

On the 5th of September, 2017, I embarked on the newly-established HNC course in Performing Arts at the Norwich performing arts centre The Garage. After hearing of the course from a teacher, I had applied and auditioned that summer for the course's Acting pathway, and had been given a place with generous bursary arrangements supplied by The Garage and the Mason Trust.

My previous educational and academic experience had been haphazard and somewhat sparse, though high in its quality. Although I had performed well in the subjects that I chose to pursue during my previous education at the Norwich Steiner School, I was only able to do so because I had been permitted to specialise in these self-selected topics as an alternative to the official SSC qualification, in accordance with part-time arrangements made with the school following my diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. My completed work was mainly in the form of performances and presentations, as difficulties with the process of producing written work had caused me to shy away from subjects that were assessed in this way, and I struggled with the dichotomy of needing time outside of lessons to work on assignments but having trouble doing so at home. I had never written an essay in my life, and any written assignments that I was set were almost always in need of accompanying extensions. Even creative writing, which I have always loved and hoped to make a career of, posed challenges for me in terms of completion – and formal academic writing was all but unknown to me. These educational arrangements were exactly what I needed at the time, and they allowed me to flourish in my own areas of expertise in a way that more rigorous mainstream education could not, but I knew that in order to progress in my ability and fulfil my dreams I needed to address these challenges.

One thing that I had been left with was a love of theatrical performance, and this is exactly what had attracted me to The Garage's Performing Arts course. The vocational nature of the HNC and the similarity of its structure to that of the SSC appealed to me, but there were still concerns as to my ability to handle the written workload and to engage with all of the subjects even within this specialised field. "See how you go," my mother told me. "You don't have to do it all."

Having now been through the six-month intensive experience of essays, workshops, presentations and performances and come out the other side, I think that I can conclusively state that not only have I done it all, I have gained numerous benefits in doing so. I have been able to complete and submit work for every unit, ranging from regular journal pieces to formal essays and reports, and have received grades of both Merit and Distinction level. There has been work handed in late, of course, and I have faced the consequences of doing so, as I adjusted to the challenges and demands of a new and unfamiliar work structure – but I am astounded and overjoyed that for perhaps the first time in my life I have managed to hand in every single piece of work, even in the units that I took to less naturally, and with such

positive results. When I began, I had no idea that I would even be able to stick with the course and deliver work in every subject, let alone achieve what I have now.

Of course, perhaps the most important feature of the HNC, and probably the one that helped me to engage with and handle the increased written workload, is the balancing factor of the strong practical aspect. The course has given me the grounding and technical training in the performing arts that I desperately needed and hungered for, and its comprehensive performing arts focus has enabled me to explore areas outside of acting that I had previously longed to experience but had been intimidated by or did not have the opportunity to study. I had never thought of myself as an athletic or very physically capable person, but studying a dance module has opened my eyes not only to the possibilities of the performance medium but also to the benefits of implementing regular physical activity to maintain and improve one's health and abilities. I have been able to adopt and maintain a training plan not only during the course but since its completion, and I have already noticed improvements, especially in my muscular strength and the stability of my long-hypermobility joints – and as these are two areas in which I have previously had serious weakness, this is a huge thing for me. The module in classical singing was also invaluable, as it is a genre that intrigues me, and this along with an acting-focused speech unit has helped me enormously in improving my breathing and vocal power.

During the course I have had numerous opportunities to further engage and deepen my involvement with the performing arts, from free admission and funded trips to shows at The Garage and elsewhere to attending a Frantic Assembly workshop along with theatrical professionals. I even had the chance to attend the 2018 theatrical event *Devoted & Disgruntled* in London, where I was able to lead a discussion with a group of complete strangers – the very thought of which might have left me scared witless only a year ago.

Another significant impact that this course has had is a social one. Since our first meeting in September, the people that I am ashamed to say that I originally thought of as “scarily modern mainstreamers” have all become my close and valued friends, and I have every intention of maintaining my contact and connection with my new-found family. Prior to my enrolment at The Garage, my friends all consisted of people that I had known for years, and I had serious concerns about my ability to form and sustain friendships outside of my school environment. The idea that I would be able to make six new friends in the same number of months, even within the structure of a course such as this, would have seemed like a speck on a daunting and impossible horizon.

At the time of writing, my results for the full certificate are still pending, but I have recently attended an audition and interview at the University of East Anglia, and have received offers for all of their Drama courses. Wherever I go next, however, I

would not have reached where I am now without the HNC course, and I must thank both The Garage and the Mason Trust for the support that I have received.