

PORTSMOUTH ABBAY SCHOOL



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Onward and Upward

As performing arts director Jay Bragan plots his 50th performance next winter, we take a peek at how his program is developing top tier students.

BY ANNIE SHERMAN '95



The lights dim. The audience's frenzied conversation softens to a hush as late arrivals find their seats in the dark auditorium. The electricity bounces like ping pong balls around the room as the sun seems to rise above the stage. When character Abby Brewster alights from stage left, the student audience erupts with bottled excitement, as if they were a can of soda, shaken and then uncapped. Eleven weeks of rehearsals arrive at this moment.

Jay Bragan leases a precarious perch on the back step, as far from them as possible. Unable to sit still, the play's director teeters on the edge like a metronome, back and forth slowly, mouthing each word as it's emitted by each actor. His body says, "It's in their hands now." His smile and eyes beaming say, "They're nailing it."

This spring production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* is the third of the academic year, and a fundamental part of the broad performing arts program at Portsmouth Abbey School. From musicals to Shakespeare, comedies to tragedies and contemporary translations of classics, these productions are a campus collaboration. The individual music, dance and art programs play their own role in shaping young minds, and have become a highlight for everyone who experiences them.

Students, however, remain at its core. They accept most of the drama, music and technology roles, on stage and off. From set construction to managing the lighting and sound board and even passing out the programs, 14 students ran this entire show on opening night in May. It was an impressive accomplishment for professionals, let alone a handful of teenagers. And the excellent performance, from first line to final bows, made onlookers forget that these are high school students.

"We get to be that creative side, that outlet of personal expression," said Music Director Jeff Kerr. "For them, whether or not they know it, they need that. There is something about a student who has participated in the arts that is more freeing, more social, it gives them confidence."

LEFT: Director of Performing Arts Jay Bragan with drama students

ABOVE: From top, *Shrek* (Winter Musical 2013); *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Spring 2019); and *The Tempest* (Fall 2017)



Act 1, Scene 1

“This is all part of their education,” Bragan said. “Ultimately the goal is not so much training them for a career in theater (although that does happen from time to time); it’s more about giving them the skills needed to fully express themselves in front of a group, even if they are a bit terrified.”

“Ninety-nine percent of these students don’t study performing arts after high school. So these lessons of being in front of an audience will carry them to the boardroom or their best friend’s wedding speech,” he added. “We’re training them to go on with their lives and deal with public speaking.”

There was no fright on stage or behind the scenes during this performance. The actors looked as comfortable as if they were conversing with friends in the Stillman Dining Hall. The student stage crew owned the light and sound board, deftly operating the technology as if they were right at home.

It’s because they were.

The actors have mastered key techniques like breath awareness and articulating speech during 2.5-hour rehearsals six days a week for nearly three months, while the stage crew learned to maneuver the sound board after practice, practice, practice.

Fifth form actress Annie St. George, who played Abby Brewster, said theater seemed daunting when she was a freshman. She said she didn’t know she had the ability to remember where she was supposed to be and what she was supposed to say at the same time with an audience. “I was always a nervous person with unscripted public speaking. It either would be a catastrophe or a miracle,” she said.

“So I just needed to trust myself, in front of an audience. I have learned to carry myself in a more professional confident manner.”



Annie St. George '20 in Arsenic and Old Lace



Claire Doire '16 at the sound board



Act 1, Scene 2

You could say that confidence really is the foundation of any performance, and in a group of teenagers who might be lacking it, the challenge lies in practice. So recitation to their peers in the classroom reinforces the skills of public speaking.

English teacher and casting assistant Lauren Bonin requires poetry recitation in her class for just this purpose. They start with Alfred Lord Tennyson’s six-line *The Eagle* in the fall. “They’re horrified,” she said.

“But by spring, they recite Tennyson’s *Ulysses*. It’s 72 lines, by memory.”

She will often see someone who has a gift, who pulls in their audience with the first word, and you can hear a pin drop. The whole room is hooked. She encourages them to try out for the play. “During auditions, there might be students I didn’t know well, or perhaps I thought I knew them. Then they made themselves vulnerable in an audition. And they would sing when they didn’t sing very well. Perhaps there was a young man who usually presents himself very cool and confident. And all of a sudden, he’s nervous, sweating and allowing himself to look foolish on stage. It’s quite brave and heroic putting themselves out there.”

