



Theatre



&

Life

All the world
really is a stage

BY MICHAEL BIGELOW DIXON

THEATRE IS NOT LIFE, RIGHT? Theatre is about rehearsal and performance. There are actors on the stage and an audience in the seats. To see the show from the house, you have to buy a ticket. Rarely is life rehearsed and then viewed by spectators as a paid performance.

Yet, while theatre may not *be* life, it sure is a lot *like* life. “The purpose of playing,” explains Hamlet to the Players, “was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature” and show “the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” If Hamlet’s right, then actors can improve their skills through close observation of human behavior, and, in fact, they can. Great acting is always true to life.

Now let’s reverse the equation. Life is not theatre. And yet, life *behaves* a lot like theatre. To quote Shakespeare again, this time Jacques in *As You Like It*,

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts...

If that’s true, then the “performance” of a life can be enhanced by theatre techniques and training. And, in fact, it is. The things you learn in a drama class—vocal dynamics, proper breathing, movement, character analysis, teamwork and more—are things we use in our daily lives.

That’s what this article is about: how theatre education informs and improves lives off stage, particularly in professions outside the theatre. The benefits of theatre training to what we think of as real life fall neatly into two categories. The first deals with life lessons that demonstrate how theatre experiences help people communicate and empathize with others. The second involves practical applications of theatre forms and methods to actual work in other fields.

The statements accompanying this article, beginning at right, come from a doctor, lawyer, pastor, economist, architectural consultant, and others, all of whom have studied theatre, worked in the theatre, or both. Their personal reflections demonstrate the substantial impact of theatre education on their careers. And though their professions and dramatic training differ tremendously, they all make the same point: no matter what career you choose, there’s great value in studying theatre and acting.

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LIFE LESSONS

A pastor, a medical doctor, a prosecutor, an economist, and four others talk about how they put their theatre training to work in their professional lives.



Meghan Davis, pastor, Longview, Washington

Has an M.A. in theatre history and criticism from Ohio University, interned at Actors Theatre of Louisville and the Goodman, and worked as a dramaturg at theatres in Cape Cod, San Francisco, Singapore, and many places in between.

“As anyone who’s taken a theatre history class knows, Western theatre and religion have shared roots. So it shouldn’t be surprising that my training in theatre, specifically dramaturgy, has informed my ministry in multiple capacities. The first and most obvious connection is the worship service. As Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard posited, the worship service is a kind of theatrical performance, with all participants—preacher, musicians and congregation—as actors and God as audience. My theatre training assists me in my ability to create a worship space and plan a worship service and sermon with a theme and flow that tell the story of the worship service much as a play.

“Naturally the literary aspect of dramaturgy translates directly to biblical scholarship and interpretation. And I’ve found my dramaturgical skills of observation and analysis helpful in most aspects of ministry, particularly pastoral care and counseling. While many seminarians and new pastors are challenged by simply listening to those seeking counseling and tend to talk too much or try to solve problems, after years of sitting through rehearsals as a dramaturg—observing and speaking only when necessary—I have never had a difficulty with this facet of ministry.”



**Dr. Barry Heller, M.D.,
Los Angeles**

Acted in college and spent two summers after graduation as a member of Brown University's summer stock company. Did stand-up comedy in Los Angeles while he was in medical school.

“My theatre background and training have been invaluable to me as a physician, particularly in the emergency room. Certainly, there is always a bit of acting in talking to pa-

tients. Sometimes it's necessary to hide uncertainty with an outward show of confidence, or to hide concern until all the facts are known. We see people in crisis, and need to respond without too much emotional involvement, which would make doing our job difficult. This involves a bit of acting, as well.

“Acting in particular taught me how to compartmentalize emotions. Some characters were too powerful to live with day in and day out and needed to be left on the stage. In the same way, sometimes in my medical practice emotions spring up in me that surprise me, and there are some patients I just cannot get out of my mind. For the most part, I am successful about not taking that home, but again, knowing that I need to separate emotion from what I do is key.”

John Keller, assistant U.S. attorney, Quad Cities, Iowa

Acted in high school and college and has taken training on adapting theatre skills for the courtroom.

“I work as a federal prosecutor and I previously worked as a federal public defender. The culmination of my case-work in each case is oral advocacy in front of either a judge or jury. I acted in both high school and college and I've attended lectures by theatre professionals on how to present effectively in court.



The nervous energy that I feel before standing up in front of a jury is the same as the butterflies that I felt before taking the stage in a theatre performance on opening night.

