ARTS

"I can't fall in love without you, please don't fall in love without me"
I CAN'T FALL IN LOVE WITHOUT YOU ZARA LARSSON

Seniors look back on four years in Yale's undergraduate theater scene

BY SOFIA GAVIRIA PARTOW
STAFF REPORTER

As the class of 2026 approaches graduation, seniors involved in Yale's theater scene are reflecting on the communities they have built with fellow performers, professors and audiences during college.

In interviews with the News, three seniors highlighted a profound sense of intimacy developed through working with the same group of actors and directors for various productions, as well as their relationships with a tuned-in audience and the influence of coursework across departments.

"I think that the theater world can be super insular here, which is one of its biggest strengths," Emiliano Cáceres Manzano '26, who is known for his credits directing "Spring Awakening," "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," and other musicals and plays, said.

Cáceres Manzano, who is double majoring in Film and Media Studies and English, described the long-term collaborative relationships he has built within the theater community as some of the most meaningful parts of his time at Yale.

Cáceres Manzano said he first became interested in theater through a series of poetry recitation contests he participated in as an elementary school student living in Mexico. That led him to acting, which in turn opened his eyes to directing as a means by which to shape the environment in which theater is created, he said.

"One of my favorite quotes about acting is that 'acting is being private in public,'" Cáceres Manzano said. "I recently just acted a little bit in a friend's web series, and it reminded me of how vulnerable it can be. I think it's important as a director to understand what you're asking your actors to do."

He also shared how his academic studies, particularly in the English major, have grounded his work as a director, a discipline that he described as ultimately founded in text analysis. He added that academic exploration beyond theater has allowed him to bring new perspectives and creativity to his shows.

For Hannah Kurczeski '26 — who also spends a lot of her time outside of class working on student productions, including playing Sally Bowles in "Cabaret" — the decision to major in Theater, Dance and Performance Studies was an easy one.

"This is what I love to do and is what I ideally would love to spend all of my time doing, always," Kurczeski said. "There's no place I'd rather be than rehearsal."

Kurczeski mentioned Annette Jolles, Daniel Egan and Sohina Sidhu as three transformative professors she's had during her time at Yale. The three professors are all in the Theater, Dance and Performance Studies department.

Kurczeski reflected on a piece of advice she had received from Jolles, who is also her thesis advisor. They had been speaking about the tendency to overintellectualize what's happening on stage, which can result from studying theater in an academic setting.

"You always need to be serving the story and serving the work," Kurczeski said, referencing Jolles' advice. "At the end of the day, you have to trust yourself — that all the invisible prep work that you did, trust that it is there for you and it has got your back, and just be in the moment."

Zaida Rio Polanco '26, who is majoring in Environmental Studies but has also taken several theater courses at Yale, recalled another class — "Acting Shakespeare," taught by Daniela Varon — that she said fundamentally changed her approach to acting.

The class introduced Polanco to a concept of three macrocosms into which the body is separated: the head as the heavenly space, the gut as what grounds an actor and, finally, the bowel region. Varon explained to the class that acting in Shakespearean plays requires one to locate different lines in the various regions of the body, according to Polanco.

"It's those distinctions within any piece of work that I've worked on since then that have made a difference in how I approach new dialogue," Polanco said.

Polanco highlighted that the distinctions have been particularly useful to her in conceptualizing darker roles she has played in theater at Yale, including the character Anita in a production of "West Side Story," which was directed by Cáceres Manzano two years ago.

Both Polanco and Cáceres Manzano described "West Side Story" as one of the most meaningful projects they've worked on at Yale. For Polanco, it allowed her to combine the three things she loves most — singing, dancing and acting — and fall back in love with theater. For Cáceres Manzano, the show taught him how to create theater both logistically and artistically.

"The high stakes of, 'Oh my God, I don't know if we're gonna be able to pull this off,' I think created an experience that was unlike any other," Cáceres Manzano said. "Everybody was really, really invested in it. Even the audiences were invested."

Cáceres Manzano also underscored the power of audiences, adding that one of the most special parts of doing theater at Yale is having access to audiences who are deeply interested in performance and art.

Kurczeski also said that the University's support of artistic projects through Creative and Performing Arts grants and other programs means that the creative possibilities at Yale are endless for actors and directors alike.

"It grants students so much agency, especially at Yale, that I think frankly would blow the minds of people who study theater at more traditional BFA schools," Kurczeski said. "If you can dream it, you can do it. You can truly make anything happen, and you don't need to wait for someone else to make it happen for you."

Kurczeski, Cáceres Manzano and Polanco all highlighted the collaborative nature of theater at Yale and its ability to build networks of trust and support among participants.

