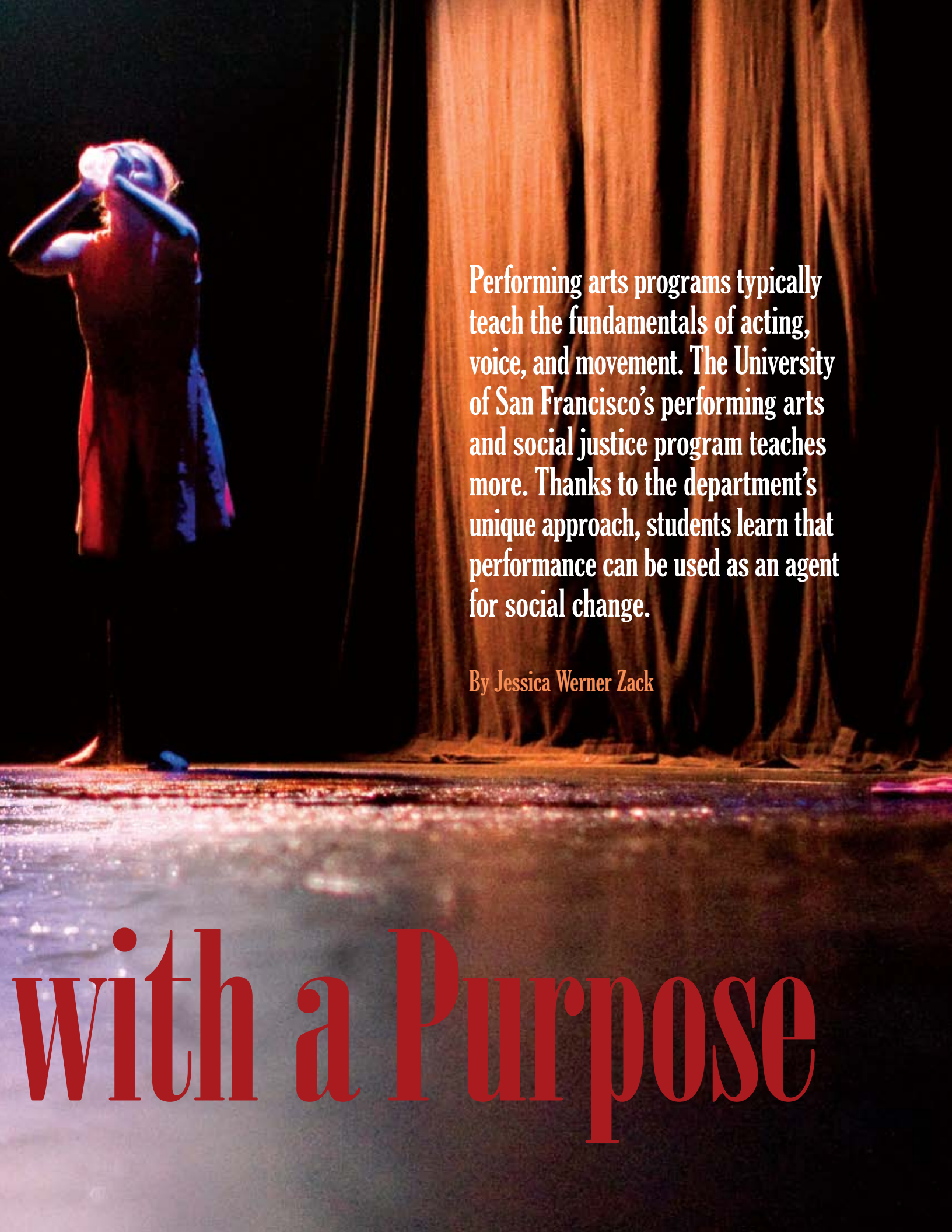




Performance

A person in a red dress stands on a stage, their hands raised to their face in a dramatic pose. The background is dominated by heavy, dark curtains. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong red glow on the person and a blue glow on the curtains. The floor of the stage is covered in a layer of shimmering, reflective material.

