

# A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW

To achieve their big dreams, students pursue acting

The men and women you see on Broadway and in your favorite blockbuster movies all had to start somewhere. Students all around you are spending hours each week trying to accomplish this. How do they do it? By being in Shakespeare plays like junior Cal Ussery, experiencing playwriting like sophomore Emma Parsons, participating in theater productions such as Ragtime like junior Ben Roberts and performing in musicals like senior Taylor Thomas.

*—Lexy Connolly and Sage Sutton*

# BEN ROBERTS

## **Featherduster: What first made you want to be an actor?**

Ben Roberts: My mother was an actress, and she always sang showtunes to me and my sister when we were little. That's what made me really love theater.

## **FD: How old were you when you began acting?**

BR: I started acting in fourth grade. Most serious actors start much earlier, so it's put me behind in that sense, but I feel I started at a good time. Right now I'm experiencing the transition between accepting child roles and young adult roles, and it's very interesting. I'm glad I started when I did.

## **FD: How do you balance schoolwork with acting?**

BR: Balancing schoolwork with theatre really depends on what I have going on at a particular time. Right before a show opens, we have about a week of tech rehearsals. This is when the designers add the lighting and sound and costume elements. The rehearsals can be from 10 to 14 hours long. Usually during techs I can work out extended deadlines with my teachers or do [homework] backstage. I've had to turn down things because of interference with school.

## **FD: How many hours of acting do you normally do a week?**

BR: Right now, I'm only spending about five or six hours a week on voice lessons and classes. When things pick up, I can be spending up to 20 hours a week rehearsing. It all depends on what I have going on. In the summer, I was in a company that called me almost 60 hours a week.

## **FD: Are you considering moving to somewhere for better opportunities, or do you think Austin prepares you just as well?**

BR: Austin is a great town to grow up in for young actors. There are a lot of opportunities to get good training. As an adult though, even the most hired actors in Austin need a day job. There aren't enough regional theaters here to make a living as an actor, exclusively. I'm not sure if this is what I want to do as an adult, and so far, I haven't made any plans to move.

## **FD: Do you have any other skills in the performance department?**

BR: I play trombone, sing and compose jazz and orchestral music, in addition to acting.

## **FD: What are some important lessons you've learned by being in acting and having to balance everything?**

BR: I've learned that if you want to perform, you have to discipline yourself. Through performing, I've become a much more responsible and organized person.



# TAYLOR THOMAS

## **Featherduster: Did you always know that you wanted to go into acting?**

Taylor Thomas: I didn't actually know. When I was little, I wanted to be a chef who sang and cooked at the same time. I didn't get serious about singing and acting until about fourth grade.

## **FD: What made you realize that you wanted to act?**

TT: The first Broadway musical I saw was *Beauty and the Beast* when I was about 8, which spurred my love of singing. Then, when I was 12 I saw *Wicked* on Broadway, and that's when I decided I wanted to perform for the rest of my life.

## **FD: How do you balance school work with acting?**

TT: It's a lot of scheduling and a lot of planning; it's a lot of knowing what you have to do ahead of time. I have my planner, which is my life, and I am always in contact with my all my teachers and all my directors. I'm always making sure that when there is a conflict that we work it out as soon as we can.

## **FD: What kind of acting do you do?**

TT: I am a musical theater actor. I sing, act and dance simultaneously on stage. I love all three of the areas of musical theater equally, so it's nice to be able to combine those three areas. Musical theater is a challenge for the performers, yet entertaining for the audience, so all of the work is worth it in the end.

## **FD: Are you considering moving to somewhere for better opportunities, or do you think Austin prepares you just as well?**

TT: Austin has a lot of good programs. The Zach Scott Theater is where I do most of my acting. It's a great program, but I hope to move to New York City and work in the big leagues.

## **FD: What was your favorite thing to perform in?**

TT: My favorite performance was probably *Shrek* last year. I was Fiona. It was the most fun I have ever had in a show. It was an amazing production that I was able to put on with my peers for our fellow Westlake students. The Westlake TEC department is phenomenal, and their work was absolutely stunning. The fact that Westlake choir is able to take a show that is usually a cast of about 40 people and use a cast of almost 300 students is amazing. It was an honor to be cast in that show, and I loved every second of it.

