

# TAPS Program Benefits from its Inclusivity



University's theater programming has long held a fine reputation in the state, and it is currently progressing in exciting ways! The Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies (TAPS) is the intellectual and artistic center at Brown for faculty and students interested in the aesthetic, historical, literary, practical and theoretical explorations of performance in global perspective. This includes not only theater, but also dance, speech, performance art and performative "roles" in everyday life. In addition to the undergraduate program, the department offers a doctoral program in theater and performance studies, an MFA program in playwriting, and the Brown/Trinity MFA programs in acting and directing.

I spoke with Brown Theatre student Ahmed Ashour to get his perspective on the program. Here's what he had to say.

**Alison O'Donnell:** Tell me a little about the program itself. I hear it's evolving!

**Ahmed Ashour:** It's really funny to have come into a program, only to learn that soon it will be undergoing some drastic changes. TAPS is split into three tracks — theatre arts (broadly-defined track for people who mostly would like to be performers, directors, or designers), performance studies (theory and history), and writing for performance (W4P). However, the program is shifting a bit in the coming year, as W4P is being absorbed into theatre arts, and dance is being introduced as a new track. Concentration requirements differ across the different tracks, save for a few history courses that survey the history of theater from its ancient Greek beginnings to its various movements in the 20th century.

**AO:** What are some of the features of the program attractive to Brown students?

**AA:** The program, which requires 10 course credits for concentrators to complete, requires a healthy mix of theater history/theory courses and practice/studio classes. However, I would say there is a larger offering of history/theory courses as well as dance courses due to the long list of amazing faculty we have in performance studies and dance, like the phenomenal Rebecca Schneider, Spencer Golub and Sydney Skybetter. Many of Brown's professors of the practice (acting, directing, speech/voice, movement, etc.) are working artists who work locally and nationally on both small and big-scale projects. While they teach few classes, the opportunity to take a class with any one of them is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The department requires concentrators to finish a loosely defined capstone that serves as a culmination of their studies with the department, and offers opportunities in the form of senior slots for both theatre and dance concentrators to experience the rush of conceiving and rehearsing a piece with the production support of the department. Anything you miss in an official class, you can most certainly learn independently in Brown's student theater and dance scene, which offers a mind-boggling amount of opportunities throughout the year.

**AO:** What is most appealing to you personally?

**AA:** Regardless of the discipline, all classes are made even more exciting by Brown's open curriculum. Unlike conservatory programs or other BA theater programs that are closed off to the larger student body, you can find engineers, anthropologists and physicists in your introductory acting class — affectionately called TA23 — here at Brown. To be able to practice your craft alongside people who have

a variety of interests gives you new insight to the work, and I think the program has only been made better by its inclusion of the entire Brown community, not just TAPS concentrators.

The same goes for the department's productions and Brown's theater scene in general. It's really a choose-your-own-adventure kind of place. There are a variety of opportunities to do theater without concentrating or even committing to anything past one production. I am currently directing the department's senior slot show called *Back of the Throat* by Yussef El Guindi, which discusses government surveillance of Arab and Muslim Americans in a post 9/11 / US PATRIOT Act world, and one of our cast members is a senior who has never auditioned for a show at Brown prior to this one. I think that is the beauty of doing theater at Brown — people are there because they choose, despite their busy schedules or what they chose to study, to be there for a piece that matters to them and to the world.

**AO:** How does Brown connect to the world? What part do Brown students play in this?

**AA:** Theater at Brown looks at the wounds in the world we live in — of which there are many — and what stories need to be told, and prioritizes these stories without being weighed down by the pressure to produce commercially appealing pieces. Any student from the Brown community can approach the Sock & Buskin board, which produces the department's season, with a play that they think is important for the community to see, and the board will give that play full consideration for inclusion in its upcoming season. Student theater (including production workshop, musical forum, Gilbert and Sullivan, opera productions and Shakespeare on the Green) works similarly — all works that are produced are proposed by students and their design teams, which allows for a multitude of perspectives to be considered. This year, productions like *Back of the Throat*, *Yellow Face* by David Henry Hwang — which deals with Asian-American representation in the entertainment industry — and *Next to Normal*, which deals so thoughtfully with mental illness — have all been timely, and spoke to a truth we are living as a community.

We as a student body are constantly in response to the world around us, and it is comforting to see theater at Brown provide a different platform through which students from all walks of life and backgrounds have their voices heard. That, combined with the open curriculum, means that theater at Brown is truly a communal creation where everyone has a say in what they want to see, and not just dictated by the few students who are concentrating and their faculty mentors. I think students who are considering making a career in theater should really consider this program for its awesomeness.

**AO:** How has this program impacted your life? Is there a sense of community?

**AA:** To say that the program has been a second home to me is an understatement. I started out as an engineer at Brown, and had only taken one TAPS class in my first three semesters at Brown. I didn't come from a theater background either — I only started my junior year of high school. The beauty of the open curriculum is that you can find your home/your calling at any point, and you'd still be able to jump in, dedicate yourself as much as you want, and be the architect of your own experience. This program has taken me as I am and provided me with the space to grow at my own pace, and I am so so SO excited for the next step in my life after today. And with the openness of the program to everybody, I feel like, unlike a lot of BFA programs, I am in community with the entirety of Brown — not just the select few who've decided to concentrate/major.

I sat at the strike of *Sometimes the Rain, Sometimes the Sea* last spring, directed by my mentor Kate Bergstrom (Brown/Trinity MFA'18), and reflected on my time here. I looked at the cast — a phenomenal group of people who I am still very close with — and thought of how lucky I am to be doing what I'm doing every day. Theater at Brown has changed me from a person who hates rain to a person who runs into it, and I think that is telling of the program — a community of people that is focused on creating spaces for discussion, growth and change. And boy, do we need the arts now more than ever to bring about change in what can be a very bleak world. Brown Theatre is that engine of change, and I am so so proud to be a part of this program!

*Back of the Throat* runs from Nov. 29th - Dec. 2nd in Leeds Theatre, 83 Waterman Street in Providence.

*For tickets to this or other upcoming shows, contact the Brown Theatre Box Office at [boxoffice@brown.edu](mailto:boxoffice@brown.edu), or call 401-863-2838 Tuesday - Friday 12pm-4pm.*