Performing arts programs typically teach the fundamentals of acting, voice, and movement. The University of San Francisco's performing arts and social justice program teaches more. Thanks to the department's unique approach, students learn that performance can be used as an agent for social change.

By Jessica Werner Zack

with a Purpose

The elderly, inmates, the homeless, and day laborers may not have much in common, but at the University of San Francisco, they have all played key roles in dance and theater students' development as performance artists committed to social justice.

"It's amazing to think that as alums we are just one small group of performers, but every one of us has gone out into the world after our training with a commitment to making the world a better place," said Kiki Allgeier '03, a performer and filmmaker in New York who spent a month in Mozambique this summer shooting a film about a group of socially engaged theater students there.

Like Allgeier, Mark Jwayad '03 has also taken to heart his training from USF's performing arts and social justice (PASJ) program. He graduated this spring from Chapman University's Graduate Conservatory of Motion Pictures and has launched his own film production company, Trainwreck Motion Pictures. His new film, *Jackson*, explores the issue of losing one's independence after a lifetime of self-sufficiency.

"My USF experiences had a huge impact on not just how I work, but on what," said Jwayad. "I choose

"Whenever I tell someone for the first time about USF's performing arts and social justice program, they always respond in one of these two ways," said Associate Dean for Arts and Humanities Peter Novak, who served as chair of the program from 2004 to 2007. "They either say, incredulously, 'How weird! What is that about?' Or, thankfully, more often I hear, 'Of course, that makes perfect sense. Why is no one else teaching that art and social justice belong together? It's a natural fit.'"

In short, the program teaches students that performance can be about much more than entertainment; it can also be used to work toward social justice. This unique approach has drawn an increasing number of students since the revamped program launched in 2001. That year, 23 students majored in performing arts; last year, 52 did so.

"We embarked on revitalizing the university's arts program by integrating it with the study and pursuit of social justice because we saw that something crucial was missing from arts training," said Novak. "At Yale or Juilliard or American Conservatory Theater, for example, which are all great arts programs, students study acting, voice, speech, and movement—the nuts and bolts of how to put on a play. We teach all of that too, but we decided that

"It's amazing to think that as alums we are just one small group of performers, but every one of us has gone out into the world after our training with a commitment to making the world a better place." — KIKI ALLGEIER '03

to tell stories in such a way that people think about social issues in a new way. My PASJ major taught me that's my goal and also my responsibility as a performance artist."

Both alums are proof of the distinct impact USF's performing arts program is having. Just as the University of San Francisco's mission distinguishes it from other universities, the seven-year-old program's emphasis distinguishes it from most other undergraduate performing arts programs. Instead of focusing only on teaching students how to be good performers, USF's program also teaches students the power of performance art as an agent for change. This emphasis is reflected in the types of courses available, as well as in the coursework itself, and in the performances students put on and the often disenfranchised groups they reach out to in the process.

wasn't enough. There also needs to be a broader discussion of what it means to be an artist in the world today, how art can be a vehicle for social change, and even how creative work can play a part in one's personal commitment to creating a more humane and just society."

While relatively new to USF, this link between performing arts and a larger mission of engagement with civic issues is in fact as old as theater itself; "politics" and "drama" have been consonant since ancient Greece: so many kings, so many tragedies. Yet in more recent history, particularly in the United States, art and artists that acknowledge creative performance as a powerful and age-old tool for social transformation have become surprisingly scarce commodities. Broadway's *Legally Blonde: The Musical* or *The Little Mermaid* trump Bertolt Brecht hands down in American cultural consciousness.



Rob Kunkle

At USF, this merging of performance and social activism begins in the classroom. Even coursework in traditional performance areas is approached with an eye toward greater social, political, and even global implications. In voice classes, for example, a technical course taught by acting programs everywhere, students at USF “discuss the socio-economic impacts of speech, as well as learning the International Phonetic Alphabet and Edith Skinner’s techniques,” said Novak.

