Made In Chicago: DePaul Theatre and School of Music Alumni Add to the City's Cultural Richness
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By Jamie Sokolik

The Theatre School
Alumni of The Theatre School (TTS) can be found onstage, backstage, in the rehearsal room, on the catwalk and in the administrative offices of nearly every theatre in Chicago. “Our alumni are making an enormous impact on the cultural landscape of Chicago,” says TTS Dean John Culbert. “I am always proud to see them develop not only as working professionals and colleagues, but as people who are enriching their communities.”

A regal bearing
Steppenwolf Theatre Company ensemble member Alana Arenas (THE ’02) doesn’t look or act like a French monarch. Yet, she was beyond convincing as the infamous queen of France in the company’s production of playwright David Adjmi’s new play, “Marie Antoinette.”

“I never left the stage, not even for costume changes,” Arenas says. “I felt the responsibility of not letting my cast down, not letting the audience down, not letting my theatre down.”

Arenas attended the New World School of the Arts high school in Miami, and when it was time to apply to colleges, her teachers encouraged her to audition at DePaul. When she told her teachers she had gotten into DePaul, they were ecstatic.

“I thought what most people think—that New York is where you want to go for theatre,” she says. “But I told my acting teacher I got in to DePaul and she said, ‘Alana, do you know that Chicago is the theatre capital of the U.S.? It made a huge impression, and I realized DePaul was the best place for me.”

Arenas immerses herself in each role she takes on. She’s a theatrical force rooted in humility and dedication to her craft. “I had a utopian theatre experience in high school that had a lot to do with theatre’s personal impact on my life,” Arenas says. “For me, the hard work started when I got to DePaul. That’s not to say my professors weren’t incredibly nurturing—they were. I learned that anything worth pursuing in life is demanding, but if you make it through, you have that foundation forever.”
The dynamic design duo

Penny Lane Studios is named for a Beatles song that mentions a barbershop. Its co-owner, Christine Conley (THE '07), felt the name represented what she wanted to build—a salon with a vintage vibe that caters to both theatre and local clientele, and where everyone feels welcome.

“I never thought I’d want to work in a salon,” Conley says. “But I went to hair design school to learn to cut and style wigs for theatre productions, and I loved having that one-on-one relationship with clients.”

Her friend and business partner, Coral Gable (THE '08), agrees. “I thought I’d get an MBA. But Christine said, ‘No, go to hair school and open a salon with me,’ It took a little convincing, but she got me there, and I’m glad she did.”

Penny Lane consistently has a full schedule of clients in the shop, as well as gigs doing hair and makeup and creating wigs for some of Chicago’s largest theatres. “We never thought we’d get so busy,” Gable says. “I think it’s because we know what we are.”

The pair also credits their work ethic to TTS. “There’s a standard that you learn at DePaul,” Conley says. “It’s invaluable to work with someone you know is going to hold themselves to that same standard.”

Gable agrees. “We work in a similar way and come from a similar place, but we complement each other, too. She speeds me up, I slow her down, and we feed each other’s creativity. We’re very proud of our education and how we use it to serve the community we love.”

Shakespeare’s standard-bearer

In 1990, recent TTS graduate Criss Henderson (THE ’86) received a call from a former professor who wanted to let him know about a possible job opportunity. Barbara Gaines, a local director and actor, had founded a small theatre devoted to Shakespeare and needed an executive director—at the time, its only other employee. After 25 years, during which the theatre moved to a new home on Navy Pier and the staff grew to hundreds, Henderson’s title has not changed. The job and the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, on the other hand, are quite different.

For Henderson and many TTS graduates, “We’re looking for our place in the theatre and hoping that we’ll be able to make a life, and if we’re really lucky, a living,” Henderson says. “I’ve had the good fortune to check all three boxes.” He has produced a variety of shows, from the theatre’s staple Shakespeare plays to musicals and new plays from around the world. The company’s consistently high standards were rewarded when it was honored with the 2008 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre, as well as multiple Laurence Olivier and Joseph Jefferson Awards from the London and Chicago communities, respectively.

Through it all, Henderson’s connection to his alma mater remained strong. He counts creating the Arts Leadership graduate program at TTS among his proudest moments. “I wanted to take the conservatory environment and coursework and synthesize it with my experience growing Chicago Shakespeare Theater,” he says. “I’m so proud of the Arts Leadership fellows, many of them now leading some of the great Chicago theatres. It’s been an incredibly rewarding experience.”

As for his own success, Henderson credits hard work, a bit of luck and a lot of support. “Four hundred years ago, the thought of a thriving Shakespeare theatre in the middle of America was probably ridiculous,” Henderson says. “I think Shakespeare is looking down on us and cracking up that there is a theatre named for him at the center of Navy Pier. I think he would have liked that.”

