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Successful theatre alumni inspire undergraduates

By Jennifer Johns (http://www.cw.ua.edu/staff/jennifer-johns) | 02/01/2018 1:47am

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Elise Barksdale is a senior double major in Theater and Dance

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Theatre majors feel encouraged and inspired after watching University of Alabama alumni make it big in the entertainment industry.

Jake Boyd is a 2010 UA graduate who has gone on to star in shows such as "Rock of Ages," "Wicked" and currently "Sweeney Todd" on Broadway, as well as "Carrie" and "The Last Smoker in America" off-Broadway.

"UA was a fun place where I met many of my best friends and the department was great in guiding me into the real-life business of this," Boyd said in an interview with Alabama News Center. "They have turned out a lot of great actors from the department."

T-Town Live

Michael Luwoye, a 2013 UA graduate, has risen in Broadway from being an alternate to starring as the lead role, "Hamilton," in the Broadway musical of the same name.

"It's given us a lot of hope [seeing their success]," said Elise Barksdale, a senior in the theater and dance department, "It helps me see all the options I can take for my career."

The alumni are mentioned often in classes, Barksdale said. One way alumni have guided current students is in their successes at a showcase in New York. The showcase is only available for seniors to attend, and the showcase provides a meeting ground for students and agents. All of the alumni were noticed at the showcase, Barksdale said.

Grace VandeWaa is another senior majoring in theatre and dance. VandeWaa studied abroad in London at Roehampton University.

"It's very encouraging [that these alumni have had success] because we've chosen a field where success is not easy," VandeWaa said.

VandeWaa says she would love to be in film.

"My tentative plan is to move to [Los Angeles, California] in the fall and do my best to make it into the industry there," VandeWaa said.

VandeWaa says Alabama's theater program differs from schools such as Julliard because they teach that it is not only training that is necessary, but also dedication.

"We are given what we need [to succeed in the industry]," said VandeWaa. "With this program, we don't get burned out from training too much."

Rejection is a staple in the entertainment industry. VandeWaa said the entertainment industry is a constant application process, and the UA alumni's success has given the program a lot of credibility.

"Auditioning and then not seeing your name on a list is never fun, but I think the most important thing I've learned here about the process is that not getting cast does not mean you failed," VandeWaa said.

Barksdale similarly said that failure is the only way someone learns.

"I always feel like I'm not up to par [in class], but that pushes me to be better," Barksdale said.

Barksdale said she likes the idea of being on stage in New York more than acting on film.

"This industry has so many opportunities that people can go into," Barksdale said.

One option is performing on cruise ships. Barksdale said many theater students do not like the idea of going to New York. Many students want to perform on cruise ships because there is no rent fee.

Both VandeWaa and Barksdale said Seth Panitch, an acting professor and the director of UA's MFA and undergraduate acting program, has easily been the most important theatre professor.

"Not only is he an incredible acting teacher, but he knows the business," VandeWaa said. "He knows how it works, and he knows how to give us advice that will help us further our careers. The man is wicked smart."

Barksdale said Panitch mentions alumni the most out of her professors.

"Panitch brings them up all the time because he taught them directly," Barksdale said.

"Just the other day he shared an email with us from a girl who graduated last year who was thanking him for a specific technique he taught in the comedy and film class and how knowing that technique got her a job," VandeWaa said.

VandeWaa said it is encouraging being taught by the same professors as Boyd and Luwoye were.

"These successful alumni studied under the same people I'm studying under and they took the same classes I'm taking, and they made it, so why not me?"



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