
SCHOOL OF MUSIC, THEATRE AND DANCE

SMTD alumni pursue dreams at prestigious graduate schools

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Whether they're pursuing a master's degree or a Ph.D., alumni of Oakland University's School of Music, Theatre and Dance are making their mark at prestigious graduate schools across the nation and around the world, thanks to the education and support they received at OU.

"OU's School of Music, Theatre



and Dance helped me in so many ways get to where I am today,” said **Ian Lester**, a 2018 graduate from Oakland University who will be attending the University of Missouri – Kansas City to pursue a Master’s Degree in euphonium performance.

Ian Lester, a 2018 graduate from Oakland University's School of Music, Theatre and Dance, is one of hundreds of SMTD alumni who have gone on to pursue their passions at prestigious graduate schools across the nation and beyond.

This past June, Lester’s Reminiscence and Death Machine was named the winner of the North Texas Euphonium Quartet’s Composition Contest. This year’s competition drew nearly 100 compositions from 25 states and 22 countries which included Spain Finland, Canada, Greece, Brazil, Pakistan, England, Mexico, Turkey, Indonesia, Japan, Lithuania, Netherlands, France, Russia, Iran, Slovenia, Germany, Taiwan, Argentina, Italy, as well as the United States. Lester’s piece will be featured on the quartet’s upcoming CD which will be released this fall, as well as performed on their upcoming fall tour.

“I think the biggest thing OU’s SMTD has done for me was provide me with the help and guidance of world-class faculty who I had the privilege of learning from,” Lester said. “Whether it was Dr. Kenneth Kroesche, who was my primary professor, or my two composition teachers, Terry Herald and Dr. Ben Fuhrman, I have gained so much real-world insight on how to become a better musician, composer and person.”



Domonique Evans

For theatre alum **Domonique Evans**, earning a degree at OU helped open new doors and allowed him to complete his master’s degree in musical theatre at the San Diego State University, which has one of only two programs in the nation that offer a Master of Fine Arts degree in Musical Theatre.

After earning his master’s degree, Evans was hired to lead the theatre department at Rainey-McCuller’s School of the Arts, a new performing arts high school in Columbus, Ga.

“The role OU played was very essential,” Evans said. “If it wasn’t for the training I received from

OU, I wouldn't have gotten into grad school.”

Like Evans, **Cassandra Svacha** is an alum of the OU Department of Theatre. She is currently living in London and attending the prestigious Royal Central School for Speech and Drama while working on her Master of Fine Arts Degree in Musical Theatre in the U.S.



Cassandra Svacha

“I've been working with RSC, National Theatre and Royal Court directors and performers throughout this past year,” Svacha said. “This summer I am mentoring with Hannah Ringham, one of the founders of Shunt Theatre and the Vaults. I am also performing in a show called Feral, which is going up at the Old Red Lion theatre and Drayton Arms here in London.”

This fall, Svacha will be splitting her time between England and the United States to work on her thesis show, entitled 10 Days in a Madhouse.

“This project will look at contemporary issues of adaptation of text, narrative and ensemble,” she said.

Svacha said she will always be grateful for her experiences at OU and the doors it opened for her after graduation.

“OU's SMTD was the doorway into performance and musical theatre,” she said. “I still draw upon lessons learned from that time, as it was a solid foundation.”

Jacob Surzyn, a 2017 graduate who earned a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance from Oakland University, took a year off after he graduated to perform before heading to graduate school.



Jacob Surzyn

“I’ve been performing in Michigan Opera Theatre’s chorus, had three leading roles with Main Street Opera Theater and one with Opera MODO, and performed as a soloist in several concerts in multiple venues,” he said.

Surzyn will be attending the University of Michigan this fall to pursue a master’s degree, also in vocal performance.

Marinda Jenkins, another SMTD alumna, graduated this past spring with a bachelor’s degree in vocal performance and has been accepted to Pennsylvania State University where she will be pursuing a Master of Music degree in Choral Conducting this fall. She was also recently hired as the director of choral activities at Faith United Church of Christ in State College.