Theatre School Alumni on the World Stage

Actor Ann Dowd (MFA ’82) has appeared on Broadway and in a variety of TV roles, including on Showtime’s “Masters of Sex” and HBO’s “The Leftovers,” and in such movies as “Marley and Me” and “Compliance.”

Stage and TV director Scott Ellis (THE CER ’78) had four Broadway shows running through the beginning of 2015, including “Elephant Man” with Bradley Cooper and “On the Twentieth Century” with Kristin Chenoweth and Peter Gallagher. He was nominated for a 2015 Tony Award as best director for “You Can’t Take It With You.” His TV work includes episodes of “Weeds,” “Frasier” and “Modern Family.”

Actor Joe Mantegna (THE CER ’69, DHL ’89) originated a number of roles for David Mamet and has appeared on Broadway and in more than 200 film and TV roles, most recently as Agent David Rossi on the CBS drama “Criminal Minds.”

Read about more DePaul alumni impacting Chicago, and see videos, photos and more at depaulmagazine.com.
Actor on the road less traveled

According to actor Jacqueline Williams (THE '87), it was fate that brought her to the Goodman School of Drama/The Theatre School. “DePaul was my second choice,” Williams says. “I wanted to go to school on the West Coast, but I couldn’t afford it, so I ended up at TTS. In my first class, I knew I was where I was supposed to be.”

Williams’ versatility and determination have earned her countless television, film and radio roles, but her first love is theatre. She was in the original cast of Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland’s play, “From the Mississippi Delta,” which played at the Northlight and Goodman Theatres, among others, before it was taken Off-Broadway with Oprah Winfrey as co-producer. She performed in Barney Simon’s apartheid drama “Born in the R.S.A.” with the Market Theatre, founded in Johannesburg, South Africa, while Nelson Mandela was still incarcerated. Her regular appearances at Chicago theatres have kept her in contention for—and winning—Joseph Jefferson, After Dark and Black Theatre Alliance awards, among many others.

“I remember one of my professors saying he wanted to make us director-proof,” Williams says. “Looking back, I can see that my training did exactly that. We learned to dive in, investigate and explore on our own, to get into the meat and the heart and the essence and the truth of any given role, story or play, so we could deliver our best performance, regardless of the outside circumstances.”

Williams has found the focus on theatre to be helpful throughout her career. “My education will forever be invaluable to me,” she says. “I am eternally grateful. I mean that with all my heart.”

The man with the horn

From the moment he first picked up a trumpet after his older sister joined the school band, jazz artist Orbert Davis (MUS ’82) never questioned that he would one day be a professional musician. “When I got my first trumpet, I was literally addicted to it,” he says. “A few months after I started playing, I performed at a Veteran’s Day festival, and the concept that I could play for an hour and get paid, instead of raking leaves like my friends, that was pretty great. There was never a plan B.”

From that first performance on, Davis was going nonstop. He paid for college performing gigs at bars, wedding receptions, concerts, anywhere he could. Because of his early involvement in the Chicago music scene, he counts the city as a teacher.

“It’s a credit to DePaul that the faculty members are all professional musicians who know how to use the city to learn,” he says. “At DePaul, being a musician wasn’t a pipe dream. They showed us how to make it a reality through education.”

Since graduation, Davis’ accomplishments are many. He is the founder and artistic director of the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic, a 60-member symphonic jazz orchestra, and has released both solo and ensemble albums.

He also hosts the radio show “The Real Deal with Orbert Davis” on WDCB Chicago (90.9 FM) every Friday evening. The project Davis is most passionate about is the Chicago-based Discover Music: Discover Life (DMDL), which he co-founded in 2000 to help ensure that quality music programming is available to K–12 students in at-risk areas. “I’ve seen lives saved by the work we do with DMDL,” Davis says. “When kids are learning an instrument and really engaged, they are at home practicing. Yes, music can also enhance test scores, but above that, it helps students discover things about themselves.”

Music School Alumni Go Global

Composer, guitarist and harp guitarist Muriel Anderson (MUS ’82) has performed around the world with musicians like Les Paul and recorded with Chet Atkins. She currently is a columnist for Acoustic Guitar Japan magazine, and her new double CD “Nightlight Daylight” has won first place in its category in 11 national awards.

Soprano Janai Brugger (MUS ’05) travels the world performing in some of opera’s biggest roles. In February and March 2015, Brugger appeared as Pamina in Mozart’s “Die Zauberfoete” at the Royal Opera House in London.

