

1 The King and I  
2 The Philadelphia Story  
3–10 Seussical Jr.



**I**n the School's illustrious 65-year history, the performing arts have always had a huge role to play at ASL. From the early days when Mildred Buhler, mother of Fred Buhler '58, led square-dancing classes for ASL's male-only population, alongside female partners from local schools, the need to break out of the classroom to flex acting muscles, sing like nobody is listening, and dance the light fantastic have been urges generations of ASLers have found hard to resist.

After speaking to a number of alumni directors, we learn that by far and away the most popular memories for returning ASL alumni, whether from the Class of 1965 or 2015, are those from the productions they starred in, the choir concerts they performed in, and the friends they made along the way.

Nothing resonates with ASL students more than taking to the stage.

Performing Arts Department Head Bronwyn Harrison P '25 '29 (ASL 2001–present) tells of a flourishing program today in the performing arts across the divisions. "I'm thrilled to report that we have more students than ever setting off on Music Tour this year. And our drama classes are attracting students K–12—and not just those who want to act. Drama workshops with London-based group 'Perform' are highlights for all grade levels."

On the subject of dance, Bronwyn continues, "Our lower school students recently welcomed an expert on Victorian dance as part of their unit on all things Victorian. An African dancer spent time with middle schoolers this year, and a Bollywood specialist shared her skills with middle and high school students. We seize every opportunity to bring the performing arts to life at ASL."

The School's performing arts history is awash with faculty members whose fervor for their subjects transformed the lives of the students in their charge, and helped fan the flames of lifelong passions in those who took their classes.

Jan Mikrut (ASL 1974–98), former director of theater arts at ASL—now working at the Spence School in New York City—explains the philosophy behind the program during her tenure. "Theater is an organic art that requires the cooperation, creativity and skills of an ensemble. Theater skills and appreciation were developed by students' active involvement in the design and building of all aspects of a production. Learning by doing."

In her 24 years at the School, Jan directed countless productions with ASL students. She has warm recollections of many performances, but standouts for her are Rodgers & Hammerstein's *The King and I*, staged in ASL's Annenberg Theater in 1979; *The Philadelphia Story* by Philip Barry, from 1984; and a unique performance of *Jason and the Golden*

*Fleece* by Dominique Vaughan, in 1985. Jan explains, "During a trip to Vienna, we were invited to give an impromptu rendition of 'Jason' in St. Stephen's Square in thick, falling snow!"

According to Jan, *The King and I* was a magical production. "The cast did an incredible job, and the teachers involved worked well together and with the students. **Audrey Moskowitz (ASL 1971–96)** created outstanding costumes, **Ray Ruehl (ASL 1978–93)** designed the sets, **Mary Miller '79** developed the choreography, and **Mary Louise Barker (ASL 1977–2003)** organized the music. We did it because we loved it!"

Jan remembers an amusing moment during a very romantic scene in *The Philadelphia Story*, featuring Solange Weinberger '85, now MS languages teacher **Solange Kidd (ASL 1996–present)**. "Beautifully staged in moonlight and formal wear, the ingénue, played by Solange, floated across the stage in a stunning black evening gown—with a three-foot-long piece of loo paper clinging to her dress with static electricity!" A great lesson was learned in checking for costume glitches.

Middle school drama teacher **Stan Ratoff (ASL 1982–present)** has amassed a wealth of experience since he joined the School in 1982, making him one of the longest-serving current faculty members. To Stan, drama is a vehicle for developing self-expression,





1-3 Midsummer Night's Dream  
4-6 The Picture of Dorian Gray  
7 Avenue Q  
8-18 The Drowsy Chaperone

Overleaf:  
1-6 Winter concerts in the School Center  
7 A Light in the Darkness  
8-10 Prettiest Friend  
11-14 Kevin Spacey on set of West Side Story



“Although it appears in many ways to be a comedy, audience members find themselves juxtaposed with accepted norms. This had a deep and profound effect. The challenge for the students was to raise their skills to unify the puppet and their character to be seen as one, which is not an easy thing to do. The students managed it to incredible effect.”

self-awareness, social skills and communication. He adds, “At the same time, students learn how to play. And through playing they learn stage presence and acquire story-telling skills, which is a bonus in other areas of their education. It’s important to afford them space to explore and ‘let go.’ Ultimately, they learn to work together.”

