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## Choose Your Own Adventure with a Degree in Theatre Arts

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## Choose Your Own Adventure with a Degree in Theatre Arts

Department of Theatre and Film alumni employ training in many fields

SEPTEMBER 1, 2020 BY KATHERINE STEWART



UM alumnus Shelby Grady performs on the set of 'Slice of Life,' a short horror film written and directed by Gavin Fields and produced by Deer Run Media, a video agency founded by Fields and several fellow UM alum. Submitted photo

OXFORD, Miss. – What do an HR director at a New York City startup, a senior tax accountant for one of the world's largest companies, and a personal assistant-cum-film producer and actor have in common?

This isn't a riddle; it's a story about the diverse ways graduates of the **University of Mississippi Department of Theatre and Film** have parlayed degrees in theatre arts into thriving careers both in and outside the industry.

The long-touted virtues of a liberal arts education are numerous and familiar: Well-rounded generalists are primed to enter a wide variety of fields, and a liberal arts degree is a solid base for many advanced degrees, including in specialties such as law and business. But aside from the obvious, where can a theater degree lead?

Three recent alumni discovered that theater training confers advantages that can be useful in numerous careers.

### Garrison Gibbons (BFA 15); HR director at Knotch

When Garrison Gibbons, a Huntsville, Alabama, native who grew up outside Jackson, came to the Department of Theatre and Film in 2011, he had one eye on a bachelor's degree in musical theater and the other on Broadway. The youngest sibling in a large family helmed by two corporate lawyers who, he said, "hated their jobs," Gibbons had been encouraged to pursue the passion for theater that he'd nurtured in high school and in his community of Brandon.

What he hadn't expected was how drawn he would be to the business side of theater.

"I was fascinated by the administrative side – why companies were doing the things they were, how technology was informing the theater community and how marketing was changing for theater communities," Gibbons said.

Gibbons learned about operations as a student worker in the department's front office and while serving with the **Ghostlight Repertory Theatre**, a fledgling student theater group. After the department's

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OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children's play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

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### Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship Aims to Build Leaders

OXFORD, Miss. – Twenty-five inaugural recipients of the Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship – a program hosted by the University of Mississippi School of Education in partnership with the Mississippi Association of Coaches and the Mississippi High School Activities Association – are expected to increase their impact on student-athletes and their communities. The coaching fellowship

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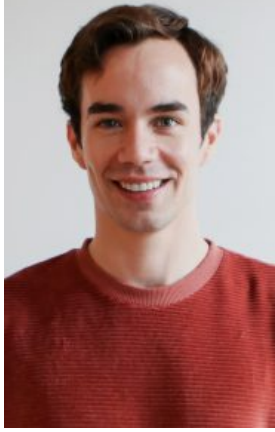
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## Ole Miss In the News

### Clarion-Ledger: New Essay Collection Tells the Story of Meredith's Enrollment

Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith's enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith's 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school's first African-American student.

production of “The Laramie Project,” Gibbons – however unwittingly – became an outspoken proponent of LGBTQ+ rights at the university, and he discovered that he had a voice offstage as well – and that he enjoyed using it to help others.



“I learned from that that I wanted to be a representative, to speak openly about my views and to make a difference,” Gibbons said.

After graduation, he moved to New York and found a part-time operations job with an off-Broadway theater company where he did a little bit of everything from finance to marketing to donor relations. He then went to work for a fitness studio and fell in love with the company’s inclusive culture.

When a trainer left to open a new studio, Gibbons was his first hire; eventually, Gibbons ended up doing human resources work, which he found that he both liked and was already prepared for.

**Garrison Gibbons**

“Almost all of HR is picking up on cues,” Gibbons said. “It’s a hard thing to articulate, but having studied theater, you just understand why people behave the way they do.”

From there, he became very intentional about what kind of job he wanted: one that would allow him to use his voice to support and advocate for others while employing the skills he’d acquired through his undergraduate degree. This led him to Knotch, a tech startup, where Gibbons was hired as “head of people” – aka HR director. He loves this role for several reasons.

“I’m able to be a voice and advocate for the employees; I’m able to change the culture of a company – what the company looks like, how the company operates, how the company handles diversity,” Gibbons said. “I’m literally the face of the company, which is a very cool thing to be.”

Besides the ability to read people, theater training supports other aspects of Gibbons’ “forward-facing” position, which requires frequent public speaking on panels, podcasts and in-house.

“Obviously, I’ve never been uncomfortable presenting in front of the company,” Gibbons said. “I do regular all-hands meetings; I’m constantly on call; I’ve never felt uncomfortable pitching an idea or expressing my views. All of that is from my theater background.”



**Garrison Gibbons (center) performs in the UM Department of Theatre and Film’s production of ‘The Laramie Project’ in September 2013. Submitted photo**

**Shelby Grady (BA 14); actor, producer and personal assistant**



Shelby Grady’s entrance to performance is a classic one: “I was bitten by the bug really bad when I was 3,” she said, laughing, in a recent Zoom interview. “My parents always thought I would grow out of it, but I feel like it’s what I was put here to do.

“The goal of college, for me, was to get an acting degree and act professionally.”

