me he created virtual performing content for several theaters and schools and kept income coming in with those. He also created his community podcast to connect people from around the world during a time when we had all become disconnected in the physical world. He said:

> One of the things that was always drilled into us at [the 2-year college] was knowing our worth. And I think 2020 has taught me and reminded me that my voice does matter. My voice has significance. And it's worthy. And if I if there's a theater company, after all of this, that doesn't acknowledge when I speak, when I complain about something or have an issue about something, then I don't have to be here and my talents, my talents and myself can leave. I don't have to settle. I don't have to settle. So, from 2020 now on, I'm unapologetically vocal about a lot of things.

Matt

Matt has a thoughtful and philosophical demeanor, slightly graying black hair, and a ready laugh. His ancestry is Middle Eastern and he identifies as a person of color. He completed his AA in theater in 2007 having attended multiple campuses of a 2-year college to complete all his theater courses. Following graduation, he enlisted in the Air Force in 2009, shipped out in 2010, but was honorably discharged because of an unexpected illness. Thanks to the GI Bill he continued his education and received his BA in theater at a public university in the greater

Atlanta area. He feels that although his 2-year theater education was valuable, he got more from his bachelor's degree education. Matt works as a theater educator, improvisational artist, and performing collaborator. He never had me as an instructor for his performance classes but he did complete all courses for the AA in theater. He has a fair amount of education debt from his 4-year degree but none from his 2-year degree. He does not let it affect his job acceptance choices but he certainly knows it is there. Matt is married with a 10-year-old child who is also interested in acting and working in theater.

Cru

Cru is a beautiful African American woman with a lilting voice and a 100-watt smile that she shares often. She is quick to observe and understand what is happening in any situation she is in and has a positive attitude about life. She graduated with her AA in theater in 2015 and chose to not continue on to get her 4-year degree elsewhere. Prior to attending a 2-year community college, she started at a 4-year urban university in Atlanta because her family told her she needed to have a "career in education or something like that" for security. That first year was a rough year for her personally and her grades suffered, so "I got kicked out of [the university]." She still has education debt from her brief stint at a 4-year school and although she tries not to worry about it, it does keep her from going back to school because she fears racking up more education debt. She works as an actor in theater and film, as a makeup artist, a professional vocalist, and as an extremely popular and prolific social media influencer. This past fall she launched her own plus-size fashion line with a major clothing company. She recently became a series regular in a popular television show produced by Tyler Perry but her nondisclosure contract limits the information she is allowed to share. I was the instructor for all of Cru's advanced performance classes and I directed her in several plays and musicals during her time at the college.

Penelope

Penelope is clear-eyed, direct, 30 years old, White, and a self-described Amazon of a woman, “I’m a giant; taller than most guys I know.” She said she originally planned to become a forensic scientist to study the weather, but pivoted to a music education major for vocal performance when she started her college career at a 4-year university. She said she “hated it, hated where I was, and so I came to [2-year college] to figure stuff out.” She graduated with a theater AA in 2008. She said one of the best discoveries while at a 2-year college was that she did not want to be an actor, so she started studying technical theater. She continued her education at a 4-year public university in the greater Atlanta area and graduated in 2010 with her BA in theater and performance studies with a specialization in design and technical theater. She feels both schools and the education from them were valuable in her career. She is currently a full-time, salaried technical director of a local nonprofit theater north of Atlanta and a freelance lighting designer. Penelope was never a student in my classes so she has no history with me as a teacher. She does not have any education debt and does not plan to get an advanced degree. She is married and has a young child.

Orlando

Orlando is in his mid-30s, quick-witted, slightly self-deprecating, young man of Middle Eastern background. He says he now thinks of himself as a person of color, although he didn’t always. He completed his AA in theater in 2009, continued at a private 4-year college in metropolitan Atlanta for his BFA, then went to the west coast to complete his 3-year MFA He feels all his degrees and what he learned at each school has been valuable in his career, and he said without his time at the 2-year theater program he may not have continued through graduate school. He moved to New York City after graduate school and in 2017 he joined Actor’s Equity

Association, the labor union for actors and stage managers. In early 2020, he was on his way to working 100% as a full-time actor with two off-Broadway plays set to open in late 2020. Now, in 2022, he is back on track with three off-Broadway plays opening this year and several television and film roles completed or contracted. In his words, Orlando has, “a huge amount of school debt,” and does not think he can ever pay it off. He tries not to let it concern him or affect his theater job choices. He said, “It’s the Millennial’s curse to have college debt and not be able to buy a house.” I taught Orlando in most of his theater performance classes and directed him in several shows while he was getting his AA degree.

Themes

According to Saldaña (2009), “a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” (p. 13). During the coding process, data were analyzed and categorized. In the analysis process after the interviews with my research participants, common themes began to emerge. In the next section of this chapter, I present the data taken from the interviews that answer each of my research questions (see Table 2).

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore and understand students’ experiences in the vocationally focused theater training program at a 2-year college and to determine participant’s perceptions of the impact of that training on achieving personal goals and career expectations in the theater.

Table 2

Research Questions and Related Themes

Research questions	Themes
What benefits have the students experienced after completing a college program that emphasized career training combined with more traditional mind-body actor training?	Skills Development Support Inclusivity Confidence Professionalism Community
Were there differences in the participants' perceptions of their success based on their experiences of getting a 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degree in theater?	Continual work Creative growth New career paths Pursuing passion Longevity in field
Using their individual stories as a guide, what were their expectations, hopes, and plans as they continue to pursue their theater careers and how might a theater training program incorporate those?	My voice Matters Industry change Connection

Research Question 1

The first research question sought to discover what career benefits the students have experienced after completing a college program that emphasized career training combined with more traditional mind-body actor training. All six of the participants mentioned skills development in their answers. Some of the most commonly mentioned skills included entry into the industry, self-promotion, attending professional theater, theater etiquette and professionalism, and experiential learning. In one case, Cru told me how important going to New York City and seeing plays was for her career. She was among a group of 15 students in 2015 who received departmental scholarships to fly up and stay in NYC for 4 days and see three plays, attend an acting masterclass, and have a backstage theater tour. For her, this trip gave her the confidence to travel and live on her own because the department included on-the-ground learning on how to navigate a big city including travel on the subway, how to use a map, and solving problems that

might come up. Cru used examples from this trip more than once in answering the interview questions so it is clear this type of experience is valuable for her when she was a student at her 2-year school. Seeing professional theater in Atlanta was also important to all the participants and they equated it with professional development and networking activities. Seeing the shows were great, but getting to meet the actors, director, and others was useful as a way to enter the industry as a familiar face. They all appreciated the smaller tasks learned like actor resume writing, how to get a headshot, website building and other professional, business-focused skills. Although they all said they loved their theater classes, each had a different favorite, often the one where they had an enlightening or emotional experience that ignited their love for theater. They all also wanted more theater business and acting skills building classes and fewer core classes, although they agreed some core classes were valuable for everyone to build better actors.

The theme of having a support system inside the 2-year college program came up in every interview in some manner. Having small classes and individual attention was a major factor in these students' feelings of success. For those who continued on to a 4-year university they felt keenly they went from part of a familial group to a much larger program with more teachers but also more students where they had to fight to be noticed. Most felt they did have some college-to-career activities and classes in their 4-year and graduate education, but all said it was not as plentiful as what they got at their 2-year college. Also, having had that experience, they searched out more opportunities for professional training and learning opportunities. The other part of the support angle was inclusivity. Feeling like they were seen and treated as unique individuals was a powerful statement on their 2-year college experience. Those participants who identified as women and people of color had strong words to say in favor of their 2-year college experience and against their 4-year experience. Bernard was candid in his interview about the

racism he, and other Black students, experienced at their 4-year university theater programs. His experience was echoed around the country in Summer 2020 when Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) theater makers took White theater leaders to task with their "We See You White Theater" (W.S.Y.W.A.T., 2020) manifesto of demands for an antiracist theater movement.