It’s a tough call to ask Stan for favorite productions, but after some consideration, he cites *Seussical Jr.* by Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s*

*Dream* and *Lockers* by Jeremy Kruse.

*Lockers* brings back happy memories for Stan because of the unusual staging. “The actors promenaded around the School, delivering monologues and moving on. And it had such a relevant message for middle school kids. It was ground-breaking and very well received.”

Stan recalls *Seussical Jr.* as a fun and creative production. He says, “The students rose to the challenge and convincingly created the fantastical world of Seuss at ASL. There was a wonderful atmosphere on stage.”

Like any Shakespearean play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* presents its trials, but the middle school actors were undaunted. Stan explains, “I was thrilled that the students delivered such a magical, humorous performance. The cast was very strong, and so was the support we received for set and costume design. I think the forces came together.”

He continues, “Of course, former HS English teacher **Keith Millman (ASL 1974–2014)** was delivering Shakespeare in the hallways long before our performance!” And more than rumor has it that **Don Jesse (ASL 1964–91)** was

bringing to life the Bard of Avon in his classroom well before Keith!

High school drama teacher **Buck Herron (ASL 1998–present)** has directed hundreds of ASL students in his career. Singular projects for Buck are *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman, *Avenue Q* by Jeff Whitty, *Antigone* by Sophocles, *The Drowsy Chaperone* by Bob Martin and Don McKellar, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde/Neil Bartlett.

*Antigone* was Buck’s first production at ASL after taking over from Jan Mikrut at the helm of the drama department. The text was being studied in an English class and the crossover appealed to the newly appointed drama teacher. Buck says, “I love the play’s symbolism. Our production was ambitious and the scale of it was enormous. I remember we had a drawbridge and a Greek chorus in tableau.” And it’s said that former English teacher **Mimi Flood (ASL 1997–2010)** shed a tear in appreciation.

Buck remembers *The Laramie Project* and the electricity of the production. “We integrated film into the piece, which was very powerful. It gave the sensation of watching the action in real time, which added such gravitas to an already emotive story.”

Of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Buck comments, “The material was so edgy, I had to do it!” Having seen the play at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Buck was charmed by the piece. It transpired that the production would not move on to the National Theatre, as planned, and so Buck approached the play’s adaptor, Neil Bartlett, to ask if he could bring it to ASL. Bartlett readily agreed and the rest is history. “The adaptation reads like a film script—there are more than 27 scene changes,” admits Buck. “We used lights and sound and minimal furniture, and it worked!” The play’s shocking conclusion made this a truly memorable piece of theater in ASL’s celebrated back catalogue.

Of the more recent productions, Buck holds great affection for *Avenue Q*, a play that saw puppets play a major role in the success of the performance for the first time at ASL. Buck says, “Although it appears in many ways to be a comedy, audience members find themselves juxtaposed with accepted norms. This had a deep and profound effect. The challenge for the students was to raise their skills to unify the puppet and their character to be seen as one, which is not an easy thing to do. The students managed it to incredible effect.”





# Performance at ASL today

Today, the performing arts are just as important a part of the curriculum as they ever were. The departmental philosophy is to cultivate creativity and expression by fostering the development of outstanding performance skills and aesthetic awareness in all our students through high-quality experiences in dance, music and drama.

Our youngest students enjoy an experiential program, involving singing, playing, listening, creating and moving, with a focus on participation, enjoyment and creative expression. At the same time, an understanding of the role of music in world culture is encouraged.

Having worked their way up from recorders to ukuleles in the lower grades, the middle school program is designed to develop students' understanding through ensemble participation. Students work on developing instrumental and vocal technique, reading music fluently, and becoming comfortable and confident performers. There is a strong emphasis on rehearsal skills and teamwork.

In the High School, it's time to specialize. Offering a depth of curriculum rarely seen outside of specialist performing arts schools, ASL's program

encourages meaningful artistic expression, while providing a hands-on approach in drama, music and dance, and adding to the richness of students overall educational experience.

At ASL, the study of dance addresses the use of the human body and physical movement as an expressive art form. Students explore a wide variety of genres and styles during their studies—from hip-hop to ballet. They learn through observation, physical expression and choreography.

Music for our older students brings the much-anticipated reward of the long-established annual Music Tour; this year, our students are off to Bonn, to spread the wealth of what they have learned with audiences in Germany. Former tours have taken students to Paris, Madrid, Athens, The Hague and Prague.

