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Menu

🏠 Home » 2025 » February » 20 » Outside the Classroom: Dalton Arts Teachers In the Spotlight Far From 89th Street



NEWS

Outside the Classroom: Dalton Arts Teachers In the Spotlight Far From 89th Street

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Theater and dance students at Dalton are lucky to have teachers who had vast and varied professional experiences in their fields that inform what and how they teach here. For example, did you know Stagecraft teacher Meg Zeder swatched green fabric for Elphaba in *Wicked*, or that dance teacher Tiffany Mellard starred in the national tour of *West Side Story*? This building contains giants! Each of the next three issues of the Daltonian will spotlight two Theater and Dance faculty members' history onstage and behind the scenes. First up: Dalton's Theater Tech faculty!

Meg Zeder (she/her)

Meg Zeder has worked for the past 15 years as the Middle and High School Theatre Arts and Design Teacher at Dalton. Before she became a teacher, however, Meg spent 30 years working professionally in theater in Chicago, Seattle and New York. She spent her undergraduate years training in movement-based theater, or as she describes it "clowning, mime, and other silliness." After that, she went to London to do a one-year Shakespearean acting program. After that program ended, Meg started a theater company with her friends in Chicago which was "really, really fun, but also totally exhausting and expensive. Chicago also has the world's worst weather," she added, "so I left."

Zeder had always known she wanted to work in the arts in some capacity. When she was in high school, she volunteered at a company that produced music festivals and concerts. By the time she was in college, she was working with the company over the summer on music festival production. They later hired her to do installation performance pieces. Once, she did an installation performance piece for a fundraising party at the Seattle Art Museum that involved Father Guido Sarducci (an SNL character) performing actual weddings on top of a 50-foot tall wedding cake (a mariachi band was on another tier of the cake). At the end of the event, they burned the entire cake.

If that wasn't hard enough to top, in her mid-20's, Zeder was cast as a ballet dancing chicken in a circus that was starting in Seattle, which she did for a couple of years. Simultaneously, she was doing prop design and assisting a magician, which she describes as "a whole bunch of stuff to keep [her] hand in" and trying to figure out how to make money while doing it. Eventually when she was about 28, she realized she didn't want to be a dancing chicken for her whole life, and that the circus "wasn't really going to be everything for" her. So she started looking for more serious, formal ways to make money from her passions.

She decided to go to NYU for graduate school in Design, and got into film from there (because all her friends were in the Film Department on a floor above her program). When she graduated, she immediately started working in feature films and in television. She also collaborated on small operas in New York and off-Broadway shows all while taking small jobs for Broadway shows (e.g., being a swatcher, a shopper, etc.). "There is a whole enormous pyramid of jobs that go into producing any show," Zeder explains "and I worked all of them. All of them." Eventually she started working in famed costume designer Barbara Matera's costume shop and built several of the costumes for *The Lion King*, *Mamma Mia* and *Wicked*. "I personally swatched every green fabric known to man," she says.

At the same time Zeder was working doing all of this exciting costume work, she was always working other odd jobs because "one of the anxiety-provoking things about being a freelance designer is you never know when your next job is going to come along so you always say yes to things." Never a dull moment in her professional life, Zeder later went on a break from the costume shop and picked up commercials here and there where she would "do clothes for five people and shoot for two days and then it would be done."

Around this time Zeder started working on a couple of feature films. "Nothing...really hit big but it was with friends I had worked with in grad school." With these friends, she then started working in television and was hired by Jack Morton Worldwide as an art designer to create sets on shows such as *The Daily Show*, *Inside the NFL*, and *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*. "She would get "a stupid amount of money" to decorate a set, which she thought was a really great opportunity. "I worked with a bunch of smart, interesting people but the call times were terrible," (e.g., 3:00 am for a morning show).

She had a small child at the time and was looking for a job with a more family-friendly schedule when a friend who worked at Dalton recommended she apply there. And the rest is history! Zeder has been building sets and teaching kids all about theater tech for 15 years and is a beloved and indispensable member of the department.

Zeder took many lessons from her professional work that she applied for as a teacher at Dalton. This is easy to do, she explains, because there are so many similarities between a theater department at a school and the army of people who work together to create professional shows. "The process at Dalton where a class of middle schoolers and a class of high schoolers plus numerous adults work for weeks and weeks to make the set and costumes for a show is just a microcosm of what happens on Broadway or on a TV set," she explains.

All her professional work has made her ambitious for her students and optimistic about what they can achieve. "I have really high hopes and expectations for what kids are able to do," she says, "because I know from my own personal journey that the more you practice and try the better you get at something and it is always a work of faith, hope and imagination to mount any big production. And I think the more enthusiasm and positive support you can put behind that the better result you get. Our belief is what wills these things into existence. Just like an actor wills their character into existence, we will set and costumes into existence. And the more generously you can approach that the better the result."