"Theater is such a powerful community builder, both the process of making it, but also watching it. It's a presence art form, it demands so much engagement and real-life connection," Cáceres Manzano said. "I think spaces like that are really missing from our lives."

Yale's 325th commencement will take place on May 18.

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YULIN ZHEN / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
Three seniors — Emiliano Cáceres Manzano, Hannah Kurczeski and Zaida Rio Polanco — reflected on how making theater on campus has influenced their academic, creative and social lives.

Schwarzman Center art exhibits highlight student experiences

BY ANGELINA KOVALCHUK
STAFF REPORTER

Five exhibitions that opened in the Yale Schwarzman Center on April 7 feature creative work from 53 young artists, including New Haven high school students, Yale undergraduates and Yale graduate students.

"Each exhibition explores how the students see and interact with the world; they are all responding to different themes and questions," Carlynne Robinson, the center's associate director of venues and exhibitions, wrote in an email to the News. "They explore identity, unity and memory, and nature and emotion."

The works span a range of mediums, including visual art, photography, installation, digital work and multimedia. All exhibitions are free and open to the public.

"Whether someone is coming to the Yale Schwarzman Center to have lunch or see a performance in The Dome, I hope that people visit the exhibitions multiple times and experience something new every visit," Robinson said.

"Call-to-Connect," located in the building's rotunda, was designed by Soleil Piverger '27. The exhibition consists of two payphones positioned on opposite sides of the space, inviting visitors to connect and converse from afar.

Each payphone is accompanied by a phonebook, which contains extension numbers corresponding to previously-recorded messages.

"Even if you're not creating one in the moment, you can look through and listen to all these other people's memories and moments of connection," Robinson said of the installation.

"The View From Here: Accessing Art Through Photography" is on the second floor of the center. In collaboration with the Yale Center for British Art, the annual exhibition features photography by New Haven high school students.

According to Robinson, the photos were taken only on smartphone cameras.

"All you need is a cell phone, because these days, every smartphone has a camera. So everybody is a photographer in some sort of way," she said.

The theme of this year's "The View from Here" exhibition centers around "pathways" through the students' lives and communities, according to the Yale Center for British Art's website.

On the Schwarzman Center's lower level, "Rooted in Heritage: Art Across Yale's Cultural Centers" showcases visual art and photography from Yale undergraduate and graduate students. Each of Yale's five cultural centers are represented in the exhibition.

"I just asked people to kind of reflect on the multicultural communities that they're a part of at Yale, and how they feel represented here within their community and back home," Robinson, who curated the exhibition, recalled.

Stella Duran Gonzalez '29, one of the artists spotlighted in the installation, said her identity and experiences as a Puerto Rican greatly inspire her work.

In her featured pieces "Escúchame" and "Isla del Encanto," Duran Gonzalez highlights classic figures and iconography from Puerto Rican culture, including the coquí frogs native to the island.

Duran Gonzalez wants her work to inspire viewers to reflect on their own cultures and backgrounds, she said.

"This dual reflection — artist reflecting while working, viewer reflecting while observing — is what I believe makes art so powerful," she said.

Olivia Jiang SOM '26 contributed the pieces "Ablaze" and "Waiting," which feature urban scenes from ancient and modern China, to the "Rooted in Heritage" exhibit.

"The specific settings are deeply Chinese, but the feelings of longing, community, vitality and loss belong to everyone," Jiang said of her work.

The corridor of the Schwarzman Center's lower level displays "West of the River," which features rural landscape photography by Christian Badach ART '26.

"His work is focusing on rural landscapes and how they function in the dichotomy of emotions," Robinson said. "So thinking about community and isolation, bliss and madness, these different kinds of ways that you can feel emotions."

Another exhibition, "Storyboard: Poetry and the Everyday," is showcased virtually on the center's website. The digital gallery showcases a mix of visual art, audio, video and written work submitted by Yale students.

Students were asked to convey in their submissions the ways in which they interact with poetry "on a daily basis, if at all," according to the website.

Elisabeth Nwasokwa '26 submitted a poem inspired by the autumn views on Hillhouse Avenue.

"While my poems are often about the beauty within the simplicity of nature," she said, "the desire to reflect that beauty aligns with the long and continued history of storytelling of both my Nigerian and Haitian cultural heritage."

"Poetry and the Everyday" was curated by Babette Thomas GRD '26.

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ANGELINA KOVALCHUK / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
The new exhibit, "Unfurling the Flag: Reflections on American Patriotism," includes significant documents from Yale's collections, including an original copy of the Declaration of Independence.