A whole new program

WestConn: Musical theatre degree incorporates dancing, acting, singing, music theory

By Sandra Diamond Fox
Contribution Writer

Have you seen Andrew Hendrick’s performance in the latest Broadway show? You may one day, thanks to the new Bachelor of Arts degree program in musical theatre he’s in at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury.

Hendrick is one of only 21 students who got accepted into the four-year program, which incorporates classes from the university’s music and theatre departments.

“My dream job is Broadway. I’d love to have a career doing any kind of acting,” says Hendrick, 20, of Fairfield.

The program incorporates acting, dance training, music theory, keyboard competency, audition techniques, and voice and diction. Other classes are in theatre history, costume and makeup, body movement and mime, and play production.

According to professor Sal Trapani, co-chair of the theatre arts department, about 30 students applied for the program, which began in September.

“Students had to demonstrate talent in singing, dancing and acting,” he says. Interest in a musical theatre program at WestConn began years ago, Trapani says. In response to the strong interest, “we talk to the music department about how we could make use of their instrumental resources in theory, sight singing, keyboard competency and individual voice instruction to complement what we do, in order to come up with a comprehensive B.A. in musical theatre.

“We developed a program where we don’t have to generate new classes, new faculty, or new resources,” Trapani says. Musical theatre students take existing courses taught by existing staff members. According to associate professor Pam McDaniel, co-chair of the theatre arts department, two classes that have been created over the past few years with the new program in mind are cabaret performance — which studies style and personality — and musical theatre workshop, which is “the wedding of the acting concepts with the musical concepts.”

Chat with musical theatre student
Alexis Willoughby

Eighteen-year-old New Milford native Alexis Willoughby, who is entering her junior year at New Milford High School, is one of the students in WestConn’s new musical theatre program. In a recent interview she spoke about her experience in the program and what it means to her.

Q: Are you interested in this program?

A: I was interested in auditioning for the program and went to the auditions.

Q: What is the program like so far?

A: The program is very intensive. The class is a lot of work, but I love it.

Q: What do you like about being surrounded by the arts?

A: The classes are very enjoyable. I’ve learned a lot about theatre and music. The teachers are very helpful and the classes are very interesting.

Q: What do you see your future in?
WestConn adds musical theatre degree

Continued from D1

that performers have to bring forward in a musical," she says.

One of the unique aspects of the program is that it allows students to practice what they're studying. They'll have the opportunity to participate in many after-school productions, one of which is the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland. This is the largest international arts festival in the world, according to McDaniel.

"There will be productions from all over the world there, and our students will have the opportunity to perform there as well. The purpose of this experience is to enrich students' awareness of their training. It brings them to an international context, rather than just a national context, regarding theater," McDaniel explains.

Another performance opportunity occurs every spring when seniors produce a show in a small theater in Manhattan, N.Y. Students learn what it takes to perform in the New York environment.

One of the only additional costs of the program — amounting to $300 per semester — is for weekly private voice lessons. All students in the program are required to take this in order to develop their specific vocal techniques and range for singing, McDaniel explains.

"The comprehensive training, the performance experience both in New York and internationally, and the contact with industry professionals is what makes this program and degree unique," Trapani says.

"Musical arts are my focus and my passion. Approximately 90 percent of shows you see on Broadway are musicals. When you look around the country, it's musicals that tend to be the most successful, as opposed to straight plays. That's why it's so important to have this degree," Hendrick says.

"I like that this is a Bachelor of Arts program, as opposed to a Bachelor of Fine Arts program. You get a regular program (of academic classes) in addition to theater classes," says Theresa Curran of Shelton, 19.

"My dream is to be on stage. If it doesn't work out with acting, this degree will give me experience in some other aspects of theater that I'm also interested in such as costume, lighting, and makeup," Curran says.

Eighteen-year-old freshman Rachel Fournier, of Shelton, is especially looking forward to her dance classes.

"I started dancing when I was 3, but I haven't taken formal dance classes in several years. I'm excited to get back into it again," she says. "I love the combination of singing, dancing, and acting. Being able to burst into song during a show is pretty cool."

Trapani says there is a lot of theater in Greater Danbury.

"The state of Connecticut realizes that the arts bring in revenue. When you train kids in theater, you're training them as performers. They will always have a connection to Connecticut," he says.

"This is an exciting time for us," he adds. "The new degree is going to make us less of a well-kept secret and more of a force in musical theater education nationally."

From right, Rachel Fournier, 18, of Shelton, Theresa Curran, 19, of Shelton, and Anna Giordano, 19, of Clinton, participate in the new Bachelor of Arts degree program in musical theatre at WestConn.