

A World of Skills

Arts majors must have a love deeper than mere desire

Over on the southwest corner of campus, just past the education building, lies a half-brick, half-wood structure. Every day, the people inside must listen to lectures on the value of discipline and hard work. When they are released, the lecturers say, life won't be easy —

there are many obstacles to face tougher than these.

On the second floor, there are several small solitary confinement chambers, where the occupants

must sit hour after hour, day upon day, proving that they are good enough to step outside again. Occasionally, they must show their worth before the general public, whose approval, no matter how generous, is fleeting. The lecturers teach that people can't be too satisfied with accolades because they need to continue to improve.

This structure, though it seems to cage the occupants, isn't a prison. The occupants are here voluntarily, spending upward of five hours a day practicing, in addition to the requisite four to eight hours of classes. The prison, if you can call it that, is the passion for art, the love of performance, from which music students cannot escape if they want to succeed.

Robert Ponto, director of bands for the School of Music, used to have advice for students who asked whether they should become musicians. "Only if you can't help yourself," he told them.

Because it has to be a love deeper than mere desire. A love that means acknowledging that few financial opportunities are out there. A love that drives you to practice piano until your fingers fall off, to dance until your legs collapse.

The music, dance and theater arts departments at the University all offer the standard liberal arts degrees to their students. But they also offer something more, something intangible to students. Unlike economics, business, or journalism majors, arts majors usually aren't thinking "career" when they start; they're thinking, "I need this." Career is what follows.

"A lot of people can't believe they can major in dance," says Jennifer Craig, head of the dance department. She says they've been told by the mainstream culture that arts are frivolous and unessential, so that when they arrive at the University, it doesn't occur to them that they can study what they love. As a result, many dance majors are defectors from other programs who realized they couldn't abandon their passion.

Greg James knows the feeling. James originally studied journalism but found it stifling. "I got sick of writing about other people's lives," he says.



Shannon McCord stretches and jokes around with Carrie Shanafelt (standing), while Tami Combest (sitting, near door) and Julie Manchester grab lunch between classes.



Shannon McCord and the rest of Susan Zadoff's Ballet III class warm up at the bar.



Melissa Topazio hands Chikako Narita some wiring from a production set.

James didn't declare as a theater arts major until last spring — he's a senior now — worrying that people wouldn't take him seriously if he didn't enter a "practical" field. "When people think of theater, they think actors just screw



Kristine Hapke works at the soundboard in the production, *Two Dance*.

around and don't do anything," he says. But he eventually realized he couldn't do anything else.

James does plenty; in addition to a normal course load, rehearsals for each play he's in — he's been in about 12 productions at the University — take up three to four hours per day. Weekend performances take more time, as do various other requirements, such as crew (30 hours of technical work for one credit).

And for those who believe theater majors slide through academically, remember that theater is not a professional school. Like English and history, it is a member of the College of Arts and Sciences, thus every student must take the basic University requirements.

In addition, the theater department requires students to learn a variety of

disciplines related to theater, such as set design, production and directing. They are not easy, slide-through courses; theater history requires students to write two 10-page papers for credit.

"Our theater degree is comprehensive," says Jack Watson, an assistant professor in theater arts. "We ask for a level of competence in a variety of fields."

The difference, Watson says, is that acting classes call for a different type of studying than do more academic-oriented classes. It's not a process of memorization or analysis, he says; it's more creative.

An acting student must translate a script into a different language, he says. A performer brings into a character all of the outside learning he or she can and puts philosophy and religious study into life situations. "At its very best, theater allows you to integrate all other areas of your education," Watson says.

Theater is not the only art that encompasses that belief. The dance department's curriculum, Craig says, is like any other at the University — it is designed to provide a basic, well-rounded education. The difference is simply what you study; dance majors study an art form that includes the entire "body and self."

Craig says the breadth requirements are extensive, including anatomy, dance history, production techniques, etc. Students also have to do senior projects and internships to graduate. It's a misconception that dance is an easy major for people to skate through, she says.

In fact, students in the dance program have to profess a level of proficiency before they can graduate, which could mean conceivably repeating lower-level, or even upper-level, dance classes many times. The difference: Unlike academic courses, where you can bull your way through to a passing grade, you can't bull your way through a dance routine. You have to know it.

This creates one of the fundamental conflicts within the theater, dance and