

# Actors' passion transcends pay, competition

□ Theater students are in a 'many are called, few are chosen' profession

By Lisa Millegan  
Emerald Associate Editor

They probably will never own BMWs or Palm Springs estates, but most actors say they didn't go into the career for the money anyway.

For many University acting students, the threat of minimal pay pales in comparison to the sheer joy of performing on stage.

"It's pretty much all I wanted to do since first grade," said senior Kendra Fanconi, a University acting student. "It's incredibly energizing. When I finish a performance, I just feel clean and empty."

Fanconi has to passionately love the career she has chosen — if she didn't, she probably wouldn't be able to face the intimidating obstacles that stand in the way of pursuing her dream.

After all, the University's own theater performance program director Bob Barton calls it the "many are called, few are chosen profession."

Fanconi will literally be competing against thousands of people who want to do the same thing. Her profession's union is the only labor organization in the country that has actually negotiated for a lower salary.

"It's the nature of the work," she explained. "They know that you'll do it for nothing."

Last month, Fanconi and 400 other students from around the country got a taste of this competition at University Resident Theater Association national auditions in New York. Each student had to earn a nomination from their college and passed a regional competition to be able to attend the auditions.

The URTA auditions, held in several cities across the nation every year, allow students a chance to show their stuff to about 40 theater companies and graduate schools at the same time.

Uninterested in getting employment with a theater company, Fanconi attended the auditions with the intention of earning a spot in graduate school. Some colleges she was interested in were especially competitive.

At Yale, only eight out of 840 students that apply for the acting program are accepted. At New York University, 700 to 800 students apply for 16 to 20 spots.



Jeff Whitty and Coleman Zeigen perform a scene from Antigone in Acting V: styles. Photo by Sean Poston

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— Bob Barton,  
Theater performance  
program director

On the day she was to perform, Fanconi arrived in the small, shabby theater about two hours early. She remembers seeing about 20 people in the warm-up room nervously running through their audition monologues, reciting vocal exercises and even practicing yoga.

Fanconi said some students were talking about doing other auditions at New York's prestigious Juilliard School and their experience acting in summer theater companies.

But Fanconi said she was confident in her abilities and never let the competition intimidate her. "It's a West Coast attitude to kind of sit outside that and not try to be competitive," she said.

Fortunately for Fanconi, the auditions ended successfully. Twelve schools expressed interest in her and interviewed her later that day. Now she'll just wait until acceptances or rejections arrive in the spring.

Fellow University senior acting student Erin Malecha, who will compete in the California

URTA auditions later this week, said the cutthroat competition for jobs in theater sometimes intimidates her.

"I fear that I'm going to be flipping hamburgers at Burger King because I didn't get a business degree," she said.

However, Malecha said her love of theater is too great to abandon for another career.

"It's something I love to do and I have to do it," Malecha said. "I love that you get people to think. There are a lot of rewards, and that's why you do it."

Although Malecha loves theater, she has not limited her career goals to performing on stage. She hopes to increase her chances for work by making herself available for a variety of jobs in film and television acting, stage management and camera operation. She is also considering attending graduate school next fall.

Barton said if Malecha and Fanconi succeed in their goals, they won't be the only University grads working in the theater world.

University grads are working in theater companies all over the Northwest, he said. One past student, Brad Calaroli, is currently a Hollywood publicist for stars including Whoopi Goldberg, Whitney Houston and Dolly Parton.

Barton said he tries to prepare students for the stiff competition of the real world by requiring auditions for placement into acting classes.

"You take Acting I in the fall,

you'll have to compete with tons of people just to get into the second class," he said. Out of the approximately 90 students who take Acting I each term, only 40 students usually earn places in the Acting II class.

But Barton said getting students theater employment is not the main concern of the University theater program.

"Our focus is that you learn acting to become a more complete human being," he said. "Not that anyone would mind being a household word, but that's not what it's really about."

Barton said the main benefit of a theater degree is communications skills.

"The skills tend to lend themselves to jobs that deal with contacting the public and working under pressure," he said. "There's nothing in acting class that can't help you live your life more successfully."

After graduate school, Fanconi hopes she will be able to secure a job in a regional theater company.

"I have more dreams of doing Shakespeare in London than I do of ... being on Broadway," she said.

Eventually, she would like to do a one-woman show of the caliber of Lily Tomlin's *The Search for Sign of Intelligent Life in the Universe* and to form a theater company that would cross-cast roles (i.e. give male parts to women) of classic plays.

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