English teacher and casting assistant Lauren Bonin requires poetry recitation in her classes in order to reinforce the skills of public speaking.



Act 1, Scene 3

Flashing back to 1981, when Brother Joseph was hired straight from college to run the drama program. “I would do stage crew in the afternoon, rehearsals at night during study hall. It was a killer schedule but it meant everyone could do drama,” said the former long-time artistic and technical director. “The week of the show I was here until 2 or 3 in the morning, doing the sets and lighting. It was quite primitive.”

As director in the 1980s, 90s and 2000s, he crafted more than 25 performances on a skeleton crew and budget, before coeducation brought a wealth of variety to the stage. Lacking microphones or appropriate lighting, and only \$1200 for the year to do three or four shows, “I was borrowing everything from everyone,” Brother Joseph said. “With these copper roofs, if you had a downpour the night of the show, no one could hear anything. But now the sound system is all wireless microphones. But even when we had nothing, or we were fighting against some restraint, it forced us to be creative. We can do some really great things with nothing.”

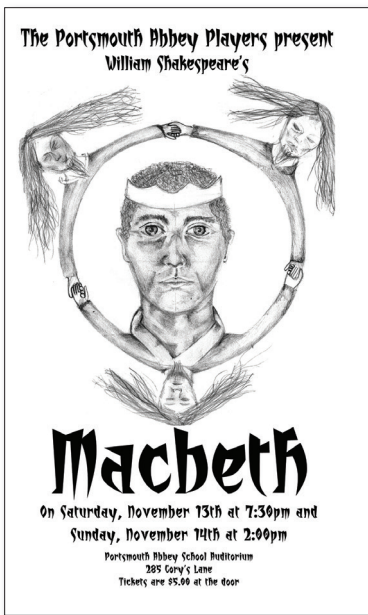
He recalled *Macbeth* (fall 2004) as technical director, and they wanted to do it “in the round” – build the stage into the audience and position the seats around it. Luckily the chairs were mobile, but the lighting was fixed toward the stage, and run from the catwalk where you can’t see the performers. “We’d have to learn the cues of what they were saying or have a signal to do the right lighting. We jerry rigged another lighting system to run remotely and see what was going on,” he remembered. “For *Macbeth*, two stage guys stayed under the stage for the whole show, to emit smoke, red light and blood. And it worked.”

When Bragan proposed *Beauty and the Beast* (winter 2010), he envisioned a vortex of rose petals when the beast transformed into a man. “And I thought, ‘How are we going to do THAT?’” Brother Joseph laughed, as he remembered the vacuum he positioned underneath to create a whirlwind tornado.

This adaptability is something they teach all their students, whatever their talent, said Brother Joseph, so they can utilize it to be a major ingredient wherever they end up. If some students have an interest in technology, or if they want to work with their hands, they can construct the set or manage the microphones. “The most well-rounded student has the opportunity to do everything,” he said. “And it’s a group effort. No matter how talented the actor or singer, you can’t do it without lights, a set or the rest of the cast. It was a huge sense of satisfaction, a triumph for everyone. As technical director, I was so proud of the kids and how far they’d come.”



Dom Joseph Byron has mentored the stage crew in everything from building sets to mastering the stage lights.



Frank Pagliaro '10 played Cogsworth in Beauty and the Beast, the Portsmouth Abbey Winter Musical in 2010. Read about Frank's continuing acting career on page 27.

Act 2

As a symbiotic arm of the diverse performing arts program, the growing music department is a dominant force. While it provides a slate of Abbey Singers to the winter musical, it also has a range of choral and instrumental ensembles with a roster of events, on campus and off.

“I have tried so hard to get us out and be visual. Every time I can get us out of this basement I do it. We’re trying to be as visible as possible,” Kerr said. “When a group has worked together to create something, to perform one time, it’s remarkable how far they come. They want to get better together.”

