

THE DALTONIAN

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NEWS

Outside the Classroom: Dalton Arts Teachers in the Spotlight Far From 89th Street (Part 3)

MAY 19, 2025 BY MIKA HIGGINS-WOO

Performing arts students at Dalton have the privilege of learning from many talented teachers who currently have, or have had in the past, professional artistic careers that inform their teaching. In 2026, *The Daltonian* has featured articles about two such teachers in every issue. In Issue 4, *Daltonian* readers learned about Theater Arts & Design Teacher Meg Zeder and Costume Shop Manager & Wardrobe Supervisor Al Rosenberg. Last issue, *The Daltonian* highlighted Associate Director of College Counseling Sai Somboon and Dance Teacher Tiffany Mellard. This issue, *The Daltonian* is shining the spotlight on two former actors on the faculty. Read on to learn more about the exciting theater careers both High School English Department Chair Matthew Lillo and Theater Department Chair Rory Boyd had before coming to Dalton.

Rory Boyd

Many high school students first met Rory Boyd in sixth grade when he directed them in Greek Fest. Some have subsequently taken a theater or stage combat class from him, or been in or seen his shows in the Martin Theater (each year he directs either the mainstage musical or a play in the Play Festival). What most don't know about Boyd, however, is that he had a vibrant career as an actor in musical theater and straight plays before coming to teach at Dalton.

Boyd was bitten by "the bug" early in his life. As a child, he performed in many plays and musicals at the Byre Theatre, a theater operated by the University of St. Andrews near his home in Scotland. He was in a diverse variety of productions there, such as *Honk!*, *A Christmas Carol* and *The Secret Garden*. Boyd describes these early theater experiences as his unique way of "receiving a theater education without realizing it." He explains that in addition to learning the ins and outs of how theater productions work during these shows, he was falling in love with the other benefits of working in the theater industry; he became "basically obsessed with the problem-solving, camaraderie, and artistry that goes into a show coming together, particularly dissecting moments that are powerful or moving for an audience."

Boyd's first traditional theater training was in the United States when he got his MFA in Musical Theater from Boston Conservatory. After receiving this degree, he worked in Boston

and more broadly in New England. Boyd's favorite shows he worked on during that time were *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Fantasticks*, and *Hamlet* (a production in which he played the organ as Hamlet's father's ghost). He then moved to New York City and was cast in many shows that traveled to other major cities in America, most commonly Washington, D.C. The last production he was in before he came to Dalton was *Newsies*, a show that he went on to direct in the Dalton middle school in 2024.

Boyd carries a lot of wisdom from his work as a professional actor into his current work at Dalton. For example, Boyd feels that his experience as an actor working with directors has greatly informed the "not incredibly authoritarian" approach he takes towards directing the middle and high schoolers. Boyd mentions that when he was working professionally, he was "most impressed by the way that [his directors] would offer up a palette for the actors to come and invest themselves into, and to pick up and become/find their own agency within it," and wanted to emulate that spirit at Dalton.

Boyd also brings to Dalton his idea that every production he puts up should not just be an unchanged iteration of the show he's chosen to produce, but rather should contain an innovation that makes it clear to the audience why a particular story *needs* to be told at this moment. For instance, his recent production of *Into the Woods* was set in New York City in the current day because he wanted to make the story relevant and emphasize that it is vital no matter what time period it is set in. He remarks: "If we don't ask ourselves [the question of why this show now?] and come up with an answer that we can stand by, we find ourselves subjugating our own artistic journey to the original. And then what we're doing is simply following an instruction manual. That to me is not quite as artistic an endeavor as we can aspire to and not nearly as inspiring for the students to take on." Boyd developed this director's perspective through being an actor and admiring how his directors implemented the same theory into their work. He feels that his past performances "weren't simply for ticket sales or to entertain audiences," but were rather for the audience to experience something that will make them really think. Boyd hopes to carry that idea into his time at Dalton as well.

In addition to adding new ideas to older work, Boyd is also interested in producing musicals in the Plays Festival which has traditionally only included straight plays. With each passing year he makes more of a mark on Dalton's Theater Department. You can next see his work in winter 2027 when he will direct the high school musical.

Matthew Lillo

Many know Matthew Lillo from his enthusiastic classroom discussions, his fascinating theater-centered classes (the 10th grade Poetry and Drama course and his senior elective focused on musical theater history), or his occasional appearance at an assembly in the barbershop quartet composed of Dalton faculty. Like Boyd, however, Lillo had a vibrant professional career in theater before he joined the English team at Dalton.

After receiving a BFA in Musical Theater from Baldwin Wallace University, Lillo moved to New York City to begin auditioning for professional theater jobs. He got an agent from a showcase he did in his final year of college, and with that agency, booked some national tours. Between 2003 and 2010, Lillo performed with various American Shakespeare companies as well as some regional musical theater shows. Although he performed in some “glitzy productions” throughout his time as a professional actor, Lillo still cites his favorite performance as one he did in his senior year of college: *Equus*.

After performing in a variety of shows regionally and nationally, Lillo founded a theater company called Fifth Floor Walkup with three other people in the industry — a writer and two actors, one of whom is a well-known Broadway actor, Eric Peterson. In addition to founding this company, Lillo also managed a separate off-Broadway company for two years. After working with that company, Lillo realized that he “was actually much more interested in talking about theater than in the doing of. And that to me was the signal of ‘oh! It’s time to go to grad school and figure out how we’re going to pursue that.’”

One of the major ideas that Lillo takes from his career as an actor and applies to his work at Dalton is understanding his “lane,” and helping students do the same. Working as an actor, he explains, it is imperative that you understand what you bring to the table. Whether you are an ingenue or a villain, understanding yourself and your “type” before going out to share that with casting directors in auditions is key. For Lillo, once he understood that he was the “interesting best friend,” he began to get more and more work “because everyone needs an interesting best friend and most young performers are waiting for their turn to be the next Idina Menzel or Josh Henry or Kristin Chenoweth, and on and on we go,” but few will get the chance to do this. Lillo brings this wisdom and self-knowledge to his students and

encourages them to understand themselves and bring their strengths to the table, not only in theater settings but also in the classroom and beyond.

Another valuable piece of knowledge Lillo brings to his work at Dalton from his previous acting career is his appreciation for collaboration. As he puts it, "theater and film and TV are inescapably some of the most collaborative fields of the arts in general. It takes an army to raise a play." Lillo brings his experience with and appreciation for this collaborative dynamic into his philosophy as a teacher at Dalton, fostering in students a love of discussion and participation, as well as helping students to understand and celebrate what they bring to a team. He likes to ask his students, "What are you good at, fam? Celebrate it, let's own it!"

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