The theme of confidence and professionalism also came out in all six interviews as very important career benefits from their 2-year degree. Confidence is also a building block that is created with support and inclusivity previously mentioned, and it leads directly into professionalism in theater, or "theater etiquette" as several participants called it. This would be the knowledge to arrive on time to all calls, to treat everyone on set with respect, to do work outside the rehearsal room, to hit your project deadlines (like memorization), and to always do and be your best. Everyone said learning professionalism at their 2-year college was the number one success factor for them. Several had stories of other actors they worked with who had degrees from "fancy schools" who didn't show up on time and did not take the work seriously. They all felt very proud of how they behaved on stage and in the rehearsal rooms. It was clear from the passion about this subject that these actors see their professionalism as essential to their feelings and experiences of success in theater.

Research Question 2

The second research question specifically searched for participants' perceptions of their success based on their experiences of getting a 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degree in theater. Not surprisingly, all participants consider continual work in theater as a marker of success. In a field that is inherently episodic, with actors auditioning for individual shows that may run for a limited number of weeks it can feel like you get one job only to finish a job the next month. Those who had continual theater work shared positive experiences of success and feeling like they were

doing the right thing. They felt validated by other creators and the theater industry and that led to more positive feelings about what they do in their career.

The COVID-19 global pandemic and 18-month theater shutdown came up often in my interviews. Though everyone spoke of some type of trauma dealing with this time, they also spoke of discovering new opportunities to create and pursue their theater passions. Everyone felt they had used their theater training to adapt to that particular situation, and to others in the past. Interestingly, Cru, who did not continue to a BA, had the strongest positive perception of her success over the last 2 years due to what she called, "my extreme adaptability and pivot-y-ness" in life and work. The other participants all felt successful at this stage of their career, but they also all had some type of teaching, office, or other work that allowed them to continue getting paid during the pandemic, and Cru did not. All her income was (and is) from acting and makeup artistry and she lost all of it overnight in March 2020. Her tenacity to keep going forward by creating her social media persona and business made her success real. She credits her ability to pivot and adapt to her training at while working on her AA degree. Orlando was on the cusp of off-Broadway and Broadway openings when the COVID-19 global pandemic shut down New York, and although he was not bitter about it, there was a sense of lost time. He has picked up this spring right where he left off as postponed productions started to be reconstituted for productions later this year. Bernard, Matt, and Arthur were also finding their acting jobs opening up again, and Penelope, who moved into technical theater, has steady work on new productions, but her work is tied directly to actors working, too.

The hope and possibility of new career paths in theater was a theme lurking in the background of what each person said, usually when discussing something around the past 2 years living with the COVID-19 global pandemic. Although they all love acting, and designing, they

also realize having all their eggs in one basket is not a sustainable plan long term. They each had a story about how they sat around during the weeks of pandemic lockdown “in my hammock,” “with my mom,” “in another Zoom meeting,” “playing a videogame,” and wondered what else they could do that would pay the bills and feed their passion for theater. Cru, of course, took that idea and created multiple avenues that excited and rewarded her. Bernard found helping other Black men with their identity questions was rewarding beyond expectation. Arthur did a lot of virtual theater and music events and found it fun and different enough to keep doing it. Penelope realized playing Animal Crossing, a Nintendo simulation game, (Nintendo, 2021) was “a lot like making theater but on my phone,” and found ways to “not lose my mind” at that time. Matt reignited an old love for long-form improvisational acting and is planning more offerings of shows and classes that use it at his theater. Each of these people used the crucible of the unforeseen to keep going and find new ways to create and grow. Though it was hard to see the pain they all went through, it was a joy to hear them make their future plans.

Research Question 3

The third research question looked at the participants’ individual stories to discover their expectations, hopes, and plans as they continued to pursue their theater careers and to discover how a theater training program might incorporate those in future planning. The main themes around this question came out in conversations about longevity in theater and how they can keep doing it 10, 20, and more years into the future. Five of six participants said they had no plans to stop doing theater but that they also wanted to continue growing and exploring what things they could do that were theater-adjacent or used their theater training and talent. They each detailed their plans to me about doing plays and performances, creating works themselves, designing clothing and makeup, writing screenplays, creating podcasts, starting a theater school for

children, and making opportunities for people like them to work doing what they love. Only one participant, Arthur, said he could see himself leaving theater to do something different, but only because he really wanted to act and sing in shows and not do other theater-adjacent work. The ability to think broadly about what one can do with a theater degree appears to add to the feelings of success and self-value as participants build for their futures. For those ready to adapt to the moment there seems to be a stronger chance they will remain in theater for many years rather than burning out because they didn't get the roles they wanted. Being in control of one's career choices leads to longevity, whereas letting others control one's career, which is typical for actors, may lead to disappointment and leaving theater for more enriching opportunities. '

Another theme that came up often from several participants was changing the theater industry. In Summer 2020 a group of BIPOC theater makers came together as one voice and spoke out and said White theater owners must be held accountable for their tacit agreement with racist practices. For my participants, this was articulated as "my voice matters" and if a theater didn't want to promote BIPOC voices then they would not be part of that industry. The demand for systemic change has opened a new door for BIPOC actors and creators and they are not going to let it close without a fight. This lead the interviewees them to talk about changing the theater industry to make more opportunities for non-White actors and creators, and to push White theater creators to see that even good intentions in the past don't mean that they were actually doing good now. Four of the six participants were people of color and they each spoke about how they learned to believe in the importance of their opinion and ideas while a student at his 2-year college. Interestingly, they did not feel the same about their 4-year schools, although Matt gave them a pass, saying, "Well, it wasn't a thing yet when I was in school to pay attention to race in that way," but Bernard and Cru were insistent that higher education plays a large part in

the White-washing of professional theater and it is everyone's job to call that out. The more professional training focus of their first 2 years in college was mentioned as a reason for their strength of character to speak out and demand change for every person of color, woman, and gender different student and actor out there. They all felt seen and heard as a person of color during their 2-year education experience which allowed them to believe that is the way it should be at every school and work opportunity going forward.

Connection to their community was another theme that fits in this question. Several participants brought up how this past year has allowed them to look beyond only seeing their theater as a community connection and to look at how else they identify, perhaps seeking out neighbors, others in advocacy, gender identity, or even work groups. This gave them the chance to create content for communities they hadn't thought about before, whether that was group focused on race, age, area, identity, or social activities. Arthur found connection through his work as a self-employed personal trainer even during the COVID-19 global pandemic. He commented to me that he found a sense of connection to a community of people of all ages, but mostly those over 50, who wanted to train safely online and eventually in person. Arthur used his theater training to think of his sessions with new people this way, "I see it as an audition to get the job, then each session was a performance as I got them hyped up, working out, and helped them achieve their goals" in working out. Although personal training seems far from theater, some aspects have similarities, such as presentation, networking, high adrenaline moments, and using the body in a healthy way. Arthur's desire to connect with his clients was certainly about the money but also, surprisingly to him, about meeting and entertaining people in his small way. Matt found podcasting theater and film reviews with his 9-year-old daughter a fun experience and he was still excited by it a year later when we spoke. Bernard made new connections around

the world with his podcast about sexuality as a Black, gay man. He shared a story with me about a young West African man who called into a live broadcast to talk with them because he could not share anything about his sexuality with his family or community. Bernard found that truly meaningful and wants to keep nurturing those connections. Cru's connections were obvious when one scrolls through her Instagram channel to watch a few of her high-energy, body-positive videos. She has found a way to bring a little bit of theater to 294,000 followers every day.

Summary

In the next chapter, these findings are presented as the script of a play that uses the words of the participants as well as supporting information from the literature to further explain and explore the themes and discoveries from the research participants. The play script format was chosen for two specific reasons. The first is these data speak most powerfully to other higher education theater teachers so a format that they were very familiar with, the play, was a strong choice, and they may be open and amenable to reading and engaging with it in that format. The second reason came from discussions with my dissertation committee on the peer reviewed nature of play publishing. To get a play produced on stage and eventually published, playwrights must go through a rigorous process of multiple public and private readings where other theater professionals and the general public listen to actors read the script and then all present speak or write their comments and feedback about the play. A play is meant to be heard and seen, not only read on paper, so this process allows the playwright a chance to hear their work and also hear how it affects the audience and performers. When major revisions are made, the playwright will hold another reading, and make more revisions, and this cycle continues until the playwright is ready for it to be fully produced by a theater. More revisions will happen through the first and

future productions. After several productions at different theaters around the country proves the play to be well-written and producible, a theatrical publishing house may purchase the rights to market and print the play for the playwright. At this point in the process any edits cease until some future point when a new printing is warranted and the playwright may reissue their work (Haimbach, 2006).

