

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

WHAT I DID FOR LOVE:
PURSUING THE PERFORMING ARTS IN A POST-RECESSION ECONOMY

KELLY TUNNEY
SUMMER 2014

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Journalism and English
with honors in Journalism

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Curt Chandler
Senior Lecturer in Journalism
Thesis Supervisor

Steve Manuel
Senior Lecturer in Advertising/Public Relations
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

“What I Did For Love” is a multimedia documentary about the feasibility of a performing arts degree in difficult economic times created by the recession beginning in 2008. The issue is explored through the experiences of a 27-year-old chorus dancer from New York City, New York; a 58-year-old community theater thespian from Brownsville, Pennsylvania; a musical theater department director from Penn State University; and various college students and recent graduates at the Wagon Wheel Theatre in Warsaw, Indiana. These subjects tell how they justified the expense of a performing arts degree, while video of their lives illustrates their passion for theater. This written companion provides an analysis of the topic, a description of the media involved in telling the story, and the component texts that together comprise the final product, a multimedia web page that can be found at:

<http://commedia.psu.edu/news/story/performers-pursue-their-dreams-of-a-career-in-the-arts-despite-down-economy>.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Objective of the Thesis.....	1
Chapter 2 Production Techniques	2
Appendix A Video Transcript.....	3
Appendix B Print Story.....	6
BIBLIOGRAPHY	9
ACADEMIC VITA.....	10

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Curt Chandler for staying up late so many nights to help me; John Wagner for enduring interview after interview; Ernie Watson for letting me film his rehearsals; Jeremy Seiner for welcoming me into his life at summer stock; and Scott Michaels and the cast and crew of Wagon Wheel Theater for letting me observe the Mary Poppins and Catch Me If You Can production processes with far more access than I deserved.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This multimedia thesis project has been an eight-month process of finding subjects in the performing arts, interviewing them, and attempting to show why they pursue the performing arts in a hostile economy. Through the course of multiple interviews, I found out when they decided to dedicate themselves to theater, what they sacrifice for that pursuit, and how they work to make themselves competitive in the industry. My material was too broad to be successfully conveyed through just one medium, so I use video, a text story, and photos to tell my subjects' stories.

Objective of the Thesis

I have been involved in theater in various capacities since early childhood, and I have always found it impossible to miss the variety of personalities one encounters in any theater. As I grew up, some of my theater friends majored in performance and others chose more practical majors. I decided to see how theater majors fare: whether some of my "impractical" friends were making a poor choice by going into debt for a theater degree, or whether it was possible to make a living in the arts, even in the aftermath of the recession that began in 2008. Through my interviews, I have found that with sufficient training, it can be possible to be consistently employed in the arts, but that theater is a competitive industry that simultaneously favors youth and experience.

Chapter 2

Production Techniques

I decided to create the main component of my multimedia thesis using video recorded on the type of digital single-lens reflex camera I use in my photojournalism classes and activities. I located subjects and conducted interviews with them, and for those subjects who are active in theater, I recorded them in rehearsal and performance to convey to the audience the atmosphere of the theatrical process, and to give credibility to the actors' skill.

After I recorded the videos, I backed them up and compiled them onto a timeline in Adobe Premiere Pro, transcribed the hours of interviews, and excised the most pertinent quotes to build my video. Once I had laid out the audio track for my video, I inserted b-roll and video sequences to punctuate different themes in my video. In conjunction with my video, I wrote a text story that contained facts and citations that would have muddled the narrative of my video. As a reference for my audience, I also wrote small biographies of the various characters that appear in my video, accompanied by screen grabs that illustrate the characters as they appear in the video.

I compiled these various components – the video, text, and photos – onto a web page where the audience can take in the entire story at their own pace. The presentation of my thesis can be found at: <http://commedia.psu.edu/news/story/performers-pursue-their-dreams-of-a-career-in-the-arts-despite-down-economy>.

Appendix A

Video Transcript

["God I Hope I Get It" from A Chorus Line plays under video of a dancer rehearsing onstage]

John Wagner

Honestly, when I went into college, I don't even know if I thought about the economy because it wasn't really an overwhelming thought to me at the time. I think the report from Equity came back and it's like at any given time there's like 75-85% of people are unemployed in this industry. That's terrible.

