



DEVELOPING HIGH SCHOOL TECHNICAL APPRENTICESHIPS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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by laurie kincman

The School of Theatre Arts at the University of Arizona describes itself as “conservatory training in a university setting.” One of the key components to this is the Arizona Repertory Theatre (ART): a company of actors, designers, technicians, theatre educators, and scholars who are pursuing BFA or MFA degrees. The UA main stage production season features six Arizona Repertory Theatre productions each year.

Uniquely, that season kicks off in the summer. Actors, designers, and technicians are invited to audition or apply for positions on this production, working with professionals in their fields. The show rehearses for a month, performs through the end of June, and then is remounted at the beginning of the fall semester. Nearly every performer and staff member receives a stipend, making this production more akin to summer stock than the regular academic season.

HOW IT BEGAN

During my first summer as the production manager for the School of Theatre Arts, a faculty colleague who was lighting the show approached me about allowing a high school student to work as an electrician. The student had a great deal of high school experience, and was ready to take the next step in his training. We agreed this seemed a good idea, and invited the student to work as an electrician and subsequently a member of the run crew.

As I observed the student that summer, an idea emerged. A number of theatre companies in the southern Arizona area offered acting opportunities for high school students in the summer, but rarely did such a program exist for designers or technicians.

The props master and props apprentice dress a barracks wall for *Biloxi Blues*.



PHOTOS BY AUTHOR EXCEPT AS NOTED

Simply walking into the shop at the U of A, I knew that this new space could offer all sorts of possibilities for creativity and innovation that I had not even dreamed of until that moment. Just thinking about what it meant to be able to work with metal and steel after years of nothing but wood structured sets, I became excited. The skills I learned in the shop that summer were extremely beneficial in my stagecraft class my freshman year. While others were learning how to hold a drill, I was given other projects in the lab and I was really able to get a lot more out of the class than I think I would have otherwise.

Working on the run crew of Biloxi Blues was another sort of wonderful. It was a blessing to meet so many new people, both students and recent graduates. I listened and tried to absorb all the advice that my older peers had to offer. Behind the scenes of a college production I noticed right away that there was a system of organization and communication that were much more professional and fine tuned than the methods of my high school days. All of these little things made me more and more excited because I knew that I was slowly being initiated into this next level of theater.

Katelin Ashcraft
Scenic Construction Apprentice

DEVELOPING A PILOT PROGRAM

Over the course of the next academic year, I developed the pilot for a High School Technical Apprenticeship Program. I first brought the idea to my colleagues in the Design & Technology division of the school. Though not all of them are on campus during the summer, I felt it important to have everyone's input and support if the program became a reality. Each of them suggested jobs that could be appropriate for a high school student, and offered advice on how many apprentices their area might be able to take and ways to combine work and teaching. Because the summer staff is largely comprised of graduate and undergraduate students, this would offer them opportunities of their own to work on teaching and leadership skills. The summer show is supported largely through grant funding, which ultimately limits the number of paid positions that can be offered.

Although very specifically not wanting just free labor out of this, I hoped that an offer of a few pairs of extra hands might make the program more appealing.

With an outline of the program in place, I approached the director of the School of Theatre Arts. He agreed a pilot program was a good first step, and allowed me to proceed. It launched in May 2005 with our production of *Brighton Beach Memoirs*.

SETTING PARAMETERS

The pilot program was intentionally small, with applications sent to only two area high schools. I chose drama programs in the area that produced fully-mounted shows throughout the year and offered technical theatre classes as well. In doing this, I hoped to get students with some previous technical experi-

Biloxi Blues, 2006.

Arizona Repertory Theatre,
directed by Brent Gibbs;
sets, Sally Day;
costumes, Patrick Holt;
lighting, Jeff Warburton;
sound, Scott Readell.



PHOTO BY CHRIS RICHARDS

ence. The intent of the pilot year was to determine if our summer show could provide the “next step” training I envisioned, so at least this time around good basic skills were a necessity. I developed flyers and an application, and sent the materials to the drama teachers at those two schools.

Although the program is voluntary and free for the apprentices, I wanted a formal application in which detailed information could be given to the students—the scope of individual apprenticeships and a production calendar—and information could be gathered about the applicants—contact information, their job preferences, and their conflicts with the schedule. (A PDF copy of the application is available at [www.usitt.org/tdt.index/extras/44-3apprentices.html](http://www.usitt.org/tdt/index/extras/44-3apprentices.html).) Though the program was beginning small, we were looking for students to take the opportunity seriously. I also wanted to address as many questions up front as possible and provide a space for the signature of the parent or guardian who would ultimately see that the students met their commitments (and sometimes drive them here and back each day). Past experience had taught me that written commitments are less often broken than verbal ones.