Clearly, the process of taking the page to the stage is thorough and involves many eyes, ears, and comments. My play, by contrast, has had one private and one public reading with verbal responses from the audience and actors each instance. In both of my readings the play was printed out and each performer was given a copy to read their assigned part out loud so those listening could hear the words spoken as if it were a performance. There was no blocking, or stage movement, assigned; the actors sat on chairs with music stands in front of them on which they rested their script.

Part of the playwright's work is hearing the play the way the audience might and note any places that might be confusing or disjointed. This prompts the playwright to return to the script to correct, clarify, or bolster a section. A second (and third, fourth, etc.) reading may occur and changes codified or altered again with succeeding versions. All of this work is in service to the story that is being told. Even though a playwright may be creating something totally new, they still have a responsibility to be as true to the story as possible. When a story is also someone's life, or a part of it, there is even more need to take care in recreating their story for the stage.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

When I first sat down with the data to write this play, I was confronted with the reality that to properly present what was uncovered it needed to be spoken by one of the characters. A play is a story performed by actors for an audience. That seems simple; however, the core of a good play should be conflict (Brockett et al., 2016), for without conflict it will be uninteresting and ineffective in connecting the audience to the story being told. As humans, we live in daily conflict from the small (e.g., not able to get gas because all the pumps are occupied) to the large (e.g., war). Exploration of the words of those interviewed presented clear signs of conflict between the actors and the theater industry, and between the current state of theater in the United States and the hopes of the future of theater for these actors. Because the intent of this piece was to be a theatrical research-based work exploring the stories of actors and former students of a 2-year college, the need to have multiple voices heard rather than only one- or two-character voices quickened the need to share all the participant voices. Ancient Greek theater employed a chorus of citizens to speak together and separately during their plays. The chorus often reflected the audience's reactions to the main character, often supporting, sometimes against the actions the main character chose. The chorus often voiced lines together in rhythm and also singly when the response warranted (Brockett et al., 2016). To hear all the words of these participants their words needed to be woven into the play like a tapestry and that led to the creation of the Theater Grad Chorus. As the listener hears the words of each chorus member, they may be able to follow the thread of that individual through the play and therefore understand how that person responded to

the questions. Using allegorical treatments for the remainder of the characters seemed to work well as a foil to the singleton Student which represents the combined perspective of the interviewed participants to questions about their time as students, and the Grad Chorus as the voices of those same students who were now professionals in theater. Allegories serve as simplified expression of truths or generalizations of human experience through symbolism and enable the audience for the research to see the essence of experiences and derive new meaning in these truths (Kaarst-Brown, 2017).

This play uses the Standard American Format for Theatrical Plays using spacing, capitalization, indents, title page, and fonts expected for the theatrical publishing industry (City Theater Company, n.d.). Stage directions were minimized to allow a future director, should there ever be a production, to start with an idea of what the playwright was thinking for movements. All stage movements use parentheses for separation from dialogue. All stage directions start from the actor viewpoint as they stand on stage facing the audience, which is opposite of the audience perspective.

- SR = stage right
- SL = stage left
- DSR/DSL = downstage right/downstage left; down is closest to the audience.
- USR/USL = upstage right/upstage left; up is farthest from the audience.
- CS = center stage; add a D or U and you move toward or away from the audience.

TO BE AN ACTOR

A Data-Based Play

By

Sally J. Robertson

CHARACTERS

STUDENT

PROFESSOR (OF THEATER)

THEATER GRADUATE CHORUS

THEATER INDUSTRY

THEATER HISTORY

FUTURE THEATER

REGULAR PERSON (NO CONNECTION TO THEATER)

TIME

Yesterday, midday.

PLACE

A proscenium stage(similar to the Fox Theater in Atlanta in size but much plainer). There is no set, simply a neutral stage space prepared for work.

Because the performance preparation hasn’t begun for the evening the only light on at start is the ghost light, or single work light placed center stage for safety. As the play progresses the lighting may change so more characters are visible.

The stage floor is painted black, the stage curtains (legs) on either side are deep black and dark blue. Nothing else can be seen in the dim light.

Playwright Notes:

The THEATER GRAD CHORUS is made up of three to six actors of all ages, genders, races, and types. They should reflect extraordinary diversity. Each line can be read by a different actor or as a choral reading with more than one actor speaking at a time. It should be a fluid decision by the director to hear multiple voices who may have similar thoughts to share but who don’t always agree.

The STUDENT may present as any gender or nonbinary.

Act 1

(Sound of the STUDENT opening the stage door, SR. STUDENT walks into the dimly lit backstage area. There is a lone ghost light center stage which gives enough light for safety but not for seeing far.)

STUDENT

Hello? Is anybody here? (Walks a few feet onto the stage, trying to get a sense of the space.) Hellllooooo! Anyone? Nope, nobody around. I wonder why they left the door unlocked. Ahem. "To be or not to be, that is the question"; "Out, out damned spot! Who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?"; "I'm just like my country I'm young scrappy and hungry and I'm not throwing away my—"

PROFESSOR

(Speaking from the dark, SL.)
Careful, that's not public domain.

STUDENT

Ahhh!!! Holy crap! You scared me! Uh, how long have you been there?

PROFESSOR

It's about time you showed up. Do you know what time it is? You're late, and it is not acceptable to be late in the theater. We must all learn basic professionalism if we want to be successful.

STUDENT

What? I can't be late, I don't have rehearsal, or an appointment. I just...umm...wandered in looking for information about being a theater major and thought I'd check out the space.

THEATER INDUSTRY

You should have learned about promptness in school. Ten minutes early is on time, on time is late, late is unacceptable.

STUDENT

(Walking further on stage while squinting to see who is sitting in the house.) I did—I do know that. My teacher told us. I've only done one play in high school. I know I'm supposed to be on time to rehearsal but I'm not in a play now. I want to come to this college to get a degree in theater. Can you help with that?

(PROFESSOR walks from the opposite stage wing to meet STUDENT on stage)

PROFESSOR

Sure! I'm sorry to sound negative just now. We are very strict about our theater etiquette and I thought you were one of the actors starting rehearsal today. Welcome, I'd love to show you around and talk about learning theater. We have a great 2-year program here, and the faculty are all theater professionals as well as talented academics. You get small classes and personal attention to prepare you to go out into the world and make your career, or get an advanced degree. We think we are a great secret that we wish everyone knew about.

THEATER INDUSTRY

One play? You've acted in one play and you know you want to be an actor? You need training first. You should have gotten that in high school. Didn't you attend a special performing arts high school? They are the best place to start learning about becoming an actor. It's a hard life and very competitive, you know.

STUDENT

I wasn't accepted into the performing arts high school. Yeah. Well, my grades, you know. I'm not great with all that book reading and stuff. I like to be creative, but not big into the paperwork.

THEATER INDUSTRY

I see. Have you looked into something more hands-on? Like technical theater crew? Or electrical work? You don't have to go to college to learn those jobs.

PROFESSOR

That isn't helping. We're all here to encourage, not discourage. The industry has enough problems without running off new people.

FUTURE THEATER

What did he just say? Rude much? That is some privilege showing there. No wonder the Theater Industry is struggling.

THEATER INDUSTRY

What do you mean? We aren't struggling. We always have an abundance of actors running off to New York. We need better trained actors who are ready to work.

THEATER HISTORY

Well, (clears throat) historically, actor training hasn't been around very long. The way we do it now has only been happening since about the middle 20th century. The idea of colleges and universities educating artists was invented by a collaboration between the universities and the business leaders of regional and commercial theaters in the United States. Part of the 'why' was to welcome more diversity into higher education.

STUDENT

(Quietly, to PROFESSOR) Man, seriously? I thought acting was, you know, forever old or something?

PROFESSOR

It is, really. Goes back to before written history, but then we started writing it down and it's been arguments ever since.

FUTURE THEATER

Diversity? What's your meaning here? U.S. theater is rich and white; not much diversity there even now. Students from diverse backgrounds aren't usually able to pay $30,000 or more per year on tuition when the chance of success as a professional actor is slim.

STUDENT

My family said theater wasn't a serious major and I need a back-up career. They can't help me with college money. I gotta do it on my own and I don't want to owe money later.

