

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Advice for a new generation of U.Va. arts graduates

Four University professors discuss the range, risk and resilience required from those seeking a career in the arts

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Despite Punxsutawney Phil's prediction, graduation weekend has arrived. From theater to media studies to even architecture, graduating arts students are soaking in their final days as University undergraduates, begging time to slow down, even considering graduate school to prolong their tenure in Charlottesville. Inevitably, however, after diplomas are received and caps tossed high above the Rotunda, these students must reckon with the ultimate question — what comes next after the University?

Entering a career in the arts is difficult at any time, but particularly during a time as ripe with cultural evolution as the modern entertainment climate. Bruce Williams, Taylor Professor of Media Studies, said that the first task for students looking to chart their path in the arts is to figure out their ideal job.

"My advice [is] always try and do that for five years," Williams said. "And at the end of that five years, you will have learned something."

Echoing this sentiment, Tovah Close, a lecturer in the drama department, emphasized the importance of adaptability in today's job market. Her own career had her hopping from actress to dialect coach to professor in a matter of years, an evolution which she found incredibly fulfilling and simultaneously invigorating.

"There's no one size fits all advice, but I think that when you are starting out in your career, the more broad and variable you can be, the more opportunities you're able to confidently say yes to, and the experience will lead to specialization," Close said.

She added that the current and constantly changing media landscape brings with it the opportunity for experimentation within theater, and encouraged students to adopt a mindset of taking every chance they are offered to do things that excite them, even if those things may be foreign to them.

"I think we're at a really exciting time in the theater, because I think a lot of the old forms and systems are starting to decompose and make room for new things," Close said.

Siva Vaidhyathan, Robertson Professor of Media Studies, agreed that the shifting definition of a career in media means that the arts world which current students are entering looks very different from even five years ago.

"You have to be willing to be entrepreneurial. You have to be willing

to be disappointed. You have to be willing to understand that your first job will be terrible, maybe your second and third jobs will be terrible," Vaidhyathan said.

He went on to note that versatility coming out of a bachelor's degree is integral, even essential, when looking for a job in a creative sphere.

"That's why we make everybody take a variety of classes in their first two years — not only to discover who you are, but to give you exposure to different areas of the world and fundamentally make sure you can read, think and write well, because those are the basics for almost any entry level job," Vaidhyathan said.

The conversation around such entry level positions has taken on a new dimension with the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, an advancement which has brought significant uncertainty about the future stability and availability of jobs across sectors.

Looking at the arts specifically, there is a looming fear that roles previously reliant on human creativity will be rendered obsolete as a result of the expanding capacities of artificial intelligence. At the same time, there are also new facets of art being introduced, and Peter Waldman, William R. Kenan Professor of Architecture, spoke on AI's potential within architecture to work in collaboration with preexisting molds and customs.

"People ... have been drawing architecture, making models with their hands without any digital aids, for 5000 years," Waldman said. "I think that these archaic practices or foundational practices need to be kept alive, along with what simultaneously could be done through AI."

He added that humans are inherently creative beings and should feel encouraged to tap into that side of their consciousness — despite, and perhaps even as a result of, the simplicity with which AI allows an individual to shelve their innovation.

"We can't choose one world or the other, but there's no reason that we have to forget the confidence of any four, five year old," Waldman said. "They all think that they could draw or make a sand castle ... early on, it's in our capacities and then we get scared off."

Close noted that the digital sphere is having an increasing impact on the live arts — but whether or not it will render them entirely obsolete remains to be seen.

"I am always hopeful when stu-



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dents commit to an art form that's both really ancient and really future-looking like theater," Close said. "There's a lot of hand wringing. I think about the end of live performance, and I just deeply believe that it will always be with us, because it will always be [building on itself]."

So, too, have opportunities in traditional media institutions — such as journalism, broadcast news or literature — been affected by the increasing presence of short-form digital technology. Williams feels this evolution carries both benefits and drawbacks for aspiring writers.

"One of the things that's changed is, I think it's never been easier to express yourself," Williams said. "It's never been easier to say online what you want to say, what you think you know you have that's important to say. At the same time, it's never been harder to attract an audience to that."

The media studies program at the University emphasizes the importance of an interdisciplinary education, which in turn provides graduates with the skill sets to express themselves in a variety of ways, not limited by degree or field of study. On this note, Williams added that the media as a whole has evolved to be a lot more individual than it has historically.

"A lot of the opportunities that

have opened up ... [are] not connected to an institution like a newspaper or broadcast station," Williams said. "They rely on you."

In general, when looking towards post-graduate life as a student of the arts, multiple professors noted the importance of maintaining one's creativity, even as the opportunities to employ it may grow scarcer. In a similar vein, Close also emphasized the importance of taking time for oneself.

"You don't have the structure of classes, you don't have the accountability of projects that are due, professors or peers who are with you in the work consistently," Close said. "Structure your days so that each day has a little bit of art in it, whether that's reading a poem every day or making a sketch or doing yoga ... keeping those juices flowing."

Waldman added that education does not stop when a cap is tossed up into the sky, nor should it.

"You have to continue to be a good student and be modest and say, I've got something to learn," Waldman said. "I love the expansion and not the clear, defined route."

Williams reiterated this sentiment, citing a line from the 2015 Broadway phenomenon "Hamilton." The line "history has its eyes on you," first delivered by George Washington as he selects Alexander Hamil-

ton to be his right hand man, echoes throughout the musical as a mantra.

This idea is also how Williams would define his outlook on his students — he emphasized the importance of intelligence and idealism in the face of political instability, and has a strong faith in his students as agents of change for a better future.

"History has its eyes on you folks, your generation ... And I think that changes the game," Williams said.

Indeed, all four professors have a great deal of faith in this generation, noting idealism and creativity as potent traits throughout the student body and emphasizing how a degree from the University is an invaluable starting point for any number of careers.

"One of the things that I believe is that a substantial percentage of my students are idealistic," Williams said. "They feel really deeply about these issues in the way that you can only feel when you're ... in college."

Ultimately, it is what students do at the University that gives these professors hope — hope for the ideas and the careers and the minds that emerge from such an institution.

"If you love your time at U.Va. and have grown with it, and you continue to want to grow, the world is yours," Waldman said.