The strategies for delivering effectively are the same, too. Be prepared—prepare, prepare more, and then prepare more. I give versions of my

opening and closing statements in front of the mirror and then to my wife and her daughter. I have even taken my exhibits and other presentation materials to the courtroom prior to trial and walked through different parts of my case, just like a dress rehearsal prior to a performance.

“I also use theatre tips while speaking in court. Don't forget to breathe deeply. Project with your voice. Look at your audience. Move with a purpose, i.e., don't just pace or shift your weight because you're nervous, rather, if you are walking somewhere make this accentuate whatever it is that you are trying to convey. Rarely, if ever, turn your back on the audience. Remember that they've never seen the play, or the case, before, so if something unplanned happens, act like it was planned. And finally, and this may not always be true in theatre, but in the courtroom I have to be genuine. Whatever techniques or emotional appeals that I might use in a courtroom, I have to do it in a way that I personally believe in. Otherwise, jurors see through my words or feigned anger or loud voice as exactly what they are, cheap theatrics.”

Deborah St. George, television journalist, San Diego

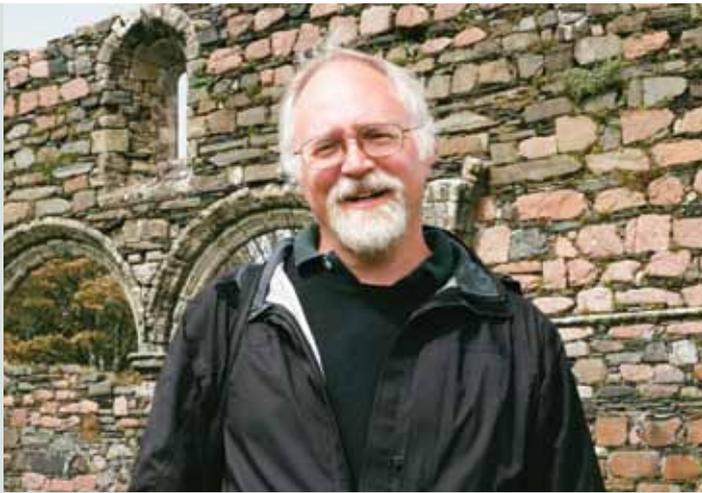
Began acting in high school and was a theatre major in college where, she said, “without learning the craft of acting, I never would have made it to graduation.”

“On the simplest level, the makeup room for a news reporter feels exactly like a backstage dressing room for actors. There are differences, as well. On TV you're playing to a lens instead of an audience seated in the dark, you are authentic instead of playing a character, and you report the facts instead of interpreting a role. Understanding those differences, however, helps clarify the purpose of each.

“Also, acting and news reporting are similar because you're communicating, you're telling a story, and the best news stories, like the best plays, are about the human spirit. You want to deliver news that will have an impact on people's lives, which feels the same to me as wanting to make an impact through your performance on a theatre audience.”

**M. Christopher Boyer, city councilman,
Lynnwood, Washington**

Has a B.A. in theatre from Rice University, where he studied with famed acting teacher Bobby Lewis, one of the founders of The Actors Studio. Worked as festival coordinator for Actors Theatre of Louisville and managing director for several companies, including A.D. Players, Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre, and Taproot Theatre Company.



“My theatrical training has helped me in many ways, but two stand out. First is a lesson that I began to learn in eighth-grade speech class, which was refined in many ways over the years: how to be an effective public speaker. Techniques such as breath control and enunciation have stayed with me and I’ve been called upon to pass them on to students and colleagues.

“The second lesson concerns the cooperative creative process that underlies most of the best theatrical art. Playwright, director, designers, actors, and technicians all bring their creative ideas to bear in a coordinated fashion. Only in special circumstances are any of these dispensable, and the whole is nearly always greater than the sum of the parts. Keeping this collegial spirit and its far-reaching results in mind has helped me to effectively lead groups from the religious, social service, arts, and government sectors.”



Chris Wineman, theatre architecture consultant, Denver

Earned a B.F.A. in acting and M.F.A. in directing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and worked for eight seasons at Actors Theatre of Louisville and three seasons as executive director of the Denver Center Theatre Company.

“I work in an architecture firm—even though I was never trained to draw or design. Even my theatre training was acting and directing and management,

so I can’t claim to be a converted scenic or lighting designer. I spend most of my time doing research into client functions and needs, bridging the communication gap between the client and the architects, and presenting to audiences such as donor groups, user groups, and city councils.

“Working in theatre prior to my career in architecture

taught me to work in teams, understand a deadline and a schedule, see beneath the surface to the work going on ‘backstage,’ balance the big picture with my own specific responsibilities, ask good questions, put myself in others’ shoes, and of course, be a good presenter—not simply in that I can be heard without a microphone (which I can), but that I can distill the message to key points that the audience will understand and value.”