THEATER GRADUATE CHORUS

Yeah, my family said that, too, about a backup career. Everyone will tell you that.
They don't get what we do and it scares them.
Thing is, nothing is guaranteed anymore in any field.
We all change up what we are doing in our lives, but if you want to do theater longer than a couple years you need to plan for all kinds of crazy happening in your life.
Even hit shows had to close during a pandemic and no one saw that coming.
Professor calls this flexibility our 'actor toolbox', which includes ways to be your best actor self, but also ways to pay the bills when you can't do theater.

STUDENT

Oh, hey, wow, who are you all?

GRAD CHORUS

We are Graduates from this theater program.
We are different,
and the same
and we are you 1 day.

PROFESSOR

I'm so proud of all of you.

STUDENT

What do you do besides act?

THEATER GRAD CHORUS

I'm a model and social media influencer and started designing my own fashion line.
I do improvisational acting and direct.
I'm a puppeteer and a teacher.
I sing and dance and teach at a drama camp for little kids in the summer.
I'm a technical director at a theater north of Atlanta and I'm a lighting designer—acting is not for me.
I have had a nontheater job for the past 2 years but now that Broadway is opening up again I have two shows lined up for next year.

STUDENT

How much do actors make? I heard some famous actors in musicals make $30,000 a month! True??

GRAD CHORUS

Oh, I wish that were me!
Me too!
That is such a small part of the field.
Not a real thing for most of us.

THEATER INDUSTRY

Our annual actor survey shows that most Actors Equity actors have another job that is flexible but helps them pay the bills when they aren't in a show. Some of them do temp work in an office, but increasingly they are doing graphic design, consulting, coaching, and other flexible work they can do whenever. In a New York based, Broadway play actors will make between $1200-3500 per week depending on size of house, play or musical, stunts, etc.

STUDENT

Okay, okay, I could be livin' high on $3500 per week. I need to tell my mom it's not a dumb idea!

PROFESSOR

Hold on, there is a lot more to it. Part of what you'll learn here at this community college is how to manage life as an actor, which includes things like pay, budget, expenses, and taxes.

STUDENT

Taxes? I have to pay taxes?

ALL

(general laughter and nodding)

PROFESSOR

Yes, we all do. You also need to think about the market you are working in. I know $3500 a week sounds like a lot of money, and it would be to live here in Atlanta, but in New York City it won't go as far as you think. Your part of rent in a shared one bedroom apartment might be $3,500.

STUDENT

What?! That's nuts! I can afford a real nice house here on that money!

PROFESSOR

Yes, right, that's right. But you won't be in Atlanta. You'll be in New York and if you live outside Manhattan because it's cheaper you have to plan on transportation, and time to get to the theater. Also, as a new actor it isn't likely you'll be making $3,500 a week, right?

THEATER INDUSTRY

Oh, no, definitely not. Most new actors to the city have to get a nontheater job to pay rent and other living expenses. Their first paid theater gig might bring them $300 per week. Nonunion work always pays less.

THEATER HISTORY

Ah, Actors Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers started in 1913 to clean up a very abusive field. Did you know that before AEA actors could be forced to rehearse 24 hours a day? They also might only be paid for performances and not rehearsals. It was a wild and wooly time in theater history.

STUDENT

Back in the day was harsh. Well, I'm gonna join the actors' union so I can make bank and not work 24 hours a day.

PROFESSOR

Hold on, slow down. That all depends on where you want to work. Are you staying in Atlanta? Or do you want to live in New York?

STUDENT

I don't know. Do I need to choose now?

PROFESSOR

No, it's all fluid and you may start out here and go somewhere, but you need to know how all this works. You'll learn that in our weekly college-to-career sessions, Georgia isn't a union state, so you don't need to be a union member to work here, but if you join the union now you are barred from working in nonunion shows.

STUDENT
(to GRAD CHORUS) Are you in the union?

GRAD CHORUS
Nope, too restrictive working in Atlanta.
I am. Got in about 6 years after I graduated because I had to get enough professional credits to join.
I'm not because I'm staying in Atlanta.
Don't do it because you think you have to.
It's an individual choice and your situation isn't like anyone else's.

STUDENT
Can I get my Equity card when I go to college?

PROFESSOR
Sometimes. If you go to an acting conservatory that is usually built in to the program. They are really intense schools and have a high price tag.

GRAD CHORUS
That's what I thought I'd do, but I'm glad I went the 2-year route.
It was good to work in the business a few years before I got my card. I feel like I worked for it.
No way is a conservatory worth the cost!

REGULAR PERSON
Why does anyone need to go to college? Especially an actor? Can't you just do it and learn that way? Isn't that how it works? Save a bunch of money.

THEATER INDUSTRY
Well, that's…what? Of course, college is for everyone.

FUTURE THEATER
Is it? This should be good.

THEATER HISTORY
Who are you?

REGULAR PERSON
I'm just a Regular Person who goes to work every day and likes movies and sports.

PROFESSOR
Not go to college? What's your agenda here?

GRAD CHORUS
Hold on, he deserves an answer.
This is a belief that is out there in the rest of the world and we should answer it.
I think college is great.

I'm glad I went but I can see what he means.
If I hadn't found this program I know I would agree with him.

REGULAR PERSON
I didn't go to college and I'm doing fine. I just think too many people get into a lot of debt for a piece of paper.

STUDENT
That's a lot to think about.

PROFESSOR
Yes, it is, so let's look at it from a couple of different angles. (To RP) Are you a creative artist?

REGULAR PERSON
Me? I like to take photos of weather and see them on the news report. I work in construction and make a good living. But no, I don't think of myself as particularly creative.

PROFESSOR
So, do you think someone without any experience or training in a construction field should get your job and make your salary?

REGULAR PERSON
No, of course not. Everyone needs training. I've been doing it for 15 years and got to know things on the job.

PROFESSOR
It's the same in theater, but a lot fewer jobs and a lot more actors. But your point about reconsidering who needs college, and how much college, is valid.

GRAD CHORUS
I feel like I may have learned more when I was doing shows in college and after than I did in classes.
Well, I can remember a couple of amazing classes.
Me too.
I think the combo helped me most.

THEATER INDUSTRY
We have to have something in place for us to know who is going to be worth seeing at auditions.

FUTURE THEATER
You mean a Gatekeeper? An easy way to say, "Nah, you don't have someone's name on your resume I know so you go to the back of the line"?

THEATER INDUSTRY
Every field has something that points to knowledge and experience in new hiring.

STUDENT

So, I need a college degree in theater because the industry is lazy? That should not be a thing.

THEATER INDUSTRY

No! Not lazy, but imagine if anyone could show up at an audition and be seen? It would be chaos and would take forever to find the right people.

FUTURE THEATER

The “right people”? What is that code for? People you want to work with? Are comfortable with? Perpetuate old, outdated models? Have the support to spend $100,000 on a degree? You are leaving out a huge group of people, and let’s be honest—many are young and people of color.

GRAD CHORUS

Ooooh, preach!

FUTURE THEATER

Or maybe in that chaos you’re imagining there would be amazing actors showing up without a lick of training and we’d find some glorious new ways of working together.

PROFESSOR

But then how do we know who is qualified?

FUTURE THEATER

Qualified to do what? Act? If they move you, connect with you, aren’t they qualified? Or is this really about how do we, who have already been through the gauntlet of higher education, prove our worth in the world, especially academia?

PROFESSOR

Oh, wow. Ummm...I...need to think about that one. Is it selfishness and pride for me to want to perpetuate my background onto my students? I always thought it was generosity, but now I’m doubting that.

THEATER HISTORY

Academia does use the MFA degree to prove someone is worth hiring as faculty. It’s the first gatekeeper.

PROFESSOR

In the arts, we struggle with our nonartist colleagues in proving we should be part of the professoriate without a PhD even though the MFA is globally recognized as a terminal degree.

THEATER INDUSTRY

We spent a lot of time and energy to connect theater higher education and advanced training to academia and now you want to undo all that? We have to have standards! Talent, castability, total dedication to theater--

REGULAR PERSON

Those standards are really specific and don't apply to most fields. This seems...unreasonable. Is it just me? I don't know much about theater, I mean I enjoy watching it sometimes (my kid loves musicals) but from someone who hires people those aren't helpful or reasonable expectations.

