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onstage

Theater Arts at Bergen County Academies

WRITTEN BY STACEY ROSENFELD



TRUE GRIT Junior Sumner Perera says drive and motivation are keys to success in the theater program at BCA.

Enter the hallways of the Bergen County Academies (BCA) campus, and any notion of a traditional high school fades away.

The corridors brim with congregating students, an anomaly in many modern-day high schools, and the air itself seems infused with ingenuity and creativity. It is immediately apparent that this is no ordinary place.

BCA, located in Hackensack, is a public magnet high school for academically gifted Bergen County residents. The school, whose admission criteria are highly competitive, offers seven specialized programs in the areas of mathematics and science, engineering and design, medical science, business and finance, culinary arts and hospitality administration, technology and computer science, and visual and performing arts.

Applicants are initially culled by a variety of academic measures, followed by a personal interview. However, in the case of the theater arts program – one third of the Academy of Visual and Performing Arts (AVPA), made whole by other concentrations in music and visual arts – a comprehensive audition process takes the place of an interview and ultimately determines acceptance. The result is an annual admission class of approximately 16 students, roughly 10 percent of the program's applicants, who embody both academic excellence and theater grit.

ANNE-MARIE CARUSO

The Program

In merely its 10th year, the BCA theater program has already been distinguished as a Model School of the Arts, one of only four such designations in New Jersey. And its origins, much like the program itself, are unexpected.

Dr. Rebecca Strum, performing arts coordinator and founder of the theater arts program, recalls exercising on a treadmill at a Ridgewood gym beside BCA's then superintendent, Dr. John Grieco.

"I had been teaching at BCA for nearly three years at that time," she says, "after working as a professional actor and director. Dr. Grieco, who also loved the arts, turned to me and asked, 'How would you like to start a performing arts academy?'"

From that conversation was born AVPA, which absorbed existing music and visual arts programs, and complemented them with a Strum-designed theater arts concentration for students interested in pursuing college majors and careers in theater or film.

In addition to the prescribed BCA core classes, all of which are taught at an honors level or higher, students complete a theater arts concentration, which includes sequences in acting, theater history, voice and speech, directing and writing, as well as a plethora of electives ranging from stage combat to stage makeup and costume design. In addition to studying with faculty members, students learn dance, musical theater, screen performance and the business of theater from distinguished guest artists. And each student is also required to participate in two major theatrical productions each year, either on stage or behind the scenes.

If that all sounds a bit like the film *Fame*, it's not far off. Students move through the halls in various states of dress, from Shakespearean costumes to leotards, all without a second glance.

Julie Earls, a 2009 graduate who was recently cast in a Boston production of *Romeo and Juliet*, recalls "running around the school wearing costumes, carrying wacky props and wearing leotards and tights complete with tap shoes."



BRIGADOON Summer Perera as Meg in a rehearsal for the March production of the Lerner & Loewe show.

"What's so lovely about this image for me," she says, "is that it reminds me how I not only had the amazing opportunity to focus on the performing arts, but that BCA was a place where I could do that wholeheartedly...and no one ever made me feel ashamed or weird."

One of the program's three main instructors, Stephen Kaplan, hails from the very Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School for Music and the Performing Arts on which *Fame* was based, where he served as vice principal and chaired the drama program.

A native of Los Angeles who worked as a professional actor and continues his work as a playwright, Kaplan is a member of the Dramatists Guild and is directing this spring's production of *Bat Boy: The Musical*. He believes some of the greatest takeaways from the program are the confidence and empathy engendered in the students.

"Theater forces you to connect with things in a way that is not necessarily comfortable," he says. "The ability to conquer, to embrace and to fully embody other perspectives is priceless."

Necessary Ingredients

Ability may be the key word when describing those students who thrive in the theater program. It is universally described by both faculty and students as demanding and intense. Combined with the rigors of BCA generally, it takes a student who has the ability "to balance priorities, manage stress and remain highly motivated" to succeed, says Alexandra Holden, a senior from Saddle River.

"Ours might be the most time-consuming academy here," Philip Anastassiou, a 12th grader from Tenafly, says. "Even the sports teams get home earlier than we do when we're in rehearsal."

Summer Perera, a junior from Teaneck, says a student must be "driven and personally motivated" to triumph over the combined demands of BCA and the theater arts program.

It is an incredible passion of the theater arts students – palpable in conversations with them – that fuels their long hours and makes the experience worthwhile.

"The quality of the instruction we receive, and the professional >

standards to which we are held, are simply unparalleled," says Anastassiou, who will attend Columbia University next fall.

That instruction is delivered by Kaplan, Strum and Victoria Pero, an accomplished director with numerous off-Broadway and regional theater credits and an extensive background in scenic artistry and costume design.

"Everything we do here is at a professional level," Pero says. "It is a very clear reflection of the real theater world."

The three annual theater productions, each directed by one of the program's three instructors, are done at the professional level, replete with everything from quality-grade lighting to professional costumes and choreography.

Pero adds, "One of the most magical things about our school is that our students are not sitting at desks all day. They are on their feet or working with their hands and bodies. They are immersed."

Immersion in the theater is something that is also accomplished through the program's internship program, wherein seniors work in the field every Wednesday in lieu of attending school.

Emma Iacometta, a 12th grader from Rochelle Park who is very interested in stage management, interns in Manhattan at a Lower East Side theater company – notably founded by two BCA alumni – where she "gets to do a little of everything." Anastassiou interns at New York's famous Playwrights Horizons, where the self-described aspiring playwright gets to read and evaluate scripts.



THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE III Philip Anastassiou as George III and Lauren Henning as Queen Charlotte in this November 2012 production.

Upcoming Shows

One-Act Play Festival, student directed, May 16-18

Theatre in The Round, arena-style play, May 31 and June 1

Additional information about the AVPA Theatre Arts Program may be found at bcts.bergen.org.

Perhaps even more striking than the education the students receive is the program's culture of belonging and collaboration.

"To create good work is to create a true ensemble," Holden says. "That is what we are taught."

"Our teachers are our mentors and like our second parents," Anastassiou says. "And I am also extremely grateful for the friendships I have made here."

Alumni: AVPA's Legacy

Shakira Barrera, a 2008 BCA graduate who earned a BFA in dance from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, says, "I currently live in Los Angeles with my best friend from the AVPA theater department, Anna Lewkowska, who is also my talent manager! We are excited to announce that I have booked my first co-star role on the hit television show *Grey's Anatomy*."

Michael Schwitter, another graduate of the class of 2008 who toured with *The Book of Mormon* for a year upon his graduation from the Cincin-

nati Conservatory of Music, recognizes the value of paying it forward.

"Dr. Strum and Ms. Pero know how to produce smart actors," he says. "They teach their students to read more, ask questions, watch the news, become exposed to everything in the world that informs theater."

"Some of my AVPA classmates [and I] constantly help nurture younger actors who also dream of enriching their lives with everything that the arts can provide," Schwitter says, "whether it's onstage, behind the scenes or even just as a passionate theatergoer."

And Earls, who earned a BFA in acting from Boston University, credits AVPA with much of her success.

"I cannot talk about the performing arts program without talking about Dr. Strum and Ms. Pero, the 'yin and the yang' of the program," she says. "I owe these ladies so much. These teachers take their students seriously as theater artists. And they also care for their students as regular teenagers going through teenage things – fear of the future, figuring out our identity – with open arms and open hearts."

Applying

Strum's best advice for those contemplating the AVPA theater program is to ask, "Do I have a genuine love of learning, and am I ready to really study theater?"

Pero says, "If the answer is yes, then get ready for a joyful four years." ♦