Marinda Jenkins

“I would not have accomplished what I have, nor become the well-rounded musician I am today if it weren’t for the support of the faculty at OU,” Jenkins said. “They have created a community that fosters academic support and a true love of music that many programs surprisingly lack. The OU SMTD may be small, but it contains a rigorous program that turns out able, competitive musicians, educators and anything else in between. This program played a huge part in making me the person I am today, and I will always say that I am proud to be a Grizzly.”

For **Emily Sese**, an alumna of the OU Department of Dance, transferring to OU in 2012 changed her outlook and encouraged her to pursue her passions.

“My professors, Ali Woerner, Thayer Jonutz and Elizabeth Kattner, introduced me to ways in which I could merge my



Emily Sese

passion for dance and love of writing,” she said. “For me their mindsets, curriculum and advice revealed an academic side to dance that was previously unexplored. This sent me on a quest to share this connection with other intellectuals, students and community members.”

Sese moved to Texas after graduation and enrolled at Texas Woman’s University for graduate school.

“In 2017, I earned my Master of Arts degree in dance from TWU and published my thesis *Finding Multiplicity in Dance and Spoken Word: An Analysis of Works by Kidd Pivot, Cynthia Ling Lee and Bill T. Jones*,” she said.

Sese is currently employed as an adjunct instructor in the dance department at Tarrant County College and a dance critic with TheaterJones, an online journal covering art in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

“More than even the quality of our programs, the success students have when applying to graduate schools reflects the SMTD undergraduate experience,” said Joseph Shively, interim director of the School of Music, Theatre and Dance. “Our students are provided opportunities as undergraduates typically reserved for graduate students at other schools. These experiences prepare them to study at leading graduate schools and receive significant funding to support their continued education.”

To see what other SMTD alumni are up to, check out the latest edition of the [PRISM Newsletter](#).

Over the years, hundreds of SMTD alumni have gone on to be accepted to prestigious graduate school programs and perform in high profile venues across the nation and beyond after graduating from OU, including:

- Zollie Schut, who is attending Indiana University and pursuing a Master of Music

(M.M.) degree in Jazz Studies.

- Fil Starostka, who just graduated from Michigan State University with a M.M. degree in Trumpet Performance. He will be starting a D.M.A. (Doctor of Musical Arts) in Performance at Louisiana State University in the fall.
- Lauren Wilson, who is a Ph.D. candidate in Music Theory at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York.
- Joshua Neuenschwander, who will matriculate at the University of Iowa for a D.M.A. in Conducting.
- Paul Abdullah, who is a Ph.D. candidate in Musicology at Case Western Reserve University.
- Jane Hines, who is a Ph.D. candidate in Musicology at Princeton University.
- Stephen Komer, who is a Ph.D. candidate in Music Theory at Indiana University.
- Caitlyn Bramble, who will matriculate at the University of Washington while pursuing a master's degree in Museum Studies and Museology.
- Michaela Franzen (Judkins), who is a Ph.D. candidate in Musicology at the University of Michigan.
- Amandalynne Walker, who is currently pursuing a M.M. degree at the College Conservatory of Music (CCM) at the University of Cincinnati.
- Mark Hosseini, who recently graduated with a M.M. degree in Vocal Performance and Literature from The Eastman School of Music.
- Regan Tackett, who recently graduated with a M.M. degree in Vocal Pedagogy from Ohio State University.
- James Long, who completed his M.M. in Euphonium Performance at the Cincinnati

Conservatory of Music and will be beginning his D.M.A. in Performance at the University of Michigan.

- Alyssa Primeau, who graduated from OU in 2018 with a degree in Flute Performance and Music Education, will be attending Boston University in the fall for Flute Performance.
- Garret Klauss, who is a 2018 graduate of OU, will be attending Bowling Green State in the fall and pursuing a degree in Saxophone Performance.
- Isaac Garrigues-Cortelyou, who earned a B.A. in Music from Oakland University in 2018, will be majoring in Choral Conducting at Syracuse University.