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Passionate performers

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Passionate Performers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT ONE OF THE MOST UNDERRATED MAJORS AT IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY.
Passionate Performers

An in-depth look at one of the most underrated majors at Iowa State University.

By Alyssa Priebel Design Alixandria Collins Photography Hannah Olson

Morgan Darrow, who plays the role of Meg March, rehearses a sword-fighting scene with Keaton Lane for ISU Theatre's production of Little Women.
“With only 40 students enrolled in the performing arts program... small numbers don’t measure the success of the department. In fact, some believe it’s one of its biggest strengths.”

Keaton Lane sat next to his sister, his
grandmother speaking to them from the
other side of the dining room bar in her
small house in Cascade, Iowa.

“Are you enjoying your classes?”
she asked.

“Yea, I’m taking script analysis, acting and
musical theater,” he responded. “I added a
double major in performing arts.

She looked at him confusedly.

“What do you mean you’re studying
performing arts?” she questioned.

“What’s that?”

It was a long conversation with Lane trying
to explain what exactly it meant to study
theater at Iowa State. Something he says
tends to come up whenever he tells anyone
his major.

“Most people I speak to don’t know you can
major in theater,” he says. “Or that Iowa
State even has a theater department.”

With only 40 students enrolled in the
performing arts program, it’s not
surprising stories like Lane’s are common.
But small numbers don’t measure the
success of the department. In fact, some
believe it’s one of its biggest strengths.

“Most people don’t think of the department
specifically,” says Beate Schmittmann, the dean of
the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

“Students who choose to major in theater are so dedicated to their craft that
they choose it despite the low numbers of students,” she says.

The students are driven by their passion for theater, and they
make the most of the opportunities available to them.

“Is there any particular reason you chose to major in theater?”

“I went in thinking I wanted to
be a professional,” Lane said.

“I knew I wanted to help people make a living off
of art, and I felt that the performing arts program at Iowa State
was the best fit for me.”

As a senior, Lane is set to graduate with
an undergraduate degree in theater.

“I’m excited to see what the future holds for me,”

he said.

Award-winning Program

Every year, Iowa State students and faculty
participate in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF)
which not only offers numerous workshops and
competitions, but brings a representative
to present feedback serves after each ISU production.

Following the audience’s thunderous
applause, Kroksh headed into the
basement of Fisher Theater. He and the fellow cast members of “Mr. Burns”
listened as the KCACTF professional talked
about what worked and didn’t about their
most recent performance.

“I think the first and third acts were the
strongest,” she said. “I especially liked
their different tones.”

The cast members listened intently, and
the representative continued, her voice
echoing off the concrete walls.

“I want to ask you guys, how did you
about approaching the script for this
adaptation?”

She talked for about 45 minutes, sharing
insight and asking the performers their
opinions. After she left, their director
Amanda Peterish-Schrag, an assistant
professor in music and theatre, spoke
a few last thoughts and sent the cast on
their way, ready to start again the next day.

Kroksh says he’s grateful that Iowa State
submits each production for KCACTF
because of the valuable feedback the cast
receives at the end of each show.

All Majors Allowed

Unlike many other universities specializing
in theater, all Iowa State students are
encouraged to participate in shows and
take performing arts classes — regardless of
their major.

Michael Clinkscales sat in his dorm room
wondering what was missing. Sure, he
enjoyed his psychology courses and knew
he wanted to help teens recovering from
substance abuse, but something was
still missing.

He thought back to his high school
days when he acted in school plays and
performed during speech competitions.
He decided to look into performance
opportunities at Iowa State. Then, he found
an audition announcement for “Amadeus.”

He walked into 2140 Pearson, the
program’s audition room, feeling an air of
intimidation. He knew multiple students
majoring in theater were auditioning, and
was unsure how to compete with them. But
he performed his prepared monologue,
filled out the form and read a scene in front
of the director, Jane Cox. After about
five minutes, he heard the words ever
actor experiences.

“Thank you, we will let you know.”

Clinkscales left, and began the waiting
process. About a week later, he received
an email from the Theatre Department at
Iowa State University.

His eyes scanned over the show
information until finally, he landed
on his name.

“Michael Clinkscales, Joseph II.”

He felt surprised and excited.

“There’s a huge level of intimidation
getting involved in theater in college,” he
said. “I thought about how I was going
gainst people who live and breathe it, so
when I got a part I was surprised.”

He attended rehearsals five times a
week and quickly remembered what he
loved about theater to begin with: he
had stories to tell. He also found
himself accepted by all the performers —
regardless of their majors — and inspired
by Cox, the director of theatre at
Iowa State.

After the show ended, Clinkscales decided
to continue auditioning for different
productions and take some theater
courses — something he says a lot of other
students do too.

“It’s rare to see someone do just one
show,” he says. “There’s such an inviting
and welcoming environment. It doesn’t
matter which major you’re in. It’s a
collective experience of people who are
enthusiastic about the same desire: to
create.”

As a senior, Clinkscales will graduate
with 45 credits from the performing arts
department. But he says he never thought
to minor or double major because he
wanted the freedom to take the classes he
saw benefiting his future the most.

“I do want to pursue theater when I
graduate,” he says. “But I’d rather take
musical theater and directing — or other
classes I feel most benefit me. They teach
more than just facts. They teach me how to
be a professional.”

Brad Dell, an associate professor of
theatre, noted that many of students
enrolled in his classes aren’t majoring in
the program.

“Virtually every class and production is
filled with majors and non-majors, which
is a testament to our program,” he says.

“We help the ISU student body
become compassionate, empathetic,
creative citizens.”

