

Plymouth MAGAZINE

PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY • WINTER/SPRING 2014



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ALUMNI IN THE ARTS

HOW FOUR MTD ALUMNI ARE PUTTING THEIR DEGREES TO WORK ■ BY MARCIA SANTORE



Above: Jake Josef '08 was technical director for the Glimmerglass production of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*. Karli Cadel photo, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival.

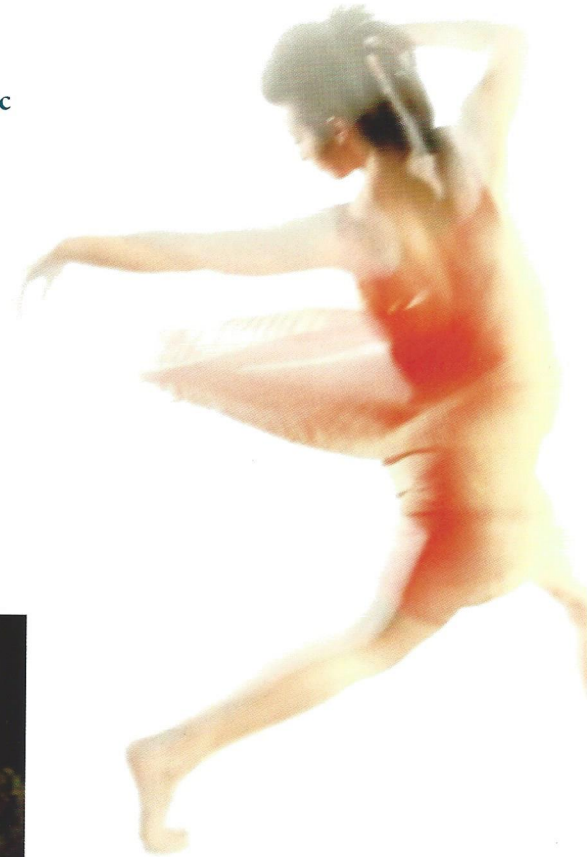
Right: Cassandra Marcella '00 is the band director for the West Haven (CT) High School Marching Band.

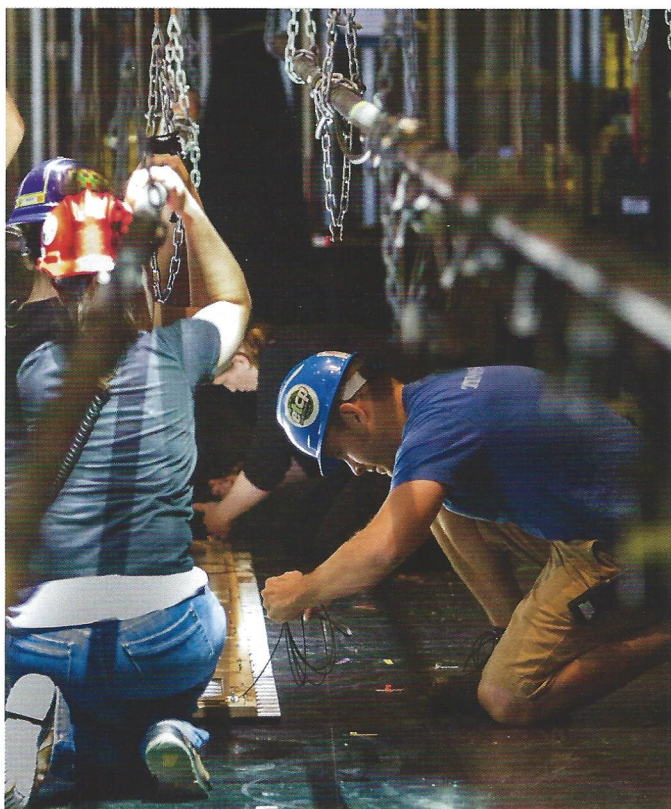
PSU's Department of Music, Theatre, and Dance is the starting point for alumni pursuing a wide variety of artistic careers. From here, they go out into the world to do what they love: they teach in Connecticut and Kuwait, perform on cruise ships and Off-Broadway, work backstage in Boston and Oman, and so much more. Here's how four alumni, each representing a facet of the multidisciplinary department, are achieving success in the arts.



Left: Daniel Brevik '11 (center) appeared as Don Pedro in the New England Conservatory's production of *La Perichole*.

Above: Kathleen Pantos '08.