GRAD CHORUS

Reasonable standards? You have seen through it, my friend, even without theater experience. Universality matters. Let's start with some true standards--
Professionalism.
Knows industry language.
Dedication.
Good at memorizing.
Patience.
Be a good and kind person.
Adaptability.
Willingness to learn.
Honesty.
Healthy physical and mental safety boundaries.
Focused.
Leaves out the ego.
Hard worker.
Passionate about theater.
Community connected.
Loves the work.
Flexible.
Thinks differently.
Solves problems.
Thinks critically.
Be compelling to watch on stage.

REGULAR PERSON

Now that's, a good list of training expectations for lots of jobs.

STUDENT

That is an amazing list! But what about talent? That's all I hear about from my family and on the internet. Don't we need talent? Or that thing that makes you great? A spark of greatness?

PROFESSOR

Talent, sure, but that's really hard to quantify. That's a whole other conversation.

REGULAR PERSON

But everyone needs talent to be an actor. I don't want to watch boring people.

PROFESSOR
Anyone can be boring at anything. Talent is one of those things I think can be at least partially learned because it is about professional work ethics and experience. The ‘spark’, though, that is special and not everyone has it. However, I think outside of that one thing anyone can train themselves in talent.

THEATER INDUSTRY
Oh, I don’t know about that. If everyone could be talented, why aren’t they?

PROFESSOR
Because it takes such a high level of dedication and focus to be great when you don’t have natural talent that most people give up or don’t even try. It takes dedication to find success in this business even with natural talent, so even those actors don’t always make it, or not for long.

FUTURE THEATER
That’s it, you got to the point. This isn’t about fame for a few years, it’s about longevity in the field. We want to create workers and creators who do theater for their entire lives, who can be successful for decades and make a sustainable living at it and then retire with benefits. Our careers change as we grow into them, sure, but it’s all still theater.

STUDENT
I like how that sounds. But I love acting and don’t want to ever not do it.

GRAD CHORUS
That’s great, and how I feel too.
But as you grow you change and other things are more fun, like
directing,
producing,
teaching,
writing…
Imagine if we could move between them throughout our lives?

THEATER HISTORY
When we look back at what we know in the history of live theater, most people did that. A lot of them worked until the very end of their lives and aged into new characters or into producing. Shakespeare wrote his plays with his favorite actors in mind and they aged as he did. We see it happen often in history.

FUTURE THEATER
Hey we also need to talk about sustainability here. Actors performing on Broadway and on tours perform eight shows every week, even on most holidays. That’s only 1 day off each week.

Some shows are highly physical and intense and doing two shows a day is exhausting. That's not sustainable and leads performers to leave theater.

THEATER INDUSTRY

This all sounds very nice but how do we afford it as an industry? We do eight shows per week to hit our target budgets. If we do fewer we'd need to charge more for tickets.

PROFESSOR

Broadway tickets are already expensive. Regular people can't pay $150 for a ticket to a show let alone afford $800 a seat for a hit show.

REGULAR PERSON

Whoa! Nope, not for me. $800 bucks? That's definitely a rich people thing not something I'd do with my family. We'll go to Disney with that money.

GRAD CHORUS

Okay now. I'm going to chime in here.
Been doing this a while in nonprofit regional theater and things are different.
Off-Broadway is different but the same in some ways.
We are talking apples and oranges between for-profit and nonprofit theater.
Broadway is a mess. We are giving ourselves to an unsustainable model.
Eight shows a week is for the producers' pockets not for the people or passion.
Disney is theater, by the way – entertainment industry, and tickets aren't cheap to that, either.

STUDENT

Disney is theater? I would love to work there!

PROFESSOR

It's entertainment for sure and yes, they also do theater. Lots of theater people work there, but like all large corporations working there is a double-edged sword. Remember that.

THEATER INDUSTRY

We need Broadway. We need to keep supporting it.

FUTURE THEATER

Why? At those ticket prices, it should support itself.

THEATER INDUSTRY

Theater is enormously expensive to produce, especially in New York City.

FUTURE THEATER
That is a lame answer. I'll be here later if you've got a better one.

STUDENT
But what are my options if it isn't acting on Broadway? I can't work for free! I need to work and make money. So, do I skip theater and go into film? I like theater more. Film is...(whispers) can I say it's boring? Is that okay?

THEATER HISTORY
(whispers back) It's okay to say it around me. I think it's boring, too.

PROFESSOR
Film and theater are really different, and not everyone does well in both mediums, or enjoys them both.

GRAD CHORUS
Film can be fun, but it's not the rush of live theater.
Yeah, you can make bank doing films. Or get a regular day job until you get your big break.
Or do other theater-like things that make you happy and give you some funds, like performing on a cruise ship,
coaching young actors,
coaching business people and lawyers on their presentations, or do commercials and voice overs.
There is lot we can do.
The point is to use your skills and do something you enjoy.
Always remember that during the COVID pandemic people stayed at home and watched actors do their thing—in tv, movies, and on stage.
Art is essential to life, and it's up to us to leverage our talent, skill, and worth.

REGULAR PERSON
Hey, yeah, that's true. I did that. My family marathon-ed the heck out of so many films and television shows and musicals. That Hamilton show on Disney wasn't bad.

GRAD CHOURS
See? Even Regular People now know how essential artists are to everyone's wellbeing.

STUDENT
But why can't we do what we love and make a living at it? Why is it so hard on the budget to be an actor? I mean it's not like being a doctor or lawyer. They have college debt and make good money. Electricians do good and they don't have debt.

FUTURE THEATER
Absolutely! That is what I am waiting to hear. Why can't we make theater and make a living? Anybody got an answer?

(Long pause. No one answers)

PROFESSOR
I know. You're all right, it isn't fair and it needs to be different. I can see some things shifting in small ways and I think you (to STUDENT) and your generation may make some big changes in this business, this art.

STUDENT
So you're saying this is on me? When I don't know anything yet?

THEATER HISTORY
She's saying it has to be you. She's done her part and now she's handing over the baton to someone who is ready to do more hard work. All teachers do this with each generation of students. I've seen it happen many times through the centuries. Theater has such power to change the world, both the theater world and the greater world. Artists are revolutionaries in history, which is why they sometimes have their power lessened in a culture. It's exciting to be on the cusp of another moment of change!

PROFESSOR
It's hard to see your place in the bigger picture when you're in the middle of it. That's what I tell actors, too. You can't see how you're doing on stage, you need to let the director lead you. Here we are in the middle of it all and we need to go where the director tells us.

STUDENT
But who's the director?

GRAD CHORUS
Life.
Fate.
Time.
History.
Mother nature.
Theater herself.
Or whatever spiritual entity you follow.

PROFESSOR
I know you want to be an actor, and we all support you, but I need to tell you that theater is not for the faint of heart, no matter what you're doing, even teaching (sometimes especially teaching). It's hard work that most people don't understand, there's rejection constantly, and so we are always underfunded at every level. Decades ago when I was in high school our drama

program had its entire budget cut. The students had a homecoming chili cook-off every October to make enough money to do two shows a year. It still goes on today in schools, universities, and professionally. We have to fight every day to do what we love. Is it worth it? It is for me, but you'll have to ask them, too (pointing to GRAD CHORUS).

GRAD CHORUS

Yes, totally worth it.
Some days I wonder if I should stop, but I'm still doing it, so yes, it is enough for now.
I can't see myself doing anything else.
One of the reasons I love this life is it isn't same from day to day, week to week. Every day I get up and do something different, even if I'm working on a play. It's always changing, which I love.
OMG, I would seriously be depressed if I stopped acting. I may never be rich but that's fine, I'll be happy while I'm eating ramen noodles.
It was bad at the start of the pandemic. Theater was hit so hard and you know what we all did? We kept working, finding ways to connect to people even if we weren't in the same room. That's why we all do this and why we keep doing it.

STUDENT

Yeah. (pause) Yeah, thanks. Ramen noodles are nice and macaroni and cheese is cheap. Should I plan to get my BA? And graduate school, too? That sounds like a lot of work and money. I got the Pell grant but it won't go far.