Zeder's career before Dalton taught her to say "yes" to as many things as possible, and she wants to impart this advice to her students: "You can't know what your full journey is going to look like so one of the characteristics of my career is saying yes to things as often as I can. And to keep your eyes open for what's out there because it's almost never what you think it is going to be, but sometimes it's totally amazing. I did not set out to be in a circus. I did not set out to work in television, but both of those opportunities changed my perspective on what theater is, what television is, and so just being open to what the world is offering you is fantastic. Still have vision, move forward and whatever, but also just sort of keep your eyes open and let good, happy accidents happen to you."

Al Rosenberg (they/them)

Al Rosenberg started working at Dalton in 2023, but 2025-26 is their first year as a full-time faculty member at Dalton, working as the Theater Tech Department's Costume Shop Manager & Wardrobe Supervisor. They studied Design and Production at Fordham and went on to have a wealth of experience working in theater tech (specifically costumes) before they arrived at Dalton. They worked on everything from high-profile Off-Broadway shows to theater cruises.

One of their favorite productions they worked on was *Between the Lines* at Second Stage (a prominent Off-Broadway theater). They describe it as one of "the most exciting and highest-budget productions I've worked on." It premiered right after the COVID lockdown and so every cast member had Covid multiple times. As a result, new people were playing different roles every night. Rosenberg remembers scrambling to Macy's to find alternate clothing options for actors playing new roles every day. Other chaotic memories of this show include the stage flooding three times, having to call the fire department because a wig head got stuck in the elevator, and more. Above all, one of the biggest things they remember from this experience is the bonds and connections they made with other artists.

Another notable experience that Rosenberg has had working in theater tech was working on a theater cruise for a month. Through this cruise, they spent about a month in southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Dubai, Sri Lanka and Thailand). Because the cruise guests were on the ship for nine months, the entertainment had to be refreshed every month to keep audiences engaged. When Rosenberg boarded, they had to dispose of old costumes and fit performers for new ones. Rosenberg also had to get acclimatized to the new situation on board quickly. For example, though the costume shop was under the stage, they would wait in the stairwell of the boat whenever possible to avoid getting seasick (because the lower you are the more nauseated you get). The best part of this experience for Rosenberg was seeing all the new places the cruise went. They went to a 7-11 in all the countries they passed, and a McDonalds in Sri Lanka.

Similar to Zeder, Rosenberg also takes a lot of lessons from their professional career into their work at Dalton. One of the biggest skills they bring into their work at Dalton is organization. A lot of wardrobe supervising is organization," Rosenberg explains. "Organization and also putting clothes on and taking them off, so I am pretty good at knowing how clothes go on. Also, I know that for some reason when people are putting on costumes, they somehow forget how pants work and how shirts work and how jackets work. It just is what happens. People

are putting their arms through leg holes. So, I think I have a pretty unique perspective on how I can make [costumes] as easy as possible to put on. For adults, but also now for younger people. Middle school is different from high school, which is different from adults. Maybe middle school can handle a zipper and maybe the high school can handle Velcro without it being crazy-looking. The middle school can't always do this!"

Rosenberg uses their expertise in organization not only for efficient costume design at Dalton, but also for the process of reorganizing the costume shop, which they have been doing steadily in breaks between shows. They want to make sure that the costume shop is "an actual functional space. The first three or four weeks of the school year the room was beautiful and perfect. It was really special."

Part of this project included the Dalton community! This year, the Theater Department at Dalton did their first costume shop giveaway, which was an event where anyone interested was welcome to take unwanted former costumes. It was a similar event to Dalton thrift, but perhaps with more of a vintage look to all the clothing, as some of it has been in our theater for decades. Rosenberg would love to make this costume shop giveaway a regular occurrence, so everyone should keep their eyes peeled for announcements of upcoming events similar to the first one earlier this year. Regarding the costumes at Dalton, Rosenberg says: "we are so lucky to have such a great stock, but space is a hot commodity and we are always buying new things. This is especially why I love to do the rentals because I would love for us to be a little more eco-friendly, which is again a work in progress."

Another thing Rosenberg experienced in the "real world" of theater that helps them in their job at Dalton is managing big personalities. "Bigger even than teenagers I would say! Compared to some of the performers I worked with, you guys are easy!"

Finally, Rosenberg mentioned that the most important thing they bring to Dalton from their professional career is scrappiness. From the highest budget Broadway show to a showcase in a friend's basement, every performance requires scrappiness. "A lot of it is just figuring it out. That doesn't go away when you have money. It's still just figuring it out a lot of the time," they explain.

Dalton students are extremely privileged to be learning from professionals so willing to bring to their work not only enthusiasm but also incredible experience — from 50-foot wedding cakes, to ballet circus acts, to a cruise of southeast Asia to flooded theaters. Thank you, Meg and AI for sharing your stories!

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