Cassandra Marcella '00 recorded her career ambition in her high school yearbook. Thanks to a series of mentors, her education in MTD, and her own focus and dedication, Marcella achieved that ambition: to be the band director at West Haven (CT) High School, in her hometown.

Marcella's career aspirations were inspired by her middle school and high school band directors, Tom Gibbons and Skip Crabtree. When she began to look at colleges, it was Crabtree who encouraged her to check out Plymouth State.

understanding. I had the faculty's support in leaving and in coming back. I don't think I would have found that at any other school."

She was able to pick up where she left off and finish her degree. That was important because back home, people were waiting for her to fill a new elementary school band director position. Two years after taking that job, she learned that her mentor Crabtree was retiring from West Haven High School. Marcella was hired to replace him, and pays forward all the mentoring and care that she received as a student.

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“People tell you that you’ll know you’re at the right school the minute you get out of the car,” says Marcella. “That was absolutely true when I came to PSU.”

She studied saxophone with Professor of Music Rik Pfenninger and instrumental conducting with Gary Corcoran, now professor emeritus of music. “I felt so welcome. I knew I’d made the right decision,” she says. “Professors were genuinely interested in the students and everyone was very caring. It’s never been recreated in anything else I’ve ever done.”

But Marcella's life took a very difficult turn. “One of the toughest things I dealt with at Plymouth State was when my father passed away from cancer,” she says. When Marcella felt she needed to take some time off from college, she says, “All my professors were so helpful and

As Corcoran says, “Cassie is the type of teacher that other teachers aspire to be. The dedication she shows her students at West Haven High School is beyond measure.”

And it's appreciated. Marcella describes her former student Brenda Calderon as “valedictorian from her freshman year,” and helped Calderon with her application to Yale University. When she was accepted, Marcella says, “I was more excited for her than she was for herself!” But Calderon had a surprise for her band director and mentor.

“On the first day of school this year,” Marcella says, “I was going through all the mail that had come in over the summer and dropping most of it straight into the wastebasket. There was a package from Yale and I almost threw it out.” To her great surprise, the package contained

a Yale Educators Award. Without telling Marcella, Calderon had nominated her for the award, which recognizes teachers around the world “who have supported and inspired their students to achieve at high levels.”

Supporting and inspiring students: That’s what Marcella learned from her teachers—and that’s what she continues to do every day.

Jake Josef ’08 first came to PSU as a singer. But everything changed when he took a job in the theatre shop. He was taken by the hands-on nature of the work, which includes all the design, building, rigging, and technology that go into the behind-the-scenes work of a theatrical production. He was hooked—and quickly changed his major.

“Jake is a great example of what it means to be a theatre practitioner,” says Matt Kizer, head of MTD’s theatre design and technology program. “He began at Plymouth State as a performer. He sang, he danced. He performed the lead role in our production of *Guys and Dolls*. We admit students by audition only here; Jake was a really good performer. At the same time, he also developed an interest in theatre technology. He worked in our shop, and grew to be really good at engineering, design, and planning.”

Josef keeps in touch with the MTD faculty and still turns to them for advice. “It was a small program, which was a huge influence on what I was able to accomplish,” he says. “The faculty and the facilities at Plymouth State are something that you’re going to take with you and use for the rest of your life.”

In 2007, Josef interned at the Glimmerglass Festival, a

professional summer opera company based in Cooperstown, NY. That experience inspired Josef’s decision to continue his education. His appreciation for the opportunities he’d had at Plymouth State led him to seek out another small program for his MFA in technical direction at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. As a graduate student, Josef was hired as assistant technical director at Glimmerglass, then promoted to technical director. Last summer, the technical team built sets for three out of the four productions. Building the set for Wagner’s one-act opera *The Flying Dutchman* “really stretched my knowledge,” Josef says. “With flying actors and lots of flying scenery, it was a great learning experience!”

Josef’s work with Glimmerglass has even taken him around the world to Oman, where he was technical director for *The Music Man*, co-produced with the Oman Royal Opera. “The most rewarding part of the trip was the chance to work with theatre technicians from all areas of the world, and learn their methods and techniques in technical theatre,” Josef says. “The opera house was state-of-the-art, and the opportunity to work with that kind of technology was invaluable.”

Kizer is pleased to see where his former student’s career has taken him. “As a technical director, Jake is ultimately in charge of everything that happens on stage in regard to technology and stagecraft. He’s a great representative of what we want our program here to be about; everyone should know as much as they can about everything, and put that together with their passion to contribute to our art.”