GRAD CHORUS

Listen, this is all about your journey and what you need to be successful.
I loved my 2-year education, it gave me the confidence and the training that I needed to know that I can do this and the motivation to know that I have to work my ass off.
It showed me that you don't have to go to an expensive school to have a solid experience.
My community college time gave me a foundation of structure and some space to actually truly dive into being an artist.
My 2-year college was a well-thought-out sanctuary for artists in my daily life. That was my experience.
Everything I learned in each of those classes has been applied to my real life.
Do you know the difference between metal-ology and metallurgy? Metal-ology is learning about a metal through theory, and metallurgy is learning about a metal through actually applying heat to that metal. That's what theater training can be.

THEATER INDUSTRY.
That’s it, the training is what’s important. That’s what we wanted do back in the sixties.

PROFESSOR
But what about educating the whole student? You know, taking classes in philosophy, literature, the sciences...how do we keep all that and tightly train actors in the doing of theater?

THEATER HISTORY
I feel like we need some current data on that. What’s out there on it?

PROFESSOR
Not much. It’s not a hot topic of study and the literature is sparse.

FUTURE THEATER
It’s coming. More is being written every year. You have to keep moving, and talking, and changing and you’ll see the data start to appear. Trust me on that.

GRAD CHORUS
I’m for the whole education. I think it needs to be in a theater program. I think you need to have everything you need to be in that world.
But the training, the actual theater work needs to be thorough. I don't think those other things can be separate because it, it fuels you and you have to be inspired from everywhere.
I think a lot of learning and education you can get from life once the fire is lit in a student.
Society needs to acknowledge how the arts is so beneficial, not even just for like, television, or not being for entertainment sake, but the amount of skills that you acquire as an artist.
Let’s flip that and advise even if you're not someone who wants to be a theater major to take theater courses, because they do really make you a well-rounded individual. Let’s change the view.

STUDENT
Hold up. I only came here to see if I should go to this school to learn to be an actor. Now you all keep talking about deep things and I think it’s way above my head ‘cause now my head is pounding with it. I don’t know what to do. (to the Grad Chorus) What are you all going to do now? You’re all done with school, right? What’s next for you?

GRAD CHORUS
Hey, how about 5-year goal shout out?
I would like to do a national tour.
Get my equity card.

Have at least 90% of my income be from theater related and acting jobs all the time.
To keep getting the training that I need to be really good.
Take on-camera classes and continue to try to make money in film to support doing live theater.
Do more with puppetry, and create content online.
Create something for and with my community.
It's time for a holistic brand launching of fashion and music, boo!
To do a musical in Atlanta, maybe at the Fox, or Actor's Express.
Expand our theater's acting summer campus for kids to include technician summer camp with the actors. We need more kids going into tech theater.
Learn to say "no" when it doesn't feed my soul and pay the bills.

STUDENT

So, you don't want to be, you know, "rich and famous?"

GRAD CHORUS

Nah, man, I want to be known in my field and have a great reputation for being the best person to work with, I don't need fame.
I wouldn't mind enough money to not worry though.
Is that rich? Or is it just enough?
I want to help my mom and my sister. If I can help them anytime and not be worried I can't pay bills then I'm rich.
Fame is overrated from what I see. Maybe it would be cool, but I'm not sure.

REGULAR PERSON

Nobody wants to buy a house? Have kids? Go on vacation every year? You know, like regular people?

GRAD CHORUS

I've got a kid, she's great. That's another daily hurdle, though.
I've got a house, small but perfect for me and thank goodness, I learned how to use power tools in college theater!
Vacations are fun, but I don't feel like I have to get away from my work because I love it. It can be hard to plan around plays.
We're regular people too.

FUTURE THEATER

Regular People have jobs, lives, kids, houses, apartments, and vacations. They have bills, debt, problems, complex lives.
Actors also sacrifice so much to make theater a career. This doesn't change much, I'm afraid, but it can be made better.

STUDENT

I think I want to be on Broadway, but maybe not. I've never been to New York, so I guess I should check into that more. I know I want to act and sing but I don't know the rest yet. I will have to sacrifice to do what I love every day. That's scary.

PROFESSOR

It's okay, you know, to not be sure. That's where your theater professors can help you with some answers. But remember, what you decide today you can change later. It's not set in stone.

GRAD CHORUS

One more thing.
The great lost year of 2020 has taught me that my voice matters.
My voice has significance.
And it's worthy.
And if there's a theater company, after all of this, that doesn't acknowledge when I speak,
when I complain about something
or have an issue about something,
then I don't have to be here
and my talents, my talents and my Self can leave.
I don't have to settle.
I don't have to settle.
So, from 2020 now on I'm unapologetically vocal about a lot of things.
So much of that is from my 2-year college experience.
I found my confidence.
I found my voice.
Start in a space, in a place, that values you, where you matter.
If they don't value you, then make your own art, theater, work.
Create content for you and others will seek it out.

STUDENT

So, I should just start and not worry about the end?

FUTURE THEATER/PROFESSOR

(together)

Yes, that's it. Let's get started.

THE END

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding chapter presented the study's qualitative findings using the format of a theatrical play. This was to allow the reader to better understand these students' stories and connect them to the rich information unearthed about vocational theater training. We absorb information from plays we see on stage and from reading them on the page. Plays are data rich and written precisely to make an audience interpret the data given to them (Haimbach, 2006). Baker (2018) wrote playscripts are research artefacts in their own right by showing how an initial research question informs the writing of plot, characterization, setting, dialogue, spectacle, etc., and the knowledge produced by exploring that idea permeates every aspect of the play.

Examining the findings through writing a play allowed the opportunity to use the very tools of theater: storytelling, dramatic language, and character development, to delve into the data discovered (Brown, 2015). Using a group peer-review process of feedback discussions after public readings of the play allowed for a deeper examination of the data. Sharing my data as a scripted theatrical play opened up the data for more readers, particularly theater professionals who naturally process information in script format (Brown, 2015).

Chapter 4 presented the stories of participants along with common and emergent themes derived from qualitative interviews. Chapter 6 includes: (a) a summary of the study, (b) an interpretation of findings, (c) discussion of conclusions, (d) implications for practice, (e) future research recommendations, (f) limitations, and (g) comments on the researcher's personal journey.

Summary of Study

This research aimed to explore students' experiences in the vocationally focused theater training program at a 2-year community college and to determine students' perceptions of the impact of that participation on achieving personal goals and career expectations in the theater. The following questions guided the research:

1. What benefits have former students experienced after completing a vocationally focused college program that emphasized career training in theater arts combined with more traditional mind-body actor training?
2. Do differences exist in the perceptions of former students on their success in the theater based on their experiences in 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degrees in theater?
3. Using their individual stories as a guide, what were the expectations, hopes, and plans of former students as they continue to pursue a career in the theater and how might these findings be incorporated into a theater training program?

The main focus of this study was on the ways a specific type of theater training was experienced and perceived by former students in this program in light of their current experiences as performers. The program was relatively unique being a career-focused, workforce education-inspired system offered at a 2-year college. The choice to look more closely at the 2-year postsecondary model of theater training was made for a number of reasons. A primary reason for this choice was the comprehensive nature of the program where actors were trained to enter the theater job market with skills in character analysis, vocal performance, movement or dance, resume writing, business building, career networking, and auditioning while also completing core classes that teach problem solving, critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

In this qualitative study six former students were interviewed, all who completed the 2-year vocational theater training program. Individual face-to-face interviews via Zoom videoconferencing software over a period of 3 months served as the source of the research. All were currently employed in some aspect of theater with 5–13 years of experience following graduation. All participants were currently working in theater, film, or ancillary fields (including education in a theater context) as their primary occupation. Though some participants did have other jobs outside of the theater, especially during the COVID-19 environment, it was important to hear from those who maintain their work in theater and have a goal to continue their theater careers for the long-term because the stories of professionals who stay in a challenging field support the choices of each new incoming generation. Purposive sampling of former students who made the decision to continue in a theater-related career after completing the program was used.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Graduation from or completion of all theater courses in the Associate of Arts in Theater Pathway at a 2-year community college in Georgia between 2007–2016.
2. Participants have maintained a career in theater as a professional actor, director, stage manager or other theater or performance-related job. This does not eliminate work in film, television, and other closely aligned performing areas.
3. Participants were varied to include as many experiences as possible, including diversity in age, sex, race, ethnicity, those who continued on to complete a bachelor's degree, and one participant who did not continue for an advanced degree.

My interest was in the ongoing experiences of former students in relation to their training and education, as well as the perceptions participants had of its effects, rather than an immediate response from recent graduates who may be struggling with postgraduation job searches.