People talked to me about that, and kind of hinted that you might want to think about doing something where you might want to have a real job.

Nancy Mimless

I didn't come from a family that had any money, so it was kind of like "what, are you stupid? Why are you going to college if you're going to do theater?"

John Wagner

But no. You've got to do what you love. You can't live unless you're doing what you love.

Dan Carter

The people who are doing this really just can't do anything else. This is what they need to do to satisfy themselves, to make a life.

Alex Dorf

Originally I spent a year at the University of Delaware studying pre-veterinary medicine. And then kind of midway through that process, I realized that this wasn't really what I wanted to do – I still love animals and stuff, and science, but-

Ernie Watson

I could make much more money probably being a doctor, or being almost anything under a doctor, but you know, being happy is important too.

Alex Dorf

I kind of went through withdrawal from acting and singing and dancing, so I just auditioned at Penn State, which was kind of a risk, but

Dan Carter

As traditional jobs dry up, people go “what’s the point?” You might as well do what’s going to make you happy.

Alex Dorf

Thankfully I got it, so now I’m happily doing musical theater.

Dan Carter

We haven’t had fewer applicants. We had 500, I just saw the report this morning, 520 musical theater students have auditioned for our program from around the country. We will accept 14.

John Wagner

So it just seems like there’s a lot going against you, that you just have to keep fighting, but we all know that it’s worth it. And when you get that callback, and you get that job, it makes it worth it, it makes... it validates what you’ve been doing.

[A Chorus Line plays under video of John Wagner dancing]

Nancy Mimless

But it has prevented me from a career in anything else. Because you can’t take a full-time job if you need to be open for auditions.

John Wagner

When you’re auditioning, that is your full-time job because you are there so many hours out of the day.

[Video of John Wagner transitions to video of Jeremy Seiner rehearsing the same song in class]

Jeremy Seiner

Auditioning is sort of like your second job, in a way. And so you’re gonna have to face rejection on a daily basis, and that kind of requires a tough skin. Yes, there will be times where you are going to have to work other places. I know a lot of people like to waiter – hopefully I’ll never have to do that.

John Wagner

It’s just what you do to pay the bills. Some people wait tables, some people do catering. That’s just survival jobs.

Alex Dorf

I mean, I know that I’m probably going to be traveling around a lot. It’s going to be a hard lifestyle, but I think because I love to perform, and I never want to lose that ability, and I want to continue to cultivate that. That’s what’s going to keep me going.

Alison Schiller

I tell people all the time that I major in make-believe. Which is true. You kind of just get to be a storyteller to people.

[Director Scott Michaels introduces Mary Poppins at Wagon Wheel Theatre]

Scott Michaels

You're in for a great performance tonight, so sit back, relax, laugh, have a great time tonight, and enjoy Mary Poppins, sponsored by Zimmer. Thank you everyone! [applause]
[backstage footage of performers providing backup vocals to "Jolly Holiday"]

Christiani Pitts

My dad told me that "you have to go to college." And I said the only way I would go was if I could major in performance of some sort.

Dan Carter

Sometimes, young women especially, who really need to sell their youth.

Nancy Mimless

When you think about being "done" at 20, and you graduate from high school at 18, you don't have much time to do things.

Christiani Pitts

You know, "school's a waste of money, school's a waste of time, you're going to get out there and you're already 21..."

Dan Carter

There's a Shakespearean quote: "Sell while you can, you are not for all seasons."

Christiani Pitts

I've kind of heard that before, but I don't necessarily agree with it.

Carolyn Miller

It's unethical to just be like "I'm going to go to New York and just try to make it."

Dan Carter

That's not what we're training people for. We're training people for a life in the arts.

Nancy Mimless

I know people with PhD's that aren't working. "Oh, I've been in this business 30 years." Yeah, I don't care. Can she do the job? 'Cause I can hire her. Can he do the job? 'Cause I can hire him.

John Wagner

My advantage is that I have a strong dance background. Usually someone my age is put into the ensemble, a dancing ensemble, so if you don't have that dance background, you're kind of thrown out. There's very few roles for a young adult.

