



By Claire Winters

Acting is the most visible profession in the film industry. Yet for all the media attention given to actors' personal lives and shopping habits, little is given to how they train. Since the success of a movie or television show depends on the audience believing the actor 'is' the character he or she plays, publicity articles rarely expose the nuts-and-bolts work necessary to make a performance feel spontaneous, truthful, and exciting. Yet diverse talents such as Angelina Jolie, Meryl Streep, and *Lost's* Dominic Monaghan all have one thing in common: years spent studying the craft of acting before stepping foot on a film set.

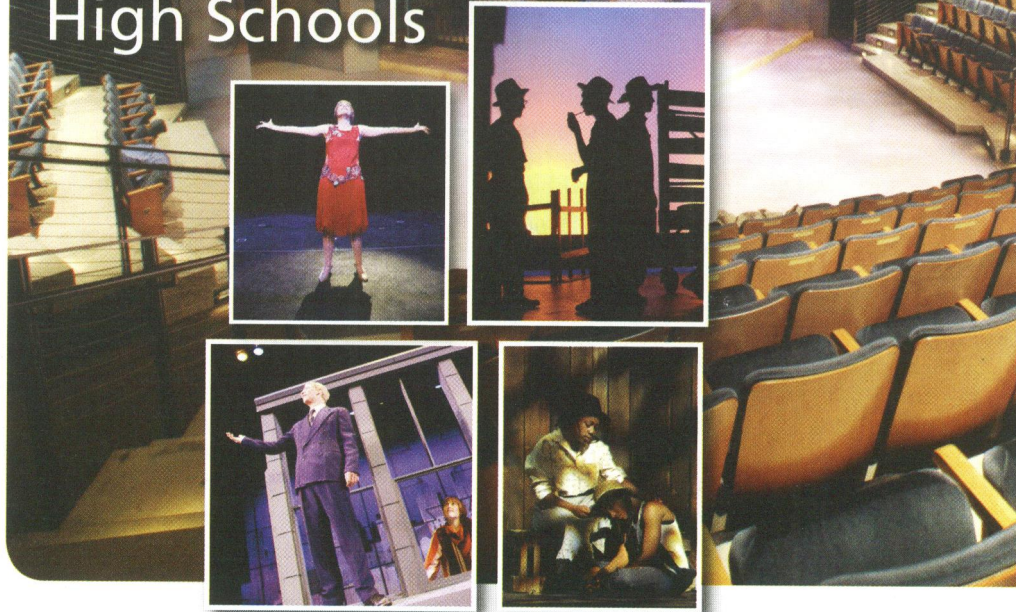
In the last issue of Intercut we looked at acting training opportunities in your school and private studios and clubs in your neighborhood. If the 'acting bug' bites you even harder after you've had some classroom and performance experience, consider full-time training in a local performing arts high school or performing arts boarding school.

Full-time training is a serious commitment. Students have long days and sacrifice other parts of 'normal' high school (and endure homesickness and a big price tag if they choose a performing arts boarding school). But they can also reap big rewards – early exposure to the industry, a fast track to the best college acting programs, and the camaraderie of friends as serious about acting as they are. My last year of high school I attended The Interlochen Arts Academy, an arts boarding school in Michigan. More than a decade later, many of my closest friends were my classmates at Interlochen. Waking up at 6 am to work on Shakespeare monologues bonds you for life!

What to Expect

Marlene Zuccaro heads the theater program at The Academy of Music at Hamilton High School, a public magnet school for the performing arts in Los Angeles, CA. In the

Teen Actor Training: Part 2 A Look at Performing Arts High Schools



instant-gratification world of reality television stars and YouTube videos, Ms. Zuccaro has a tough job convincing incoming students of the years of hard work it will take to become a respected professional actor. "Actors are bottom-feeders!" she barks on the first day of school (and you thought only the students in acting school were dramatic!). "Rise to the top by training, reading, and life-long learning!" For Hamilton students that training starts on day one.

A typical schedule includes arts and academic classes from 8 am-4:15 pm plus mandatory rehearsals from 4:30 pm to 6 pm (not to mention homework). As a result, Hamilton students aren't known for their sports teams. When asked when the kids have time for a social life, Ms. Zuccaro replied, "On the bus!"

But their hard work pays off. Hamilton students often earn places in the country's best college acting programs, and many, because of the school's Los Angeles location, find a way to dip their toes in the professional world before they even graduate. *Into the Wild* star Emile Hirsch and *Cloverfield's* Lizzie Caplan are two recent Hamilton grads already making waves in Hollywood.