Data collection methods included audio recorded semistructured interviews, direct transcriptions of each interview, member checking, inductive interview coding, and a researcher journal. Interviews were the primary data source. Textual analysis was conducted using both hand coding and computer coding methods looking for commonalities in codes and themes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom and its integrated components. Once auto transcriptions were complete, they were converted to a Microsoft Word document, then coded using first cycle coding and in vivo coding methods derived from the data itself.

After identifying a list of themes, the next step was to begin the process of filling in the spaces around the themes by using the data to describe each participant's story. Rather than simply reporting on data in typical presentations of qualitative analysis, I sought to meet an audience of theater educators in the presentation space with a play written to reveal findings. Finley and Knowles (1998) explored the artist as researcher in their Readers' Theatre piece based on their research with street youth. That alternative form of representation of the data as a play provided some of the lived-experience of the people involved and connected the audience of researcher-educators more strongly to the results. Norris (2016) stated the dramatic research piece must be able to communicate with and be distilled for ease of consumption by the chosen audience.

Using my data analysis, I created a play based on the theatrical research-based performance model (Hundt et al., 2019). This model allowed readers to better understand students' stories and connect them to the rich information unearthed about vocational theater

training. Two reading sessions of the play were held, the first in September 2021 with a small group of actor friends who gave their personal feedback to consider in future versions of the script. The second reading was held in February 2022 and was open to the public both in person and virtually with the actors together in the theater and audience both online and in person.

Audience response data was interesting and may prompt further examination of this type of process. The listeners understood the play was "a set of answers for a set of questions," but several expressed surprise they connected with the message, saying, "It sparked emotional reactions and unexpected self-awareness moments." One person who self-identified as a theater professional thought the play was, "a director's piece and had many possibilities for a stage production," even though the spoken introduction explained the play was not destined for a realized production. There was excitement in having audience members start a discussion about how they would cast each character. A few questions sparked interesting responses between actors and audience about the future of theater education and industry. One person said, "The character of Theater Industry can't be the only voice in the new world order (of theater), so we who work in theater need to think about that." In the second, more expansive reading, the 11 actors who read the play had much to say about the tension in the play between questioning the purpose and value of life in professional theater versus the payoff of that life. Overall, they agreed with the content and meaning of lines expressed by the Theater Grad Chorus and wanted to hear about things a person has to give up for a professional theater career. One actor said, "Even though all of us are regular people I would like to hear more about what we sacrifice to do it and how that affects the feelings of success. This comment came from an actor of color in her late thirties who identified as having to give up a lot to stay in theater.

A midcareer actor asked if something about the high level of rejection could be written into the play when the professor is telling student about their options. The point was well taken because rejection is a huge part of an actor's life. This was a great suggestion and easily done with an added sentence. There was also one audience member who wanted more of a conclusion on the finding of whether or not theater education is a barrier for people of color and how can that be surmounted. She stated, "Yes, getting an education in theater is a good thing, which I absolutely agree. But then the little voice back of my mind, I'm like, well, isn't it just keeping people out?" That question is one that can be further discussed in future research. The character of the Student in the play was read by a current 2-year theater student who said of the role, "This is me! How did you get it so much like what I'm experiencing?", which was perhaps the best comment of the evening for this author. It was encouraging to get so much feedback from the actors and audience about what they wanted to hear in the script that was not there now. To me, this signaled they were engaged with the story as it was written and read and that it connected with them deeply enough to make them want to improve it to give it the dimension they wanted to hear. In this process a playwright might take suggestions from the audience and amend the play, or they might not. Sometimes an audience goes down a dark alley that has little to do with what the writer is trying to accomplish, but sometimes one finds nuggets of gold that a playwright can shake out and use to make the play better. The big takeaway from this public reading was that the play was understood as information in an educational way, the voices of the participants were clear and differentiated, and the subject of 2-year educational theater is one people want to know more about. The readings resulted in fun and pleasant evenings with some generous and discerning people. Following the second reading, three small changes were made to the playscript: a sentence was added for the Professor about actor rejection, a line was added

for Future Theater about sacrifices for one's artistic career, and final line of the play was adjusted to a joint line for Professor and Future Theater to say simultaneously.

Following the reading, a retired high school drama teacher, also a reader for the evening, approached me about offering the play to high schools as an educational tool to help young people understand some of the challenges they might face when choosing a life in the theater. This was an encouraging outcome for the evening and for the idea of the play.

Conclusions

The six participants of this study, all former students of a 2-year, workforce education focused, theater program all expressed feelings of success and happiness in their careers. Some have done better than others, but it is encouraging all of them experienced their 2 years at a community college as the most important of their educational lives. All participants were still at an early stage in their careers and had not yet seen the financial success they hoped to achieve, but all remained hopeful and confident their theater lives were only going to get better and more fulfilling. It is possible to say that on a personal level many students who started in a career-focused theater program with extra personal attention had the tools needed to carve out their own journey to success and long-term enjoyment of their careers.

Future Research Recommendations

For all participants, the individual attention given to them at a 2-year community college was the most important and interesting finding. Often, a specific person at the institution was named as being essential to the student's choices, course completion, and feelings of success in their careers both during college and in subsequent years. We may all have one or two people we remember from our late teen or college years who were important to our discovery of what we wanted to be and do in the world. For most of these former students that person was a teacher or

staff member in the theater department during their first college experience. Teachers are important to student career motivation (Thoonen et al., 2010) and to their emotional health (Mainhard et al., 2018), but what do we know about the effect caring and involved staff have on students? The study of purposeful staff interactions, during and after college, particularly in theater training, would give more knowledge of exactly who helps these students and how their influence is felt in the lives of students while attending college and in the years after.

Class size is something that has been studied but not with a focus on theater. Although many 4-year universities have general education course sections with 100 or more students, most classes in the program major have between 20–25 students. A community college often has smaller physical classrooms, so general education classes may be limited to 30 and program classes will be limited to half that. For the participants in this study, smaller class size was important, and especially for their theater classes. Having more students in a class means less time getting to know students, and less time to help them with career focus. In the study of theater, a student will find it necessary to reveal things about themselves, both positive and negative, to find the core truth of themselves and their creativity. Truth in presentation is the basis of all modern acting and starts during initial training. The more people in the room, the harder it is to be honest and open with one's personal story. More research into how class size affects students in theater would definitely be interesting and enlightening for performing arts in postsecondary education.

There is a buzz of discussion lately about the overwhelming burden of educational debt students must now manage at the end of their degrees in addition to starting a new career (Frenette et al., 2020). A surprise for me was hearing most of the participants did have debt, some topping $50,000, but none of them let that burden them too much or force them to make

career changes away from theater. It would be fascinating to find out whether this situation and accompanying feelings permeate for other former theater students in the same and younger age groups. This particular topic has implications at all levels of higher education and there is hope doctoral students in the near future look more closely at the actual stories and feelings of students and the effect their college debt has on their career choices. This is an area that would benefit from more small, qualitative research to better represent more diverse groups of students, so the research community can give the broader public a more informed history.

Another research area that might benefit from attention is the consideration of the AFA, or Associate in Fine Arts theater degree, which is not discussed in this paper due to the extremely few public institutions offering it in the United States. The AFA degree generally requires several more career-oriented courses with fewer general education requirements. Looking into the options for community colleges to offer a more streamlined degree may be another avenue to student success in their theater careers.

The question of whether theater education is a barrier to people of color and low-income students should be studied in future qualitative research. Does the need for students to pay for theater education and training limit who goes into acting and is that a burden that should be targeted for change? It would be interesting to look at this question both from the academic viewpoint of education generally but also from the more specific theater education angle.

Implications for Practice

When we think about the business of acting and theater, we often focus on only those who make a living as actors, but there are so many career paths available to theater majors, including theater-adjacent careers like teaching, directing, producing, and writing theater, to name only a few. Very few actors manage to last in the theater industry by only acting for 30 or

more years in the field. To be honest, I do not know of any who only act in plays. All the actors I know or know of do other things besides act. They may do voice over work, singing gigs, film, television, and commercials, have their own makeup or clothing label, their own production company, or private acting school to make ends meet and support their creative side. This reality needs to be normalized rather than assuming the success is only acting on Broadway. The pandemic showed all of us we value performing arts and artists. Those artists who succeeded in adapting to the virtual medium found a new road to succeed and grow. I am sure there were actors who did not do well during the last 2 years, but my quick anecdotal survey of more than 75 actors known to me personally was that they made things work in their favor. When asked why, the response was usually some form of, "I can improvise and have to pay bills." This comment seems light and casual, but exemplifies what I have seen over the last two decades teaching at a community college. Students who study theater and other experiential, project-based subjects seem to have an easier time with changing focus and addressing problems thrown at them both personally and professionally.