The application invited students interested in lighting, sound, scenic construction, props, and costumes to participate. One of the schools, Catalina Foothills High School, responded right away. This was the school of the previous summer's student, and he had spoken quite positively about his experience. Several of his classmates were interested, and I soon welcomed five students: three lighting apprentices, a sound apprentice, and an apprentice in scenic construction.

A few tweaks to the standard ART summer schedule were needed to make this pilot program work. The university summer schedule began a full two weeks before the end of the

school year for the area high schools. By the time their classes were over, we would be nearly ready for technical rehearsals. I asked the production areas to alter their daily schedules, working later into the afternoons and preserving some of the Saturday calls which are common during the academic year. This would allow the apprentices to begin working as soon as we did, and although they were only available for limited hours during the first weeks, this was long enough for them to get fully involved in projects. The sound apprentice and one of the lighting students quickly showed exceptional promise, and they soon benefited from additional responsibilities and involvement.

All of the pilot students signed up for “construction apprenticeships,” meaning they were done with the opening of the show after a month's involvement. Some opted to attend technical rehearsals, while others finished up with the end of the major work in their area.

EVALUATION AND EXPANSION

Once the production closed for the summer, I sought feedback from the high school students who had participated. I sent questionnaires to each apprentice, asking about their likes and dislikes, other areas to add to future apprenticeships—essentially any feedback they wanted to share. *Brighton Beach Memoirs* featured a graduate student lighting designer, an undergraduate sound designer, and a guest faculty scenic designer. Each offered their own evaluations of the program as a whole and of the individual students with whom they'd worked.

The apprentices who returned the questionnaires offered me some valuable insights: several students would like to work as stage managers (I had originally not included stage manage-

Every person working on Brighton Beach Memoirs was willing to help and teach me as much as they could. During this summer I learned basic banging, focusing, and electrician skills. I enjoyed working on this production so much that I was pleased to be accepted back for a second year to the Lighting Apprenticeship program for the production of Biloxi Blues. During my second year in the program I was taught more advanced electrician skills and got to work in the proscenium theatre at the U of A. During my experiences in the apprenticeship program, I was acquainted to both the proscenium and black box theatres at the University of Arizona. I was able to take what I learned at the apprenticeship program back to my high school and apply them to the productions I was a part of. Already being familiar with both performance spaces and some of the students and faculty of Arizona Repertory Theatre, this program influenced my college choice.

Zachary Ciaburri
Lighting Apprentice

An electrician works overhead, teaching basic skills to lighting apprentices.



A break during scenic construction for Biloxi Blues.



During that summer I didn't just learn new types of paperwork and forms, but I also learned valuable techniques that enhanced my stage managing skills. I was given a whole new spectrum of problems that helped me prepare myself for life in college. These experiences allowed me to observe others, deal with situations that I hadn't yet thought about, and in general learn about theatre life.

An extra benefit of this apprenticeship was that I learned what college theatre meant and it made my transition into college much easier. I was personally terrified, and I didn't know what to expect, none the less what to do. This opportunity showed me what I was getting into.

Krystal Ritchie
Stage Management Apprentice

ment as an option); the extended afternoon in the production shops was a success; and the cost of parking was a problem.

Armed with these and my own observations, I sought to expand the program for a second summer.

My first goal was to expand the invitation list for apprentices, and to reach out to more area high schools. The University of Arizona hosts a number of high school drama activities during the academic year, such as the Southern Arizona Acting Festival (SAAF), the English Speaking Union Shakespeare competition, and a number of student matinee performances. I looked at the enrollments of these programs

and found the schools who participated most frequently. SAAF became a key element of my expansion strategy, particularly those schools that participated in the afternoon one-act play competition. These were schools focusing on both acting and technical theatre, and looking for avenues to showcase all of their students' work. I developed a list of fourteen schools, updated the application, and sent out materials.