## **FD: What are some important lessons you've learned by being in acting and having to balance everything?**

TT: I've learned a lot of life lessons like responsibility; I've learned how to take criticism; I've learned how to take rejection; I've built up my confidence; I've learned how to make amazing friends and relationships. It's really been a great experience.



# CAL USSERY

**Featherduster: Did you always know you wanted to act? How did you know?**

Cal Ussery: From a very young age I performed a lot. It wasn't really until the end of middle school that I started being in shows more often, and I realized that it was something I was really passionate about.

**FD: What kind of acting do you do?**

CU: Most of what I've done has been theater. This summer I was actually in my first feature film. It was an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, but it's set in a modern day boarding school. It's still his words and story, but transposed into this modern setting to make it more accessible. That's been a really awesome project and we're hoping to have it go up at South by Southwest and other film festivals.

**FD: How old were you when you started acting?**

CU: I think the first real play I was in, was in early elementary school. Getting into acting at a young age has definitely helped because I've been around it long enough to have some experience that someone who is just starting doesn't. I think really what that helped was recognizing how important acting was to me.

**FD: Have you performed in anything notable? What was your favorite thing to perform in?**

CU: The very first Austin community theater show I did was when I was in eighth grade, and I was in a production with this theater company downtown called the Trinity Street Players." They're a completely volunteer-run organization, and their whole goal is to make theater more accessible to people with lower income. Every time they have a show, people will show up that have never seen a play before. This past year I was actually in my first professional production; that was really exciting. It was Tom Shoppard's *The Invention of Love*, with Austin Shakespeare. It's really a cool experience to finally be able to say I can get paid for doing what I love.

**FD: What advice do you have for other aspiring young actors?**

CU: Don't be afraid of doing the work. It can seem kind of daunting; you've got scripts to memorize, school work to do and auditions to go to, but really the only way to get better is to do as much of it as you can. Go to every audition you can because even if you don't get the part, you've got the experience and that means something.

**FD: What are some important lessons you've learned by being in acting and having to balance everything?**

CU: I think definitely it has helped me be more organized and as an actor you deal a lot with body language, emotions and interacting with people. I'd like to think it's helped me be better with communicating with and understanding people.



# EMMA PARSONS

**Featherduster: What made you first realize that you wanted to act?**

Emma Parsons: There wasn't a specific moment. Before I started classes, it was more of just the idea of it, but after I actually tried a class I thought it was really fun. I could just let myself loose.

**FD: How old were you when you began acting?**

EP: I was probably about 6 when I went to my first acting class, and I loved it. There have been shows that I've done where I've been really hard on myself because I hadn't done as well as I wanted to, but that just makes me stronger. I just know that I have to do better next time.

**FD: What kinds of acting do you do?**

EP: I love theater, so that's always what I fall back on, but I think I want to end up doing film. In the last few years, I started gathering some experience in film. I like doing more of the serious stuff as well, like dramas.

**FD: What are your favorite or most notable performances?**

EP: I did a show this summer, and it was "devising." That means that we wrote the show, and it was about our lives. That was a really cool experience because it was so different than anything else that I'd ever done. I also played Patty, the cheerleader in *Grease*, which was a very different role than I normally play, so that was interesting to explore.

**FD: How is acting outside of school different than acting in school?**

EP: It's the same concept. You audition for the show, get a role and start working on the show. Outside of school it's just a lot more competitive.

**FD: What advice do you have for other aspiring actors and actresses?**

EP: As soon as you think that you want to do it, start classes. The more experiences you get with different people, the more connections you'll make and the better it will be. Also, just keep living. Acting comes from your own experience, so you really need to know yourself.

**FD: What have you learned in your experiences as an actress?**

EP: It's really helped me stay true to who I am. Even though the whole time you're playing different characters who aren't you, you still have to be yourself in it. Otherwise it's not believable. So it's helped in connecting to myself more and knowing who I am as a person.