Each of the participants who identified as a Black, Indigenous, or a person of color detailed examples in their career and advanced education when they were not heard or seen as a person of color. The theater industry and theater in higher education need to see, hear, and represent everyone not only a few types of people. There have been far too many reports of university theater departments with a meager history of producing plays by African Americans, Indigenous people, and women (Lee, 2020) and a terrible track record of racism and bias, both implicit and explicit, in departments and schools (Diane, 2020). Published department apologies and group discussions make a start, but changing the beginning level of training in theater needs to be examined. How we speak to students of color and encourage (or discourage) them to

become actors is something we need to interrogate on a regular basis. It is too easy to fall into old habits and choose another Eurocentric play or European acting pedagogy and teach it with the side note that "I was taught this way and so was my teacher, so it's good enough for my students" is no longer acceptable. Deep examination of our own biases in how we train need to be addressed in an honest, and perhaps painful, manner.

Academics and theater professionals need to study their impact on the business and education of theater and consider changes to a paradigm that has dominated our world since the 1960s where we continue to teach something that is no longer pertinent or useful. A shift that large is not easy, but it is possible. We can retrain ourselves to think of theater training differently so that it continues into the future. John Steinbeck (2007) now famously wrote, "The theater is the only institution in the world which has been dying for 4,000 years and has never succumbed. It requires tough and devoted people to keep it alive" (p. 23). We must all be tough and devoted to keep the teaching of theater alive and well so that theater can continue to be created and performed for the next 4,000 years.

Limitations

Sample size and selection in qualitative research is a topic of considerable debate among researchers (Vasileou et al., 2018). The criterion-based, purposeful sampling method used in this study yielded five participants with a sixth added after a suggestion from one of the interviewed participants. The complexity and depth of interview-based analysis samples in qualitative studies lean toward being smaller in size, which, as Sandelowski (1995) stated, is essential to this investigation method. The size of the sample was a limitation in this study, however, when formulating a justification for sample size in qualitative research, reference must be made to the

scope of the study and the nature of the topic (Morse, 2000). The scope of this study was always to focus on the individual, their stories, and their feelings of success in their theater careers.

Personal Journey

It has been fascinating and awe-inspiring to see what former students and active theater-makers do every day to find success and create their best career and life. Throughout this process, I have looked at my own actor training and how I have trained students over the past 20 years. I better appreciate my growth as a person and a teacher of theater, and am proud of the work I have done and continue to do. As with the participants, I have a small group of very important people, both teachers and staff of theaters, who were influential in my educational and career journey. My high school drama teacher gave extra time and attention to me during my 3 years with her as my drama teacher and she is the direct reason I studied theater in college. At the University of Northern Iowa my acting teacher was a successful professional actor from New York who decided to move to Iowa, buy a farm, and teach acting. His influence was on actor training and career building and he is the main reason I auditioned for graduate schools and continued for my MFA in acting. In my very early career years, I met a theater manager at a small, community college in Atlanta. She was instrumental in my becoming a college professor and making it my life's work when I thought I would only teach for 2 years before jumping back into professional acting and directing. These people have been the most influential on my career in the theater and made such a deep impression that I know my life would have gone in a completely different direction without their influence. If we can help our students connect to their own influential people and teach them to become that person for the next student, that is our success. If our intentions are truly good, and we have interrogated that reality, then we can be a powerful force for good for our students now and for the rest of their lives.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to take part in a study entitled "The Lived Experiences of Students in a Vocationally focused Two-Year Theater Program," conducted by Sally Robertson, PhD Candidate under the direction of Dr. Jay W. Rojewski, Professor, Department of Career and Information Studies, University of Georgia. My participation is voluntary: I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time, without providing a reason, and without penalty. I can refuse to answer certain questions during the interview process without providing a reason. I can ask to have information that I provide returned to me, removed from the study, or destroyed.

The purpose of this in-depth interview study is to examine the experiences of students who completed courses in theater at a two-year community college in Georgia between 2007-2016. The study will seek to understand the experiences and goals of students while they were in college, after they graduated or completed coursework, and as they began their theater career. The Researcher is seeking information on how theater in higher education can better prepare students for a lifetime career in theater and hearing my lived experiences may give the research a more developed view.

I understand that I am participating voluntarily and will not receive compensation for my participation. I also understand findings from this study will be used to open a dialogue about theater training with other college and university educators as well as professional theaters who train actors and others in theater. The procedures for participating in this study were as follows:

- Meet with the researcher in a face-to-face setting via Zoom online. All agreements will be signed electronically. No in-person meetings will occur.
- Describe my past education experiences in the theater program at of the two-year college.
- Describe past and current education experiences in other theater programs.
- Describe and explain current and future expectations in my professional theater career.
- Describe personal experiences and feelings about my theater career and how it affects me personally and professionally.
- Allow for 60 to 90 minutes of time for the interview.
- Allow for 30 minutes for follow-up questions, clarification, or additional questions.

No harm or risk is associated with participating in this study.

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with me will remain confidential and will not be released without my consent, unless required by law. All interviews will be taped on an electronic device. I understand that I have the right to review the recording and request for its deletion at any time. Only the researcher and lead advisor will access or view the recordings.

The researcher is willing and available to answer any questions you may have before, after, or during the interview, and can be reached at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via email at xxxxx@uga.edu

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The questions asked of each participant will be the following, allowing open-ended questions with continuation questions that come up depending on how individuals answer.

Interview Questions

1. What year did you graduate or if you did not graduate what year did you finish theater classes at your 2-year college?
2. What other advanced degrees have you earned and in what major or specialization? Tell me why you continued your training and/or education or if you did not, why not?
3. Did you work immediately in theater after graduation or did it take a while? Will you share a story about one thing you did then that you would now do differently?
4. Did you feel you were ready 'career ready' upon graduation or completion? Would you describe an experience that illustrates your feelings?
5. What did you do to build your business in theater after you graduated?
6. How much education-connected debt did you have on graduation and how has it affected the choices you've made in taking theater jobs? Describe a situation where the choice to accept a job or not was because on finances.
7. Tell me about your career plans before attending college—are you where you thought you'd be at this point in your life and career? How do you feel about where you are now?

8. What percentage of your annual income is from theater-related work? Is this surprising to you? If it is not 100%, what do you do to make up the remaining percentage and how does that inform on your career choices?
9. What are your goals for the next 5 years relating to your theater career and will you need additional training to achieve them?
10. Do you believe the formal training and education at a two-year college was meaningful considering where you are currently in your career and life? Tell me about an experience that might illustrate that more deeply.
11. Will you share something you learned while in theater training at your two-year college that you did not fully appreciate until years later?
12. What did not you learn at your 2-year college that you wish you had learned and why is it important enough to remember after X years? (X = participant years since graduation)
13. If you were to design your ideal 2-year theater program for community college students what would it look like? Will you describe details of the classes, support system, faculty, and/or learning spaces that you would create?
14. Did your experience at your 2-year college acknowledge you and your identification as Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color if you so identify? How might that experience have affected your pursuit of theater as a profession?
15. How do you think your experiences in theater training at a 2-year college have shaped your reaction to the theater shutdown during the 2020 Covid-19 event? Do you feel more or less prepared to succeed under duress than others in your professional circle?

16. Would you share an experience or example of something you have created since the shutdown of theaters in March 2020 that makes you feel proud of your educational choices?

APPENDIX C

OPTIONAL EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. What was your favorite class while you were in college? Why was this class your favorite? Can you tell me a story that sticks out in your mind about this class?
2. What differences and similarities did you notice between your first two years of education in the theater program versus your last two years at a baccalaureate school?
3. What does a career-focused education mean to you? How do you view your theater program in terms of arts or vocational-based?
4. If you teach others what do you pass along to them that you learned from your two-year training?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me that might help others understand your experiences with theater training and subsequent theater career?