Students also participate in a number of International Honor festivals, including Band, Choir, Jazz Band, and Orchestra, which bring together students of exceptional ability from around the globe for several days of rehearsal and performance.

Only recently, the School played host to the AMIS International Boys' Honor Choir. The end-of-festival concert took place on Saturday, 17 October, after three days of rehearsal. The School Center resounded to the swell of nearly 100 voices raised in song at an event that

packed our biggest performance space to the rafters. AMIS (Association for Music in International Schools) was founded by former ASL teachers **Dick and Georgia Bassett (Dick, ASL 1974–96; Georgia, ASL 1974–95)** and is now directed by another former ASLer **Keith Montgomery (ASL 2001–14)**.

As they enter high school, our drama students mature in discipline through technical skills that foster deeper expression in voice and movement, while tapping into the emphatic inner life of creating character. Students practice their art by acting in scenes and full dramatic works. Scene work using film scripts lends a modern approach, as students examine content and technique appropriate to this media, resulting in heightened communicative and overall presentational skills.

The community looks forward to the upcoming fall production of *High School Musical*, directed by Buck Herron. And in February, middle school students will come together for an eagerly anticipated performance of Shakespeare's much-loved tale of star-crossed lovers, *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Stan Ratoff.

# Leading lights in London

No article about the performing arts at ASL would be complete without mentioning the perennial star of the show, London itself—arguably, the arts capital of the world. Our students, like those who came before and those who will come after, enjoy the richness that London has to offer.

As Buck Herron wrote recently, “London provides a rich, dynamic and creative cultural education for our students.” He acknowledges that our capital offers an abundance of experiences in drama, dance and music.

In 2003, Buck remembers 10 of our female students working as the angelic voices in *Bright Young Things* with director Stephen Fry.

In 2008, as a result of the successful *Fulfilling Great Expectations* capital campaign, the restructured Annenberg Theater was unveiled as the new School Center for Education and the Arts, complete with improved acoustics, a state-of-the-art sound and lighting system, and seating for 450. The Old Vic's creative director at the time, Academy Award-winner Kevin Spacey, addressed the community on the set of *West Side Story* as part of the celebrations!

**Stephan Potchatek's (ASL 2004–present)** Dramatic Literature and Performance class attended several plays as part of their coursework, including Sam Shepard's *True West* at the Tricycle Theatre, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* at the Barbican Centre, and *Electra* at the Old Vic.

Buck is keen to emphasize the benefits of bringing London's finest to Waverley Place. He says, “Over the years, we have invited guest practitioners to teach master classes, including Jonathan Leverett, stage combat instructor at RADA and the Royal Shakespeare Company; Bruno Zeni, Commedia dell Arte artist from the Royal Opera House; and West-End playwright Leo Richardson, who wrote a play in collaboration with ASL actors.” The outcome from the latter was the play *Prettiest Friend*, a moving piece of theater about the complicated nature of friendships within a high school.

He continues, “Our actors learned about both the acting and writing components of a production.”

Buck is thrilled to share that Leo will return to ASL in spring 2016 to work with a group of students to build another play from the ground up. The students and the playwright have met already and plans are underway for what promises to be a must-see production during semester II.

This summer, **Michael Benz '00**, who cut his acting teeth in *A Circus*, directed by Stan Ratoff, played a lead role in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being*

*Earnest* at the Vaudeville Theatre. He completed the run in early November, making an appearance at an alumni and parent of alumni celebration at a nearby venue on the last night. And comedian and author **Elna Baker '00** returned in June to deliver the commencement address to the Class of 2015 at Central Hall Westminster.

Buck continues, “Regularly, opportunities arise in our own back yard. In November 2014, our St. John's Wood neighbor, Eva Schloss, Auschwitz survivor, author and stepsister of Anne Frank, spoke to our middle and high school students after each performance of *A Light in the Darkness*, a play based on her life. The chance to hear Eva's story as one of the last Auschwitz survivors living in Britain and the final link to Anne Frank, was a valuable experience—and some 900 of our students saw the production. Hopefully, those same students will share their memories of the encounter with their own children some day, and keep Eva's hope for a peaceful world alive for another generation.”

At ASL, we continue to explore the power of art in students' lives, examining our humanity through our experiences and effecting change in others and ourselves. London is the perfect place for us to pursue this discovery. ■