A member of the **Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College**, Grady initially pursued a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts with an emphasis in acting, but after studying abroad as a sophomore and completing an internship in New York, she became eager to break into the New York scene. She switched to the B.A. track and finished a year early, graduating summa cum laude with an emphasis in acting and a minor in cinema.

**Shelby Grady**

Grady hit New York running and in short order checked off “all the bucket-list things,” landing parts in an off-off Broadway show and a slew of commercials and promo spots, plus two guest-starring roles on Discovery Network shows.

Grady played murder victims in both shows and laughed as she recalled one casting director who told her, “‘We just really needed someone the audience would feel sorry for.’ I guess that was a compliment?”

It’s not uncommon for fledgling actors to hold jobs outside the industry while getting their stage-and-screen legs under them – the timeworn cliché of the young actress who insists she’s “not a waitress” is a timeworn cliché for a reason. Grady chose to pursue different means to her bill-paying ends and quickly found that her theater training had primed her for success beyond the bistro.

“James Meredith: Breaking the Barrier,” a collection of essays edited by UM professor of journalism Kathleen Wickham, honors this historic milestone with

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After starting out in customer service, she was scouted into a demanding role as an office administrator at an investment bank. But the exhaustion of juggling 60-hour workweeks with acting gigs led her to seek out something more flexible, and she landed a job as a personal assistant.



**UM theatre alumnus Shelby Grady poses as a go-go girl for a commercial/online spot. Submitted photo**

Grady pointed out that most jobs begin with some amount of training regardless, so “if employers are confident that you’re going to learn quickly, adapt without getting flustered and roll with the punches,” you’ll be as good a candidate – if not better – than one whose degree might be a little more tailored to the position.

“If you’re highly adaptable, you’re a fast learner and if you have really excellent interpersonal skills – actors always have to have those three things – then you can land so many more jobs than I ever thought possible,” Grady said.

Besides working as a personal assistant, Grady is co-producing and starring in a new feature film, “Brutal Season,” which she is making with the video agency and filmmaking collective Deer Run Media. Deer Run was founded by Grady’s fiance, Gavin Fields, also an alumnus of the Ole Miss theatre program, and three additional UM alumni – two of whom also have theatre degrees.

Grady’s advice to recent theater graduates entering the workforce – even outside the industry – is to focus on how the skills inherent to theater training can serve potential employers.

“Adapting when things go wrong, rolling with the punches, and doing it with a good attitude and a smile on your face – that can make all the difference in the world to employers,” Grady said. “Communication skills and being able to effectively discuss things with coworkers – these are valuable skills that you just inherently learn when you’re doing theater.”

**Kate Lindsay (BA Theatre Arts and Accountancy 16, MA Accountancy 17); senior tax accountant at Walton Enterprises**



**Kate Lindsay**

“I always said I wanted to run my own theater company,” said Kate Lindsay from her relatively new apartment in Bentonville, Arkansas.

A tax accountant, Lindsay completed a dual degree in theatre arts and accountancy with the intention of forging a career on the business side of the theater industry.

“I was really involved in theater in high school,” she said. “My dad was a CPA, and I always had a business mind. I did some stage management in high school, but I never really wanted to be a performer.”

In fact, Lindsay acted in just one production while completing her undergraduate degrees, but she was involved in more than 20 productions between department shows and those put on by Ghostlight Repertory Theatre, which she helped found. Lindsay excelled in the role of stage manager, a backstage linchpin that supports the director, cast, crew and technicians by keeping track of and communicating logistics and details from the start of rehearsals

through a show’s entire run.

“I had all the keys, both literally and figuratively,” Lindsay joked.

After working and interning for both nonprofit and for-profit theater companies – the Berkshire Theatre Festival and Davenport Theatrical Enterprises, respectively – Lindsay decided that she would “probably be better off supporting theater in other ways,” so she returned to Oxford for a master’s degree in taxation. Within weeks of beginning the program, she was already interviewing for jobs.

Lindsay accepted an offer at the “Big Four” accounting firm KPMG in Memphis and recently transitioned to Walton Enterprises, the business office for America’s wealthiest family.

Theater and accountancy are ostensibly disparate disciplines, and Lindsay echoed Grady in touting the usefulness of a theater education and some advantages it gave her outside of the industry.

“I got 10 times more reading and analyzing and writing experience than my peers in accounting,” she said. Lindsay also noted that studying accounting is akin to learning a language, and much of what you learn isn’t applied until entering the job field, whereas a theater education is built on practical, hands-on

experience.

"I got the opportunity to collaborate in real time," Lindsay said.

"Especially as a stage manager, managing 20 different moving parts, hectic schedules, different personalities ... I loved my classes, but the stuff I did outside the classroom is a big part of what theater has done for me. It gave me a lot of opportunity."

Lindsay emphasized that the Ole Miss program was particularly valuable because of its focus on providing opportunities for undergraduates.

"Undergrads do everything," she said. "It's one of the reasons I was drawn to the program."



Kate Lindsay takes in opening night activities of the 2015 Broadway revival of 'Spring Awakening,' produced by Ken Davenport. Lindsay spent a semester with Davenport Theatrical Enterprises, an internship that was made possible by funding from the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College. Submitted photo

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