Spring and fall concerts on campus complement the three academic courses and foster classmate support, while off-campus exposure opens the performers’ eyes to their potential. The Enharmonix vocal jazz ensemble and Jazz Band perform at Berklee (College of Music) High School Jazz Festival each January, and sing the national anthem and play at Providence Bruins games. Its Chamber Music ensemble performs at Newport Art Museum’s Art After Dark concert series. Thirty Abbey Singers have even sung as part of the cast for the Trinity Repertory Company’s “A Christmas Carol;” others did a live show of “A Christmas Carol” on Abbey Radio, which involved drama and music classes, as well as faculty, staff and members of the monastery.

“Any chance that they have to get off campus, they really truly enjoy. They enjoy a challenge, and they react well to it. They know they have a public concert coming up, they tighten their belts and start working really hard for it,” said Instrumental Music Director Joe Bentley. “But you don’t have to do one thing or the other, just make music for yourself. For students, it’s important to discover that as a musician. If you want to make music, it’s about who you are as a musician, to build a relationship with your instrument. And it’s a lot of fun.”

Music technology has improved with the addition of a tech lab, including 16 computers with digital audio and video editing software. Kerr edits music and sound effects for some of the drama performances, and teaches students about digital music and video editing techniques. This comes into effect with the winter musical, which is the biggest, raddest, all-hands-on-deck show that the campus creates.

“I love the musical because it brings our disciplines together, drama, music and dance, so we can collaborate. That’s really important,” Bragan said. Prone to classics, like *West Side Story* (2007) and *The Sound of Music* (2011), he said

In addition to mentoring and conducting student groups Music Director Kerr edits music and sound effects for some of the drama performances, and teaches students about digital music and video editing techniques.



The Portsmouth Abbey Enharmonix group at the annual High School Jazz Festival hosted by Berklee College, 2019



“Jeff introduced me to the contemporary shows and the potential with students (*The Addams Family*, 2016, and *Legally Blonde*, 2017). Having that new material in the community is wonderful.”

With that development, trying new routines is essential, said choreographer Sandra DiPalma, who also coordinates the co-curricular dance program. “We have some amazing dancers and some kids who aren’t. But usually they like it and try to own it,” she said. “The coolest part is that we see them grow from freshman to senior, and their evolution growing into who they are is the best part.”

Sophia Diodati (class of 2015) is living proof of this development. A member of the drama program and *Enharmonix*, she went on to perform at Johns Hopkins University, where she graduates in December with double majors in Medicine, Science, & Humanities and Anthropology, with a Theater Arts minor.

“The performing arts program at the Abbey gave me one of the greatest platforms to grow not only as a musician or actress, but as a person as well,” she said. “I was always given the opportunity to make the most of any song or character I took on, and often times I was told to just ‘do your thing.’ Having that push to trust my own instincts has absolutely shaped how I take on life, both on and off the stage.”



TOP: Carly Johnston '16 as Morticia with the cast of *The Addams Family* (Winter 2016)

ABOVE: Maya Wilson '17 in *Legally Blonde The Musical* (Winter 2017).

ABOVE: Sophia Diodati '15 in *Ghost The Musical* (Winter 2015)

BELOW: As a Johns Hopkins University student Sophia Diodati '15 became one of the *Barnstormers* and played the lead role of Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*.

Epilogue

With Bragan’s 50th performance on the horizon, the occasion for faculty in the performing arts to push themselves, as well as their students, is now. But they are prepared. Bragan said they’ll be assessing the entire program, better promoting shows to the public, and perhaps filming a documentary to highlight the evolution of one of their performances. A little more stage presence for the program itself and expansion of the music curriculum might come, possibly even a broadcast station to complement their radio program, Kerr said.

And while they’re determining the lineup for the next academic year, they know they just want to help the performing arts grow. “We’re trying different things, upgrading the technology, audio and lighting, doing more events,” Bragan said. “Student athletes do battle on the sports field – this is the same thing. And to have the entire community cheering them on is enormous validation.”

Annie Sherman is a member of the Class of 1995, and unfortunately never took the stage. She is a freelance writer in Newport, R.I.