Kathleen Pantos ’08 assumed she would attend college in New York City with a highly competitive dance program like the one she had trained in. But a friend told her about the dance program at Plymouth State and she decided to audition here, as well. What she found at PSU amazed her: a true sense of community, something she had been missing in her earlier dance training. People on campus greeted her wherever she went—even other dancers. “Going into the city, you get the competitive thing immediately,” Pantos explains. “But at Plymouth State, you get the sense that we’re all doing this because we love dance.”

She also found she could have a full and rich life outside of dance plus incredible professional opportunities. “The experiences we were given in New Hampshire were just as good as the ones my friends had in New York or Los Angeles.”

Pantos speaks highly of Amanda Whitworth, director of the MTD dance program. “She’s so supportive and she taught me so much,” Pantos says, including how to pace herself and how to have fun. “She wants to see her students succeed.”

Whitworth speaks highly of Pantos, as well. “Kat’s maturity and focus grew tremendously over the course of her academic career. Because she remained open to guidance, Kat was able to build an educational and artistic foundation that broadened her choices upon graduation.”

One of those choices was to go to Boston Dance Alliance’s open-call audition for Urbanity, a professional contemporary dance company in the South End. By 2011, Pantos was Urbanity’s associate director, running the

apprentice program and summer internships, and a principal dancer.

Another choice was to leave Urbanity to work with the Sobers and Godley Festival at Alvin Ailey City Group Theatre in New York City. Pantos even started her own pick-up company, performing at the Genesis Dance Festival in Queens. The Women in Dance Festival pairs 10 up-and-coming female choreographers with famous female choreographers to create new work. “Once you’re out of college, you lose that sense of mentorship. I was really drawn to this festival because of the mentorship aspect.”

Pantos remains connected to PSU and MTD. “The community Plymouth State has created follows through even six years later,” she says. “I adore Plymouth. It’s a home away from home. Amanda creates a wonderful atmosphere of ‘we’re going to work hard, but we’re going to have fun.’” In October, Pantos returned to the Silver Center to conduct a master class. “I’m excited to work with the next crop of artists at Plymouth State.”

Daniel Brevik ’11 had no idea that he would be an opera singer until an injury ended his high school football career. A friend suggested Plymouth State’s vocal performance program, and Brevik decided to audition. When he saw MTD’s production of *Cabaret* in the Silver Center the night before his audition, he knew he was at the right place. At first, he sang mostly traditional American pop and joined the *a cappella* group, Vocal Order. His experience with classical music was minimal. “The first year was pretty intense,” Brevik says, “but I ended up falling in love with Chamber Singers.”

“
One moment I’m singing *a cappella* and the next I’m singing opera, and it’s all because of the professors I met along the way.
”

Brevik was advised to study with Professor Kathleen Arrechi, coordinator of voice performance studies. He was surprised to be accepted into her popular and busy studio. “Professor Arrechi makes sure that she gets you on the right track,” says Brevik.

Arrechi recalls, “When I first heard Danny sing, I knew that his was a voice of exceptional promise but he really didn’t recognize it himself. When I mentioned to him that opera might be a direction he should consider, he was very dubious. It took several years of convincing, plus the assistance of other knowledgeable singing professionals, before Danny started to believe this could happen for him.”

Arrechi signed him up for the American Traditions competition, where he won the People’s Choice Award and met renowned operatic baritone Sherrill Milnes. Milnes and Arrechi encouraged him to enter the Boston National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Competition, where he took first place and caught the attention of bass-baritone Mark St. Laurent, chair of the voice faculty of the New England Conservatory. Arrechi helped Brevik prepare his audition for NEC’s graduate program. He knew it was a competitive program and didn’t expect to be accepted, much less receive the conservatory’s Presidential Scholarship.

Conductor Steven Lord has been called one of the 25 most powerful names in opera. He cast Brevik in *La Perichole* and *Paul*

Bunyan. *EDGE Boston’s* review of *La Perichole*, says, “Daniel Brevik ... was the real standout. His is a world-class voice, a massive, focused baritone with a rich, warm timbre. He can look forward to a major career in opera.”