As most of these schools did not know about the pilot program, I also created an informational flyer to be distributed throughout the year. Other communication tactics included personally contacting each teacher to whom materials were mailed,

Ten Steps to Starting a Program for High School Students at Your University

- 1 Look at the high schools in your area. Are they doing technical theatre? Do they want to? Do their students have time for outside activities?
- 2 Look at your schedule. Is there a realistic way to have high school students involved in what your program is already doing?
- 3 Look at your schedule again. Do you have time to take on the responsibilities to see this all the way through? What personnel support is available?
- 4 Get the support of your colleagues. Take full advantage of the ideas and resources in your faculty.
- 5 Start small. Begin with a single school or single show, so you can really see if the idea works.
- 6 Contact the school(s) early, provide as much detail as you can, and give students and their parents ways to reach you with questions.
- 7 Get feedback. And then listen to it.
- 8 Be willing to make changes.
- 9 Look for outside allies and information resources.
- 10 Don't be disappointed by fluctuating numbers. If you believe in what you are doing, just keep going.

as well as current BFA students working as student teachers at those schools, to provide more information and background.

Of those fourteen schools, eleven students from seven schools applied. Nine apprentices in lighting, sound, scenic construction, props, and stage management accepted invitations for the summer. Although one dropped out before the program began, two of the final eight were returning students. Three of the new apprentices opted to join the run crew and stay with the show for an additional three weeks. I was thrilled with the results.

During the pilot year, we had learned several things, including how to work around proms and graduations. We learned to schedule orientation days for the shops to offer a tour of the facilities and some preliminary training before the first day of work. Going into the second year, the Director of the School provided some funding which allowed me to pay for apprentice parking in the nearby garage.

I also received a small grant administered through the office of the Dean of the College of Fine Arts to support an additional staff position, an apprenticeship coordinator. During the summer I serve as both the production manager and stage manager for the show. Checking up on apprentices during rehearsals proved to be tougher than I expected in the pilot year. By adding an apprenticeship coordinator, I had an assistant who could be more closely involved with the apprentices each day, tend to their schedule needs on a more personal basis, and answer the "silly" questions an apprentice might want to ask, but not want to ask a teacher.

A SURPRISE

As the second group of apprentices began work, I discovered a benefit to the program that had only been tangential in my mind. Four of this year's nine apprentices were incoming BFA students to the School. Two of these four were the returning students, who actually cited the summer experience as a reason they chose to apply here. The other two saw this as a chance to get to know the department before the academic year started. I hadn't been pushing this as a recruitment opportunity, but students saw it as one nonetheless.

As mentioned earlier, the ART summer show remounts at the beginning of the fall semester. The cast and certain key production staff members are the same, but the crew changes. This necessitates another (albeit abbreviated) tech rehearsal process before the second opening. The remount gets one day of technical rehearsals and two dress rehearsals, both of which commonly have invited audiences. Two of the summer apprentices, now BFA freshmen, were invited to assist with the remount.

The stage management apprentice was offered the chance to stay with the show in the fall, as was the scenic apprentice who had been on the summer run crew. She returned eager for the chance to help train the fall technicians. That summer's

production of *Biloxi Blues* was more technically complicated than some summer endeavors, with automated scenery and a more extensive use of our moving lights. We had gotten through a one-week tech in the summer with few problems, but I was indebted to the apprentices for their help on the remount. Condensing five days work into one would have been much tougher without them.

The four new freshmen used the summer experience to their advantage throughout the academic year. Acclimating to college was a bit easier—they already had some friends, an idea of where things were, and a sense of our schedule and working style. This was a talented freshman class to begin with, but these students were able to turn their experience into early opportunities and pick up production assignments often reserved for sophomores or juniors.

YEAR THREE

Armed with enthusiasm, I entered year three. Having observed that the program did indeed work on a larger scale, and with my recruitment observation still fresh, I sought new ways of reaching out to the Tucson-area high schools. I wanted to expand the list of schools to which the applications were sent, and to find apprentices in areas such as costumes—offered twice, but not yet chosen.

It seemed fitting, as the Arizona Repertory Theatre concluded Neil Simon's trilogy with our production of *Broadway Bound*, that the apprenticeship program was now an established, fully-functioning part of our summer program.

Colleagues in the theatre education and outreach program areas provided insight as well as opportunities to speak in person with high school drama teachers. I was introduced to the Fine Arts Coordinator of the Tucson Unified School District, who offered to help distribute information about the program. Her endorsement of the opportunity, as well as an expanded e-mail contact list, enabled better and more immediate contact with the schools. More materials were created, applications sent to a wider array of schools, and the new apprenticeship coordinator did increased follow up.

