

Josh Gad Interview

Class of 1999

How did you make it from your life at NSU University School to where you are today in your career?

Gad: Well, my life at NSU University School, specifically under the guidance of the Fine Arts Department—at that time, led by a man named Brent Pesola and also Tom Gress and Charlie Redler—really pushed me toward my love of drama and gave me incredible opportunities to hone my craft. Speech and debate was something that I gravitated to in about seventh grade, and Danny Swerdlow, who was a few years ahead of me and doing exceptionally well in forensics, was one of the major influences in pushing me in that direction. It became a passion and defined me for the better part of four years. On top of that, we had, and continue to have, an exceptional theatre department. So, every opportunity to be on a stage from playing Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof to being Nicely-Nicely Johnson in Guys and Dolls gave me the love, the passion, the work ethic that would then translate into my career. I knew by late junior year that my preference for further education was going to be in a more intensive fine arts program, a conservatory. The guidance counselors there really helped me identify the best schools for my needs, and that's how I wound up finding and ultimately going to Carnegie Mellon Drama.

So you're a writer, as well. You write with USA Today and The Huffington Post. How has your life and your education prepared you to do more than theatre and acting?

Gad: That's 100 percent USchool. And, I'll tell you why. Because I went to a conservatory program, I didn't take liberal arts courses that would allow me to continue my literary studies or take an English focus in college. As I sort of evolve in my career, writing becomes more and more of a central focus of my goals, and eventually I hope to write a book. I continue—even in writing screenplays—to utilize the skills that the amazing teachers that I had at USchool gave me.

If you could send one message to the students of NSU University School and the alumni about the community that you feel here, what would that be?

Gad: I would say that if success is a measure of all of the elements that came before that pivotal moment where you sort of cross the threshold from I can do it to I am doing it, the seeds of that success were all grown during my time at NSU University School. For that, I am forever grateful. And, I believe that is an amalgamation of not only the amazing education that I was given but also the amazing resources that I was given. Going back to the school, I saw that all of those resources have tripled in some cases. I am fortunate enough to go to different schools all over the country, and I have to tell you, USchool for me is so far beyond most, if not all of those other facilities. I think it comes down to the love that everybody has, who is either currently there or has been there. There is a deep, profound respect because we all know that USchool has launched so many of our lives. That's the greatest element. It continues to build on the legacy that has come before. I'm in awe of the well-roundedness of a USchool alum; and now more than ever, the opportunity to do anything that you want to do coming out of that school is available. I think that colleges and beyond look at USchool and say, "That's an incredible program."

With moments in your career and in your life when you feel like you may not be nearly as successful as you were at other times, how do you take those moments and still continue and grow and develop and become even more successful?

Gad: Look, I graduated college feeling like I was on top of the world, but the truth was, it was really rough. Three consecutive years of non-stop rejection is enough to lead you to the conclusion that maybe it's just not going to happen. And, I had sort of given up. I was like, "I'm not cut out for this." I was going to go to law school, and my mom sat me down and said, "I'm disappointed in you," and she started crying. I said, "Why are you disappointed? I would think that you'd be thrilled that I'm actually going to do something with myself." And she said, "I'm disappointed in you because you spent 16 years dreaming of being an actor and only 3 years actually trying to carry out that dream, and I think that's an unfair ratio." How can you argue with that? About a week later, I auditioned out of the blue for this Broadway musical called The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, and as fate would have it, I landed the gig. And it changed my life.