“Our students go out into various San Francisco communities and interview people with different accents and learn to replicate them,” he said. “Then they go back on the street and ask people to take a survey based on first impressions. They learn the basic but profound fact that there is a tremendous amount of bias against people based on the way they speak. And our students have learned this from the inside out.”

Adjunct professor and Bay Area actor and director Ken Sonkin said the program’s non-doctrinaire course offerings are its calling cards. “Where else can you take hip-hop theater, Latino and Chicano theater, jazz and social justice, (and) women’s music through the ages?”

Carlos Menchaca ’04 credits the program’s unusually eclectic curriculum with instilling in him “an understanding that performance can empower communities.”

“Every arts program will teach you Shakespeare and modern dance, but no one else will teach you to look at the world through, for example, the lens of a performance brigade in Latin America that uses theater as a way to educate the public about corrupted leaders and policies,” he said.

Menchaca’s experiences reaffirmed his commitment to political action, both within and outside the arts world. During his junior year, he served as student body president and since 2005 he has worked in big-city politics as capital budget and policy coordinator for Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz. “Theater isn’t all that different from politics. The success of an elected official requires a solid performer, a brilliant playwright, flawless technical team, and a whole lot of creativity.”

Other hallmarks of the program are the numerous productions students perform in collaboration with diverse communities outside USF.

Jwayad, for example, performed the lead role in the program’s 2001 production of Brecht’s *The Good Person of Setzuan*, a groundbreaking collaboration between USF actors and Soapstone Theater Company. All Soapstone members are ex-offenders and survivors of violent crime, brought together by the San Francisco Sheriff Department’s Resolve to Stop the Violence Project. Performances sold out at USF as well as in downtown San Francisco at the Lorraine

From Above:

The department marked the 25th anniversary of the discovery of AIDS with its 2006 production of *Angels in America* and a series of lectures on AIDS-related topics.

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Thirst for Change:

(l to r) Caitlin Beard and Zuzana Samcikova perform in *Choreographing Change*, a dance production last fall that included pieces about water and its scarcity.

To watch parts of the *Choreographing Change* dance production, go to: www.usfmagazine.com





Across the Ages: Dance Generators, an on-campus dance company with dancers aged 18-82, celebrates artistic movement at all ages.

Hansberry Theatre and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

“*The Good Person* was the most important show I ever did at USF,” Jwiyad said. “I not only grew as an actor, but I advanced as a director. Working with the Soapstone members I learned to have patience and an attentiveness to every possible kind of actor, and to appreciate their courage, lessons which have greatly helped my skills as a director.”

In 2002, students performed *Polaroid Stories*, a retelling of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, inspired in part by photographer Jim Goldberg’s photo essay of young runaways, “Raised by Wolves.” During the development and rehearsal of the production, student actors interviewed homeless youth in San Francisco and incorporated their personal stories into the play’s dialogue.

The program’s first commissioned play, *The Doll Hospital*, was inspired by a visit Roberto Varea, associate professor and program chair, took to the site of Troy (Turkey) in 2003. He came home envisioning a contemporary adaptation of *The Trojan Women*, Euripides’ great commentary on the Peloponnesian War and women’s resistance to violence. Christine Evans, an Australian playwright and a visiting scholar at USF at the time, wrote the script to address issues surrounding the war in Iraq.

Dance in Jails: Students teach movement and theater to women prisoners in San Francisco’s county jail through a course on performing arts and community exchange.



Instead of incorporating a Greek chorus, the performance used a chorus of people displaced by the war and performed by actors in El Teatro Jornalero!, a San Francisco theater group made up of Spanish-speaking immigrant day laborers.

The play enjoyed successful runs in 2004 at USF and at the Brava Theater Center in San Francisco’s Mission District. Now retitled *Trojan Barbie*, the play is being performed this fall by Harvard University’s American Repertory Theatre (which credits USF’s performing arts program as its originator).

