



WHAT ART CAN BE

A GLIMPSE OF A.C.T.'S SAN FRANCISCO SEMESTER

BY SIMON HODGSON

When actor Justin Genna looked at the theater training of the San Francisco Semester (SFS), he saw a trial run. As a former dancer with Milwaukee Ballet, Genna hankered for a different type of performing, but he wasn't certain about committing to three years of MFA classes. "My mother always said, 'Take it for a test drive before you buy it.' If you're interested in professional-level MFA acting training, the SFS is that test drive. Afterward I bought the car!" Genna was so convinced by the 15-week semester at A.C.T. that he followed up by completing an MFA here. One year after leaving A.C.T., Genna is appearing at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater in New York in the premiere of *Novenas for a Lost Hospital*.

SFS students come from all over the country and beyond (including France, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Argentina) to learn the fundamental technical aspects of being onstage. Those classes—encompassing voice, dialect, text work, acting, and physical theater—become the foundation for two additional layers of imaginative training. The first is a class on devising work together. "When I sit down with the students at the end of the semester, that's the class they rave about," says Conservatory Director Melissa

Smith. "The sense of collaboration, of learning how to be comfortable with not knowing, and of falling in love with the process—that's the essence of acting."

The second spark for actors' creativity is the Cultural Landscapes class, in which SFS students experience other extraordinary art forms around the Bay Area. This fall, the current class will interact with dancers from the Smuin Ballet, conjurers at the Marrakech Magic Theater, and musicians from SF Jazz at their performance in the Gothic nave of Grace Cathedral. "We want to excite their imaginations when they create a role," says Director of Academic Affairs Jack Sharrar, who teaches this class. "These performances open them up to the possibility of what art can be, and how this art could apply to their training as actors."

For Associate Conservatory Director Peter J. Kuo, who directs the study-away program, the SFS enables aspiring performers to answer one big question: Is acting something to which they truly want to make a commitment? "The SFS is like a gift of time," says Kuo. "When you're an undergraduate,

you're always taking other classes outside your major. In the SFS, however, you're solely dedicated to your craft as an artist, but with a whole semester, student actors have time to learn and time to process."

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—SFS alum Taylor Iman Jones**

That deep dive was what brought actor Afua Busia to A.C.T. in 2015. As a theater-loving environmental science major from American University in Washington, DC, Busia harbored dreams of acting professionally. "I minored in theater and I'd grown to love performing," she says, "but I wasn't sure if a career as an actor was what I wanted. The SFS was like a theater sampler that left me wanting more. Being able to study a range of theater styles in SFS and learn from such wonderful teachers is what took my love for performance forward and made me eager to learn more." Busia graduated from our MFA Program in May and is currently auditioning and preparing for a move to New York.

While several young actors have graduated from the SFS to A.C.T.'s MFA Program, Taylor Iman Jones made the jump to the professional stage almost immediately. A year after completing her SFS training, Jones was cast in A.C.T.'s 2016 hit production of *The Unfortunates*. Three years on, she is currently starring in *Scotland, PA*, a new musical at New York's Roundabout Theatre Company. "The San Francisco Semester gave me the tools I needed to take my career to the next level," she says, "and it will always be a large part of my foundation and of the performer I am today." ■

To discover more about the San Francisco Semester, its curriculum, classes, and faculty coaches, visit act-sf.org/sfs.

OPPOSITE PAGE San Francisco Semester students working on their theatrical techniques. Photo by Alessandra Mello.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP SFS and MFA Program alum Justin Genna (class of 2018) in the 2015 Creative Movement Project. Photo by Alessandra Mello; Associate Conservatory Director Peter J. Kuo working with SFS students. Photo by Beryl Baker; Actors James Carpenter, Catherine Castellanos, MFA Program actor Adam Donovan (class of 2019), and SFS and MFA Program graduate Afua Busia (class of 2019) in A.C.T.'s production of *A Christmas Carol* (2018). Photo by Kevin Berne.