In February 2015, jazz saxophonist/composer Rudresh Mahanthappa (MM ’98) released “Bird Calls,” inspired by the music of saxophonist Charlie Parker, to wide acclaim. Since then, he’s been touring the country with stops in New York, Iowa City and, of course, Chicago.

Woodwinds player/composer Walter Parazaider (MUS ’69, DHL ’08) is touring with his band Chicago across the U.S. and Canada in 2015. Chicago is one of the world’s best-selling groups of all time and has been honored with multiple Grammy Awards.
The citizen musician

When Josephine Lee (MUS '97) was three years old, she asked her parents if she could play the violin. They said “yes.” When she was four, she asked if she could quit. Thankfully, they said “no,” or Chicago Children’s Choir (CCC) might look very different today. “My parents really emphasized the importance of education, in general, but also music education, specifically,” she says. “The idea of becoming a global citizen and using music for peace and change, they nurtured that path.”

Lee applied this philosophy first in her role as artistic director and now as artistic director and president of CCC, which she’s been a part of since 1999. Equipped with classical training in violin and piano, a degree in music performance from DePaul and a master’s in conducting from Northwestern University, Lee set herself on the path to influence thousands of Chicago youth.

Under Lee, CCC went from a neighborhood choir to a citywide program that serves more than 4,000 children in 72 Chicago public schools and nine after-school neighborhood programs. There are several choirs, even one that travels nationally and internationally. “Chicago Children’s Choir is more than just kids singing,” she says. “There’s a citizenship component. They’re becoming leaders in their community. They’re learning how to understand the world and connect with others through music.”

Lee has received countless accolades for her work. Most recently, she was profiled by Oprah Winfrey’s OWN TV for the Super Soul Sunday segment, which features people who do inspiring, uplifting and thought-provoking work. “The crew attended our annual gala and got the most wonderful shots of the kids,” Lee says. “It was a great experience for the choir because the segment is about being the best you. Seeing their growth and self-confidence, that’s why I still do this job. I love it more than anything.”

A concertmaster for the ages

Known for his attention to detail and ability to problem-solve, violinist and former concertmaster Samuel Magad (MUS ’55, DHL ’10) has had a lifetime of interesting experiences. A member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) for 49 years, he was named concertmaster in 1972 by famed conductor Georg Solti and held the position until his retirement in 2007. Magad made his CSO debut, however, when he was 11 years old, so he was a seasoned player when he enrolled at the School of Music. Nonetheless, he feels DePaul strengthened his relationship with music.

“I knew I wanted to play music for my lifetime career,” he said. “DePaul was excellent because I learned about harmony and counterpoint and form—more than simply being an instrumentalist.”

After graduating, Magad played in the U.S. Army band for White House parties and other gatherings before he returned to Chicago and won a place in the great CSO. “I got to be a part of some of the most wonderful concerts and had the greatest colleagues. That’s most important—having good colleagues and friends and players. It was the most wonderful experience.”

Magad also served as concertmaster for the Aspen Music Festival Orchestra for 14 summers and for the Grant Park Symphony for two summers during his long career. In retirement, when he’s not attending continuing education classes, he finds himself at the symphony as much as possible. “After all the years I spent there, I couldn’t live without the CSO,” Magad says. “I enjoy going to performances. I certainly did what I loved, and it’s in good hands now. I’m excited to see what the future will bring.”

Musician on the fast track

By the time bassist, composer and bandleader Matt Ulery (MM ’13) enrolled at the School of Music, he’d already released several jazz albums, performed with dozens of groups, written at least as many songs, and toured the U.S. and parts of Europe. Yet, he was determined to get his master’s degree. “I wanted to expand professionally and creatively,” Ulery says. “I thought going back to school was the best way to do that and to gain access to professionals who could offer a new perspective. I broadened my knowledge of music in general, which I think has helped my work.”

The word “busy” doesn’t do justice to Ulery’s schedule since graduation. He’s collaborating with musicians around Chicago and teaching college-level composition and bass. In 2014, he released “In the Ivory,” his sixth album and second double CD, with 14 pieces of original music, much of which he plays with his 13-piece chamber jazz ensemble. “It was definitely my most ambitious project to date,” he says. “I learned a lot from it. I feel like my composition skills are better since I graduated from DePaul. I’m really proud of it.”

Ulery went on tour for the album in the fall, and in June he performed to a packed crowd of hometown fans at Millennium Park. “It means a lot to have support in Chicago,” Ulery says. “It’s where I’ve always lived. I do get to cities with cool music scenes, but I’m based here. I love the people I play with, I love contributing to this music community. It’s just a great city.”