A Student's Perspective

Sunah Bilsted has appeared on *Alias* and *The Office* and performs comedy at the Improv Olympic in Hollywood. Sunah moved to New York City at age 10 and had dreamed of attending LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts ever since seeing the television show *Fame* as a child in Canada (LaGuardia is the school the film and television show *Fame* are based on). She was thrilled when she passed her audition.

Did the *Fame* school live up to her expectations? "Absolutely," she says. "To have the experience of being a kid and learning a serious craft ... how rare is that? And the diversity of the student body was unlike any other school. We were all from completely different parts of the city, different neighborhoods, ethnic backgrounds, economic (ones)...the conversations we had in class...I would never have gotten to know these people otherwise...the arts bring everyone together."

In order to keep students' minds on their studies, LaGuardia, like many high school and college acting programs, doesn't allow students to attend professional auditions.

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Performing Arts High Schools (continued from previous page)

Sunah found it frustrating to be in the heart of the nation's theater capital and not have access to more audition opportunities. But while that experience may have eased her transition into the working world, she admits that LaGuardia's location did have other benefits – like Oscar®-winners Jon Voigt and Al Pacino giving talks to the students! And she did find some real-life use for those daily acting classes. "I used what I was learning in the basement (where the acting classes were held) and went right up to the sixth floor (where the academics were) and acted my way out of a lot of failing grades!"

Academic Life

In contrast, Mary Lou Belli, author (with Dinah Lenney) of *Acting for Young Actors: The Ultimate Teen Guide*, says her two teens chose to attend The Academy of Music at Hamilton High School because they wanted "the opportunity to study the performing arts at a high level of instruction while at the same time pursuing a rigorous academic schedule." Acting classes at Hamilton don't come at the expense of AP courses – the whole day is longer so as to accommodate all the required course work.

At The Interlochen Arts Academy several students even attend the

school in order to major in academics! Because of its passionate and disciplined student body, Interlochen attracts a stellar faculty in all subjects. And the academic majors enjoy the school's creative culture.

Other Benefits

In fact, life at a performing arts high school can be great preparation for whichever path a student chooses to pursue. "You would be surprised how many of the students (at performing arts schools) choose NOT to pursue acting as their primary university study," says Ms. Belli. "After getting the opportunity to perform in high school, students take these great people and creative skills and pursue a different academic curriculum that has been informed by their curiosity and creative pursuits...At the same time, the ones who want to act or perform professionally are ready for the rigorous competition in the real world because they have matured and grown and looked at their skill sets realistically at a younger age."

I interviewed Sunah for this article as she began her service shift at a Hollywood nightspot. Despite her ambition and years of devotion, she – like many of us - must work an additional job to subsidize her acting income. Had she known then how tough the acting profession is, would she have still spent her teens in the

rehearsal room? Did she ever wish she had focused only on academics or spent more time pursuing other interests? "No way!" she yelled over the chatter of her customers. The creative and personal life-lessons of LaGuardia are very much alive in her today. "I'd go again in a heartbeat! And send my kids. And their kids! Everyone's going to the 'Fame school!'"

It's not just the students who find themselves transformed by the risk and rigor of life in a performing arts school. Marlene Zuccaro directed countless professional theater productions in Chicago and Los Angeles before taking her position at Hamilton. The intensity of the schedule demands a lot from her as well. "Every tech week ('tech week' is the most complicated week of a play rehearsal, when the actors move onto the set with props and lights) it's so crazy I think about leaving. But then I think, 'Where am I going to find kids like these?'" She takes a breath and smiles. "They're pretty amazing."

In the next issue we'll look at performing arts summer camps – a great way to broaden your horizons and get a taste of a college acting program! □

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Starting Your Search

Google, Google and more Google! The better-known schools' web addresses will leap onto your computer screen after you type "performing arts high schools" in the search field. Refine your search with your city's name. Ask your guidance counselor if your school district offers any full-time training programs - almost all medium-to-large cities do. But be prepared to spend a few hours on the bus (hey, think of all the lines you can learn!) each day for a commute.

Getting In

Most schools require an audition for acceptance in which you'll perform two monologues and a song of your choice. Your academic record, attitude, and an essay will figure into the admissions process as well. Schools strongly suggest an in-person audition, but if a trip to the school is impossible, you can often submit a taped audition. Check the school's website and call its admissions office to find out the details and deadlines. And it won't hurt to get help with your audition material from your school drama teacher!

Paying for It

The cost of these programs range from completely free to very expensive! But don't despair if you're not rolling in dough and your community doesn't offer a public performing arts school. Private schools value economic and geographical diversity, and many offer very generous scholarship packages. Do some research – you may be eligible for one. And if you get accepted into the school of your choice, go public with a letter-writing campaign to ask for donations to help your family with tuition.