Mike Yocum

Used to be that pretty much everyone was a mover, with the rare dancer. And now, more and more people are coming in with a lot of experience. Guys especially. Guys that dance well, work.

Dan Carter

To sustain any kind of career, you really need to be well-trained. You need to know your craft. Often, they've been out for a while and they realize to get where they want to go, that they need more training.

John Wagner

Yeah, I dunno. I just don't want to be in my forties, waiting in line at an audition.

Dan Carter

That they've had some level of success already, but to kind of break through their own glass ceiling, they need to be better.

John Wagner

That's why I'm going back to school, too. I kind of am going in a different direction as it is. I love performing, but I've started to realize that I'd actually like to run my own performing arts venue. And I think with what I'm going to graduate with, I'm going to be able to have a steadier job, with a stable income, hopefully.

Ernie Watson

There are months where I have almost anything I could want, then there are months where it's like "well, we're going to eat simple things this month. We're not going out so much." It's better for your weight anyway.

John Wagner

Then when we struggle, we're always like "ugh, the economy's so bad." But when isn't the economy bad? It's always bad, it's not getting better. We're all struggling, we're always going to struggle.

Nancy Mimless

And it's a stressful struggle, but I don't know what else to do because it's what makes me get up everyday and go "I am an actor." Even if I'm not working as an actor, I'm still an actor.

Appendix B

Print Story

“What I Did For Love”

In the midst of the global financial crisis of 2008, as unemployment in the United States nearly doubled, students continued to enroll in musical theater programs at universities across the country. Even though starting wages for actors average well under \$30,000 per year, thousands of high school graduates continued to audition for the chance to spend tens of thousands of dollars on degrees for an industry that typically employs fewer than half of its union actors in a given year.

Dan Carter, the director of Penn State University’s School of Theatre, disputes the idea that students should turn to more sensible majors during a recession.

“I think maybe it’s the reverse,” he says. “As traditional jobs dry up, people go ‘what’s the point?’ Might as well do what makes you happy.”

Aspiring thespians can follow their dreams of performing, but they had better have the talent and skills to back it up. As of February 2014, Carter says that Penn State’s theater department has auditioned 520 students to fill 14 spots. The competition that cuts out 97% of applying students also means that those who do get through have an excellent chance of post-graduation employment.

Listing Penn State’s BFA programs (Musical Theater, Stage Management, Design and Technical Theater), all of which require an audition, Carter says that “in June, after graduation, 87% of [Penn State] graduates were already working in the field.”

John Wagner, a musical theater graduate from Shenandoah University in Virginia with experience at regional theaters and in New York, says that after he graduated, in 2009, many of his classmates didn’t get work right away.

“A majority of my class, I would say, didn’t get jobs as soon as they graduated. There were just a handful of us.” Wagner counts himself as lucky that one of his first auditions got him nearly three years of work at a regional theater in Arizona.

Wagner’s series of contracts at regional theaters near Phoenix kept him employed while the rest of the industry felt the sting of the recession. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, average unemployment among actors rose nine percentage points between 2007 and 2008, from 23.5% to 32.2%.

Although the recession made it particularly rough for actors, making a living in theater has never been easy. Ernie Watson, who acts and directs in community theaters in southwestern Pennsylvania, has tried to make a living out of the performing arts ever since he changed majors from pre-med to theater midway through college in the early 1980s.

Through his decades in community and regional theater, he estimates that he’s been involved in more than 700 productions. He has acted, designed sets for shows, worked on set crews, directed his own shows – “All the way from being a ticket-taker to being in charge of the full production,” he says, and his home is packed with the props and programs to prove it.

Over the years, he says, he’s seen the theater industry change as a result of the proliferation of media options. He says he’s seeing students spending their free time playing Angry Birds -- “You’ll all be on your iPad, on your iPod” -- instead of participating in after-school plays. The audience is similarly distracted. Community theater productions now have to compete with Hulu, YouTube, Netflix and cable TV.