The result? Surprisingly, the number of schools represented in the applications declined. We still accepted six students (one returning apprentice), but I was puzzled by this turn. Several teachers responded that many of their interested students were below the required age of sixteen this year, or that they were taking the summer to work or travel before starting college. My hope had been for more apprentices, not fewer, and for more schools to be able to take advantage of the program.

ANOTHER SURPRISE

Yet amidst this small group was one of my most pleasant surprises. We did, indeed, reach one new school this summer; their representative student applying for the stage management apprenticeship. Unlike the other apprentices, the stage man-

As a high school technical theatre teacher at Catalina Foothills High School, I hold great value to the high school internship program at the University of Arizona's Arizona Repertory Theatre. The internship program for technical high school students has helped my program immensely. Interested students have an opportunity to work in "real" technical theatre situations and gain confidence in their knowledge of technical theatre. Each and every student that has gone through the internship program has benefited from the experience. I believe that education is the first step in the field of technical theatre arts but experience is the real teacher. The students better understand how the technical side "runs" by seeing it first hand, experiencing all the elements that make up a production.

As a side note, the experience reinforces my teaching as well. Successful interns come back to school interested and motivated for more information, confirming that the students have basic education in the technical theatre field and that the high school education can make a difference in the choosing of college and life-long goals. What more can a teacher ask for?

Thank you for these opportunities. The students will continue to grow in technical theatre through collaborative teaching and honest experience in the field.

Norm Testa

Technical Director & Facility Manager

Dept. of Theatre Arts

Catalina Foothills High School

agement candidate is asked to commit to the summer rehearsal and performance period up front—making it the longest of all the programs. The applicant had been very involved in theatre in high school, but almost exclusively as an actor and with little technical experience. I asked the coordinator to conduct an informal interview with her just to be sure she knew what she'd be getting into. The apprentice's reasons for wanting to join were sound, and although not a technician, she was an incoming student as well. So I said yes. What I got was a lovely, extremely responsible second assistant stage manager, who rose to the challenges of the show in no time at all. She learned quickly and fit in well. If I hadn't known she had no previous stage management experience, I would have been easily fooled.

The returning student also did extremely well. Unable to participate in his first-choice area the previous summer—that department could only support one apprentice—he got priority this time around. He worked hard, learned a great deal, and made many positive contributions.

This also forced me to stop for a moment and rethink my earlier disappointment. Quality is certainly better than quantity. Perhaps the pool of interested students was smaller; perhaps the postal service delay that got the applications delivered late had an impact. But in the end, the students who wanted to come had come—and done very well. Perhaps high school cycles are like those we see in university enrollments—some years we seem to be bursting with freshmen, while other years the classes are distinctly smaller.

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

Apprentices are remarkable people. Although younger than our college students, the fact that they come to the production completely on a volunteer basis makes them eager to learn and participate. Often they are apprehensive about asking for schedule accommodations, but once they discover they can work on the show and still go to their graduation, we find them coming in early, staying late, and asking what else they can do. The shops and theatres are new to them, so nearly every part of the process provides something for them to learn or experience for the first time.

Some apprentices choose to participate in the program while still in high school, seeing this as an opportunity to improve their skills and have material for college applications. Others opt to use the program as their transition from high school to college theatre—whether they are coming to the U of A or going elsewhere. Still others just want something fun to do, and have no lofty goals.

I began this article at the conclusion of the third summer, still believing strongly in the value of our high school apprentices. By the time this article reaches publication, a fourth summer will have ended and a fourth class of apprentices will have concluded their work. These edits are occurring during the second week of the summer rehearsals. Year four features six apprentices—and includes both a new participating school and our first-ever paint apprentice.

It is fortunate that I had three consecutive summers to develop this project, and special to me that I have done them while working on a trilogy of plays that provided an extra artistic boost for the performers, the production team, and the apprentices. Still I am constantly brainstorming for other ways to reach out. Time and a little perspective have made me less concerned with how many apprentices we get, and have taught me to focus on making sure the experience is the best it can be for all involved.

Is there more to dream of? Isn't there always? In a less budget-conscious environment, the program could expand its local focus, and offer the chance for students from out of town to participate. Each year when the applications are sent out, at least one high school teacher inquires if there is a professional development activity for them. Taking advantage of faculty designers and technicians and developing a teacher training component could fit in somewhere as well. Time will tell where the program goes next. ❖

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