Valerie Smith, former Peace Corps volunteer, Kenya

Received her theatre training on the job at South Coast Repertory in California, the Alley Theatre in Houston, Actors Theatre of Louisville, and as resident playwright with Walden Theatre in Louisville.

“One of the first things I learned as a dramaturg at Actors Theatre of Louisville was the importance of simply remaining quiet and watching. Asking questions is vital at some point, but particularly at the top of a rehearsal process, my questions must have felt intrusive to the playwright and



director. I discovered that almost all my questions ended up being answered simply through my observation of their process.

“I used this knowledge in Kenya. If I didn’t know what was going on, I resisted the urge to question, sat back, and just observed. After a while, I began to understand the ‘subtext’ running through the situation. I also began to understand that cultural outsiders, especially those from the West, I would even say Americans in particular, tend to ask a lot of questions and then demand answers. It’s natural—especially when you are in a completely different cultural context, are not familiar with the language, and may have no idea what is going on in a situation. But from the Kenyans’ point of view, this response was most often viewed as disruptive and controlling—a negative approach that generally did not serve the foreigner well. Remaining quiet, calm, and observant did a lot to increase trust and enhance under-

standing between myself and the Kenyans, just as it did in the U.S. rehearsal room.”

**Geoffrey F. Williams, economist,
Lexington, Kentucky**

Has a B.F.A. in acting from New York University. Performed in a number of Off Off-Broadway productions before entering the corporate world.

“One thing I only realized after a few years of corporate work was that being able to present is one of the most crucial skills in business. This can be either in a single one-on-one session, or it can be one of those huge Steve Jobs “Here is the new iPhone” extravaganzas. Whatever the size of the audience, the basic problems are still there—you need to present information, make sure people understand it, keep them interested and engaged. Acting experience is great for all this. It teaches you to simplify things, it helps you listen to the unspoken feedback you’re getting from listeners, and it helps you

keep calm when something doesn’t work the way you meant it to.

“The second way that acting helped me is it gave me lots of experience in trying to understand human behavior. When you work on a character, you need to use the cues of the script to figure out what’s going on. You also spend a lot of time watching the actors around you as they do the same work, and that adds an entirely new layer. You realize that behavior can be

very ambiguous: you may think you’re being very broad, and your scene partner may think you’re being subtle. You may think you’re coming across too cheerful, and the director thinks you’re being too dark. When you put together your own experience trying to interpret the written character with the complex, and frequently painful, feedback you get from your collaborators as you try to bring the character to life, you develop a much more sophisticated and cautious approach to trying to understand others.”



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PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Besides the value of theatre experience for those who choose other careers, theatre professionals have found that their knowledge has vast relevance beyond the stage. Business, law, medicine, and government are just a few professions in which people are reaching out to tap the creative resources and knowledge inherent in theatrical education.

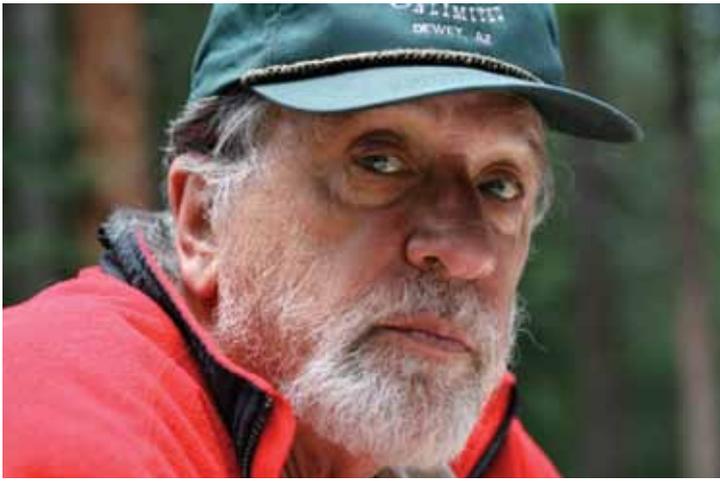
Last summer, for example, the *New York Times* reported on Mexico’s effort to reform its justice system. Mexico’s Congress had passed a bill to allow the presentation of evidence and cross-examination of witnesses, which represented a major shift in the Mexican legal process. How would the government retrain 7,700 prosecutors, investigators, and forensic specialists in a few years? Their answer was theatre. The attorney general’s office developed a series of mock trials in which the participants needed to learn scripts, prepare tactics, rehearse arguments, deal with conflict, and play to the hearts and minds of the judge and jury. By acting out imaginary cases, the participants learned new and more effective approaches to jurisprudence.