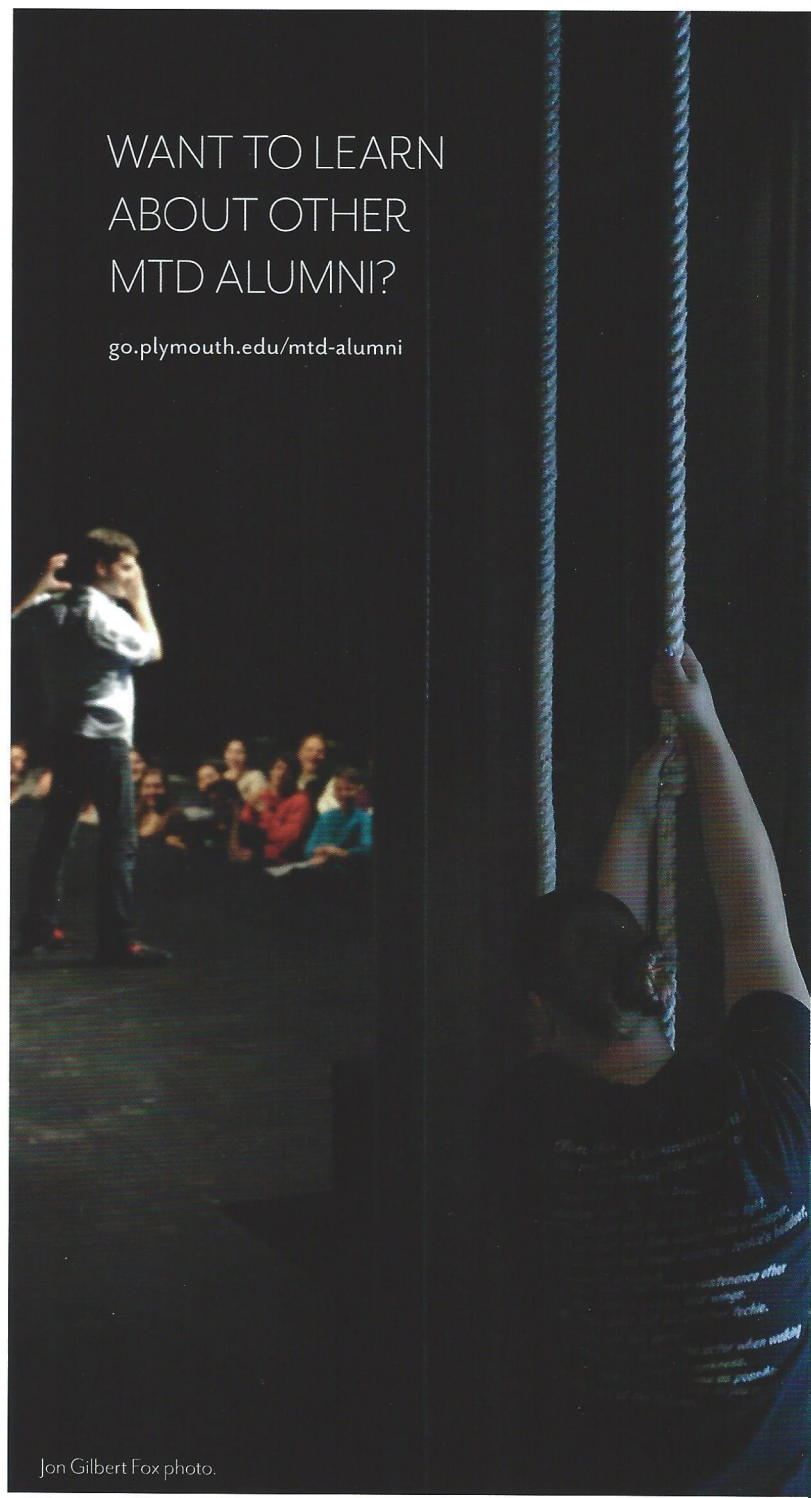
Lord encouraged Brevik to audition for Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. “It’s one of those programs you don’t expect to get in,” Brevik says. But the audition went well and Brevik found himself in St. Louis, in the ensemble for *Pagliacci* and *The Pirates of Penzance*. Brevik figures he must have made a good impression when he showed up on the first day of rehearsal with all the chorus parts memorized and discovered that everyone else was sight reading. Next June, Brevik will appear in an original opera at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis called *27*. The opera will star acclaimed mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe as Gertrude Stein. Brevik was cast to play several members of Stein’s circle, including Pablo Picasso and Ernest Hemingway. Composer Ricky Ian Gordon will tailor these roles specifically for Brevik’s voice.

Brevik marvels at his transformation as a singer, and the support from his professors at PSU as a student and now as a successful alumnus. “One moment I’m singing *a cappella* and the next I’m singing opera, and it’s all because of the professors I met along the way.”

■ Marcia Santore is a Plymouth, NH-based writer, editor, and artist.

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Jon Gilbert Fox photo.