“Being in San Francisco, such a progressive city of clashing viewpoints, gave us endless opportunities to learn from our environment,” said Shores Alaudini ’07. His first professional acting job, a role his sophomore year in the independent film *The Mission Movie*, about gentrification in San Francisco’s Mission District, was “deeply connected to issues of social justice, and so is my current role.” Alaudini plays a student in Berkeley Repertory Theater’s *Yellowjackets*, set at Berkeley High School in 1994 when racial tensions were running high, violence was common, and the issue of “tracking” students according to ability and potential was fiercely debated.

In 2003, students performed the courtroom drama *Execution of Justice* on the 25th anniversary of the assassinations of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in the United States. “This production really galvanized our whole department,” said Novak. The program held ancillary panel discussions with Mayor Willie Brown, State Senator John Burton, journalists who covered the slayings, and friends and relatives of Milk.

With its production of *Angels in America* two years ago, the department honored another solemn 25th anniversary—that of the discovery of AIDS. In conjunction with the play, which focuses on the AIDS crisis in the mid-1980s, the department hosted a series of lectures on AIDS-related topics, including the Catholic Church’s response to HIV/AIDS over the years. Various faculty and staff also spoke about their own personal and artistic responses to the disease.

“Our works are almost always contextualized in greater detail than most other performing arts departments,” said Novak. “We try to create work that will bridge other academic disciplines throughout the university.”

The program’s dance side also incorporates social justice aspects. Assistant professor Amie Dowling, for example, leads an on-campus intergenerational dance company, the Dance Generators, for dancers

ages 18 to 82. The troupe aims to celebrate diversity without false reverence for either youthful physicality or for aging. “Redefining audience expectations about who gets to be on stage is profound,” Dowling said. “There is something about showing a love duet between two 80-year-olds that in itself is radical and upends people’s thinking, gets those on and off stage to ask questions.”

Last fall’s *Choreographing Change* dance production touched on a number of personal, political, and social issues through movement. Part of a course in dance production, the performance sold out both evenings and, said Dowling, inspired students, faculty, and other audience members to discuss the issues it addressed, including concerns about water,



Phil Schermeister

and social consciousness, a belief that art and artists can change the world, one performance at a time,” said Varea.

Holding On: Senior Kendra Leingang rehearses as the wife of the title character in *Woyzeck*, a play that addresses issues surrounding inhumane treatment of the poor by the ruling classes. The department’s version this fall included connections with Guantanamo Bay.

“Every arts program will teach you Shakespeare and modern dance, but no one else will teach you to look at the world through, for example, the lens of a performance brigade in Latin America that uses theater as a way to educate the public about corrupted leaders and policies.” — CARLOS MENCHACA '04

its scarcity, depletion, contamination, and the inescapable need for it.

Dowling also teaches a class, “Performing Arts and Community Exchange,” that is a perennial favorite among performing arts and social justice students. Through the class, students teach movement, theater, creative writing, and improvisation to women prisoners in San Francisco’s county jail.

“Most of us had never interacted with inmates before, and we didn’t know what to expect,” said Courtney Stallings '07, who is in her first year in the graduate acting program at The New School for Drama in New York. “My perception of our justice system and our society changed during the course. I no longer looked at these inmates only as criminals, but as human beings who needed the human gift we brought: the chance to be heard. They taught me and my classmates much more than we could have ever taught them.”

Like Stallings, many graduates have gone on to the country’s finest performing arts master’s degree programs, and other alums are pursuing careers at the intersection of art and politics and social engagement.

That USF’s program can now have such an impact speaks to the changes it has undergone. Following budgetary crises in the 1970s, the university discon-

tinued its performing arts department, ushering in decades in which all arts majors—painters, musicians, and dancers alike—studied the same unspecialized curriculum. In 1999, a group of professors spearheaded a movement to create a separate and independent performing arts department, one based on a curriculum “with a political

“We are admittedly not for every student leaving high school with a newfound love of acting,” said Novak. “We are here for those who want to do something more meaningful with their craft. We want to expand our students’ notions of what performance really is.” [USF](#)

Courtroom Drama: Students perform a reading of *Execution of Justice* in 2003, the 25th anniversary of the assassination of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk.



Photo courtesy of PASJ department