Theatre techniques have proven useful in training physicians, too. “I do a little role playing/improv with medical students and residents,” notes Dr. Barry Heller (who talks about the value of his theatre training in his practice on page 24). “I will have them speak to me as a father of a child who has died or the wife who has just lost her husband. I also have been the reluctant patient, the man obviously having a heart attack who wants to leave the hospital or the angry patient that is calling the staff names and alienating those that can most help him. These are very useful ‘theatre games,’ if you will, which help young physicians in training to figure out how they will respond and act in various difficult situations.”

A surprising application of classical drama is outlined in Lee Devin’s and Robert D. Austen’s book, *The Soul of Design: Harnessing the Power of Plot to Create Extraordinary Products*. In their search for the best ways to manage “creatives” (employees hired to create new products), the authors draw upon Aristotle’s theory of dramatic plot to explore “what makes special things special.”

“Aristotle called plot ‘the soul of tragedy.’ For him, this soul was the major animating principle that organized the parts of each individual script into a unique example of the class of things called tragedy,” Devin and Austen write. “We borrow *plot* from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to use it in this exact sense. We need the word, the idea, in order to approach an understanding of the complex interaction of parts in a special thing.”

Corporations have long looked to theatre professionals to help employees think more creatively, improve salesmanship or customer relations, or develop better teamwork. “Adding Value to Executive Relationships” was one such workshop in which theatre director/teacher Sullivan White used acting exercises that gave executives ways to improve



Lee Devin employed classical dramatic theory in a book on product design.

their management skills. “The point of the workshop was to help sales people become trusted advisors to their clients as the company moved toward a client-centric organization,” explained White. “The skills I teach to my actors also apply to business relationships. Whether you’re on stage or in a corporate office, trust is essential and it’s earned through listening, observation, and empathy.”

There’s a place for theatre in psychology, as well. Whether you were aware of it or not, Clint Eastwood’s now infamous speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention, in which he harangued a phantom president sitting in an empty chair, connects theatre with politics via a psychodramatic technique. (You can view Eastwood’s performance on YouTube.) Therapists traditionally have patients address an empty chair as a way of focusing them on a troubled relationship, but in therapy the technique also involves occupying the chair to develop empathy or understanding of another.

“From the therapeutic perspective,” noted Professor Jonathan D. Moreno in the *New York Times*, “one problem with the way Mr. Eastwood used the empty chair is that he did not sit in the chair himself and put himself in the president’s shoes.... We could have all learned more if Mr. Eastwood had followed through and actually put himself in the chair.” Moreno, who happens to be the son of Jacob L. Moreno, the founder of psychodrama in the 1930s, postulates that Eastwood may have been familiar with this technique because the empty chair improvisation “has also been used when training actors to feel themselves in their roles.”

Museums sometimes engage in dramatic activity in the form of historical re-enactments. Living history museums like Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia provide learning environments where visitors interact with historians in costume, working farms, and hands-on craft projects from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By speaking with staff members who portray characters as appropriate to their historical period, guests acquire a deeper understanding of life in times past.

Finally, role-playing, the basis of acting, provides the conceptual foundation for a relatively new academic discipline called performance studies. Theatre artist and scholar Richard Schechner believes that through “a convergence of anthropological, biological and aesthetic theory” human thought and behavior can be understood by using ideas inherent in the-

atrical performance. For example, Method Acting techniques have been employed by scholars to elaborate on the Computational Theory of Mind, a philosophy that views human intelligence as a computer. Ideas developed in performance studies have also proven useful to scholars in the fields of comparative literature, neuroscience, folklore, linguistics, and gender and race studies, to name just a few.

As these examples demonstrate, there are myriad ways that theatre and drama are used in all kinds of professions. Detectives study “character” motivation in order to solve crimes. Theatre games help sell products at Mary Kay and Tupperware parties. And in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal advocates the use of theatre as a weapon of liberation in the realm of politics. Clearly Shakespeare got it right: “All the world’s a stage.”

THE BOTTOM LINE

If this article still hasn’t convinced you that theatre in all its aspects—technique, training, performance, theory—has a profound and positive effect on all who take part, then consider these facts.

According to a study by The College Board, “Students involved in the arts tend to have higher academic performance and better standardized test scores—nearly 100 points better on the SAT.” Studying theatre contributes to improved self-confidence and better public speaking skills. It sharpens one’s ability to follow a time line, accept feedback, and work with an ensemble. Acting in particular encourages self-discipline, hard work, self-expression, appreciation of others, and fulfillment. Most people who engage with theatre studies also find it is just plain fun.

Now, who wants to sign up for a theatre course? ▼



Sullivan White, center, used acting exercises to teach management skills.