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“It’s super-duper helpful,” Krosh says. “In the real world we are not going to get critique like this. So hearing what a professional thinks worked or didn’t is super helpful and beneficial for [our] future [careers].”

Students take the feedback the professionals provide and bring it back to their competition performances at KCACTF. This year, 44 students and faculty represented Iowa State at the 49th Festival held at the Downtown Marriott in Des Moines, Iowa in late January, including Krosh.

Krosh has attended KCACTF all four of his undergraduate years. This year, Taylor Millar took first place in KCACTF Region 5 Society of Directors and Choreographers Directing fellowship, Hannah Rublaitus earned first place in Dramaturgy for her project on “Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play” and Cook tied for 2nd place in the Society of Directors and Choreographers Directing fellowship. In addition, several faculty members also received awards for their directing throughout the years.

But competing isn’t the only reason theater enthusiasts pay the $80 ticket fee and return to the festival year after year.

“For me, going to the competitions and watching others present work they’ve been doing for so long is the best part,” Clinkscales says. “Theater will forever be a work of collaboration. It’s always learning from others, so watching these new performances is the most important part.”

“It’s about way more than winning awards,” says Dell, who serves as the chair of KCACTF Region 5. “It’s a nation-wide organization that celebrates and fosters excellence in theater.”

More than a Job

The stigma surrounded by jobs in art fields: they make little money. But generally, that’s not why artists choose their path. It’s not about the career; it’s about the chance to create.

Kivan Kirk’s gray 2002 Ford Focus cruised along U.S. 30 East. His 15-year-old hands reached for one of his favorite soundtracks. Soon, Johnny Depp’s voice blasted from the speakers, singing about how there’s no place like London. Kirk scream-sang along for the hour between Tipton and Clarence, Iowa.

He had never participated in chorus, or received any artistic education, but something about those days driving to and from work jamming out to his favorite musical numbers helped spark his life’s true passion: theater.

A few years later, Kirk started studying criminal justice at Kirkwood Community College. He decided to audition and received the lead role in “Lemon Sky.”

After a few more productions, Kirk attended KCACTF and saw performances by Iowa State. After that, he decided to transfer to ISU and major in performing arts.

Kirk graduated from the program in 2015 and currently works in Des Moines, directing multiple children’s theater shows and acting in his free time. Although he doesn’t receive thousands of dollars for his work, Kirk says he loves his career path.

“The world runs on money,” he says. “You have to be financially well-off — not just comfortable — to be considered successful. It’s awful. For me, I do theater because art shapes life. Every production taught me something new about society and myself.”

Krosh shares Kirk’s enthusiasm.

“Financially speaking it isn’t the most secure profession,” he says. “But I think the performing arts are necessary. We need art in life.”

Cox says this is the kind of thinking she tries to enforce through her classes.

“College is about teaching different ways to think about something,” she says. “It’s not about memorizing facts. It’s about how to learn and that’s what the performing arts do.”

Dell agreed with Cox’s approach.

“It is a wild myth that after college you will have a stable career,” he says. “The point of college is to grow, learn and help you become an individual. There shouldn’t be one path, but 100. I view theater as one way to prepare students for that element.”
Why is theater important?

“What kind of world would we live in without the arts? They are vitally critical in any society.”
– Brad Dell, Associate Professor of Theatre

“Functionally people need food and shelter, but people thrive off stories. Regardless the medium — dance, theater, painting — without the arts you’re just surviving not thriving.”
– Adam Kroksh, senior, performing arts

“It’s a look into the lives of other people and the similarities between us. It teaches empathy and understanding.”
– Keaton Lane, sophomore, performing arts

“It’s a healthy program that creates experiences for students to remember Iowa State for the rest of their lives.”
– Dean Schmittmann, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

“The chance to tell stories honestly and through a unique lens is what attracted me to the arts. The messages move me.”
– Michael Clinkscales, senior, psychology

COSTUME-PLANNING COLLAGES FOR ISU THEATRE’S PRODUCTION OF LITTLE WOMEN PINNED UP IN THE BASEMENT OF FISHER THEATER.
**Why is theater important?**

“Why is theater important?” is a question that has been asked time and time again, and the answers are as varied as the people who ask it. For some, theater is a means of expression, a way to tell stories and explore different perspectives. For others, it is a way to connect with others and foster a sense of community. And for still others, it is a way to challenge and provoke thought and discussion.

**“What kind of world would we live in without the arts?”**

“Without the arts,” asks Brad Dell, Associate Professor of Theatre, “we would be living in a world that is less rich, less diverse, and less interesting.” Dell believes that the arts are vital to any society, providing a way to express ideas and emotions in ways that words alone cannot.

**“Functionally people need food and shelter, but people thrive off stories.”**

Adam Kroksh, senior, performing arts, agrees with Dell. “The arts,” he says, “are what make life worth living. They give us a way to connect with others and to explore our own feelings and thoughts.”

**“It’s a look into the lives of other people and the similarities between us.”**

Keaton Lane, sophomore, performing arts, believes that theater provides a way to see beyond our own experiences and to understand the world from other perspectives. “It’s like a window into someone else’s life,” she says, “and it’s a way to learn about ourselves in the process.”

**“It’s a healthy program that creates experiences for students to remember Iowa State for the rest of their lives.”**

Dean Schmittmann, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, believes that theater is not just an art form, but a way to create meaningful experiences for students. “The arts,” he says, “are a way to bring people together and to create a sense of community.”

**“The chance to tell stories honestly and through a unique lens is what attracted me to the arts. The messages move me.”**

Michael Clinkscales, senior, psychology, found his way to the arts through a desire to tell stories and to connect with others. “The arts,” he says, “are a way to express myself and to connect with others.”