“It took money then, it takes a lot more money now,” to produce a show, he says. “And if they don’t have the support, they’re going to go the way of the dinosaur.” But despite the ups and downs of the theater business, Watson still is glad he didn’t finish that pre-med degree.

“I will be silly and keep doing this until I either fall apart so I can’t do it anymore, or I’m in the middle of some show and just die right there on the stage,” he says. “I can’t say I’ve ever had a year

where every month was total big-time, where everything was great. But overall I've been happy. I've not starved."

Alex Dorf, who transferred from biology to musical theater in his second year of college, has been performing since childhood and can see the road that lies ahead when he graduates in 2017. He spent his first year of college at the University of Delaware studying pre-veterinary science, and he is now a sophomore at Penn State.

"I decided to go into science because it was safe. I'd be able to have a house, a career, I'd be able to stay in one place, have a family, but then I realized that my passion for performing overcame any of the bad parts about it." He was one of the few to be admitted to Penn State's musical theater program, and even with that edge, he recognizes the inherent difficulties of being an actor.

"I mean, I know that I'm probably going to be traveling around a lot, it's probably going to be a hard lifestyle," he says. "I love to perform, and I never want to lose that ability and I want to be able to cultivate that. That's what's going to keep me going."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carter, Dan. Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2014.
- Dorf, Alex. Personal Interview. 13 Jun 2014.
- Kirkwood, Lauren. "Arts majors jump ahead of tech grads in landing jobs." *USA Today* 30 Jul 2013, n. pag. Web. 14 Jul. 2014.
<<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2013/07/30/tech-job-unemployment/2595669/>>.
- Miller, Carolyn. Personal Interview. 13 Jun 2014.
- Mimless, Nancy. Personal Interview. 19 July 2014.
- Pitts, Christiani. Personal Interview. 13 Jun 2014.
- Schiller, Alison. Personal Interview. 13 Jun 2014.
- Seiner, Jeremy. Personal Interview. 23 Apr 2014.
- Seiner, Jeremy. Personal Interview. 12 Jun 2014.
- United States. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Recession of 2007-2009*. Web: , 2012. Web.
<http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2012/recession/pdf/recession_bls_spotlight.pdf>.
- United States. National Endowment for the Arts. *Artists in a Year of Recession: Impact on Jobs in 2008*. 2009. Web. <<http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/97.pdf>>.
- Wagner, John. Personal Interview. 3 Jan 2014.
- Wagner, John. Personal Interview. 7 Feb 2014.
- Wagner, John. Personal Interview. 28 Feb 2014.
- Wagner, John. Internet Videoconference Interview. 30 Jun 2014.
- Wagner, John. Personal Interview. 18 July 2014.
- Watson, Ernie. Personal Interview. 15 Dec 2013.
- Watson, Ernie. Personal Interview. 9 Jan 2014.
- Yocum, Mike. Personal Interview. 13 Jun 2013.

ACADEMIC VITA

Kelly Tunney
6068 National Pike
Grindstone, PA 15442
kelly.glenn.tunney@gmail.com

Experience

WPSU Radio

Multimedia Intern, May 2014-July 2014

The Daily Collegian, Pennsylvania State University

Photo and Multimedia Chief, January 2014-August 2014

Multimedia Editor, January 2013-December 2013

Senior Photographer, January 2012-December 2012

Penn State College of Communications

Event and Promotions Photographer, August 2013-August 2014

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Photography and Multimedia Intern, May 2013-August 2013

Schreyer Honors College, Pennsylvania State University

College Events Photographer, August 2013-present

College Relations Writing Intern, January 2013-May 2013

PSN News Live, Pennsylvania State University

Studio Crew, August 2010-August 2012

Education

Brownsville Area High School Class of 2010, Brownsville, PA

Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College Class of 2014

Bachelor of Arts in Visual Journalism and English

Minor in Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies

Skills

Proficient in photography, videography, audio collection, newswriting and reporting,
Adobe Premiere, Photoshop, Hindenburg, Soundslides, ProTools

Awards

Spring 2014 Hearst Multimedia Awards: Group, 5th place

Spring 2013 Hearst Multimedia Awards: Group, 6th place – Enterprise, 15th place

Fall 2012 Photographer of the Semester, The Daily Collegian