



## **THEATRE PERFORMER TURNED LAW STUDENT: A PERSONAL REFLECTION**

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### **Introduction**

The route to a career in law is not a one-size-fits-all concept. This is something I have learned throughout my time so far at the University of Plymouth. I have met a variety of students from many different backgrounds, including a tattoo artist, an ex-prison officer and a full-time mum of seven children. Everyone seems to be succeeding in their own way, at their own pace, and this is inspiring. I always had a pre-conceived idea that if you wanted to succeed in law, you had to plan your career aspirations from a young age, attend Oxford or Cambridge University, and never think of anything else. This was utterly wrong. Instead, the alternative life experiences you undertake, and the transferable skills you obtain, will enhance your prospects of success, both at university and as you venture into the working world. This report will present my journey so far, including my experiences at the University of Plymouth.

### **My Training in Musical Theatre Performance**

While growing up, an ‘academic’ career was never on my agenda, and certainly not a career in law. I had my sights set elsewhere: performing on London’s West End. Musical theatre was my only passion, and I was desperate to run off to ‘Stage School’ at the earliest opportunity. Throughout my years of primary and secondary school, I was extremely dedicated to performing arts training. On most weekdays, I would finish school at 3:30pm, be in the studio by 4:00pm and sometimes stay there until as late as 10:00pm. Because of this dedication, my early performing career, up until the age of 15, was full of opportunity. I performed regularly in the Theatre Royal Plymouth; in the UK tour of Cameron Mackintosh’s ‘Olivier!'; and as a member of the UK original cast of ‘BIG’ the musical. This experience was a career highlight, especially when we recorded the original cast recording in London’s Angel

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Studios, where big names like Adele, Sam Smith and Robbie Williams have recorded their singles and albums. The direction and guidance that I gained through these experiences always left me wanting more. I felt at the time that nothing could ever beat the feeling of being on stage. At 15, I decided I was ready to audition for full-time Musical Theatre courses in London, as well as revising for and sitting my GCSE examinations. The auditions were successful and I was offered a fully funded place at my dream stage school: The Urdang Academy in London.

I moved out of my family home in September 2018 to begin my studies in London. Despite being just 16 years old, I soon flourished with a new-found sense of independence. My time at 'Stage School' was hugely enjoyable. I created strong bonds with my tutors and fellow students, received excellent results in my assessments and fell in love with the busy London life. I was aware of the extreme competitiveness of the performing arts industry, but I felt ready to tackle it with strength and resilience. That was until the announcement of the dreaded national lockdown in March 2020.

### **The effect of lockdown on my career aspirations**

The announcement of lockdown was very sudden and resulted in the Urdang Academy closing its doors for several months. I was very quickly dragged back to Plymouth and, like the rest of the world, had to adapt to living my life through 'Zoom', an online meeting platform. Not only were my lessons online, but my important Degree applications, auditions and interviews were too. It felt like my world had turned upside down. My small conservatory was no replacement for the spacious dance studios I was used to, and I could never shake the anxiety of singing while my self-employed stepdad was working in the next room. For the first time in my life, I struggled to maintain motivation and found myself in a downward spiral of falling out of love with an industry I had worked so hard to be a part of.

August 2020 was a turning point for me. My mental health had taken a huge hit, and my confidence and passion for performing had all but disappeared. Now 18 years old, I was a completely different person from the one who had entered lockdown, and it was clear something needed to change. I sat down to question: what else could I do with my life? I felt ashamed even asking that question of myself, especially while seeing many of my friends, fellow musical theatre students, still succeeding up in London. I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of both anger and resentment at the world: why had this happened to me? I wondered, what if the pandemic had not hit the UK in the way that it did? Would I still be in the same disorientated position?

## **Choosing to begin a career in law**

After many sleepless nights and tearful deliberations with my family, I decided to consider a future career in law. Like many budding legal practitioners, the media portrayal of the legal system had always intrigued me, especially TV series like 'How To Get Away With Murder'. I admired the sense of excitement and risk, although I appreciated that this cinematic depiction was not an everyday, accurate reflection of a career in law. I was interested in the role of an advocate in court, as it reminded me of acting, like putting on a show for the courtroom while helping people to achieve justice. I also remembered a previous conversation that I had with a lecturer at a University of Plymouth Open Day in 2016. We spoke about a career in law, and he informed me of the many transferrable skills between working in the performing arts industry and the study and practice of law. I made a calculated decision to leap into the unknown and applied through clearing to study Law at the University of Plymouth.

Soon after I received a phone call from the university, offering me a place on their LLB (Hons) Law Degree. They explained that I could go straight into the first year, or I could undertake a foundation year to ensure that I was as prepared as possible, after spending two years out of formal education. As my decision was so abrupt and uncertain, I chose the latter option. I couldn't recommend the experience of a foundation year enough, as it gave me back the confidence I had lost and assured me that I could succeed in something new.

## **My time, so far, at the University of Plymouth**

My foundation year provided me with many of the skills required in Higher Education, including notetaking, essay writing and critical thinking, which eased my anxiety about returning to formal education. My modules included: 'Foundational Ideas and Concepts in Law, Government and Society', 'Introduction to Law and Criminal Justice', 'Introduction to Government and Society' and 'Work and Employment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. Unfortunately, most of my foundation year was taught online, and I struggled to cope with the loneliness. The university and my lecturers were aware of the extra pressures of studying while living through a pandemic and provided useful resources that made it easier. However, when I heard that my first-year lectures would all be in person, I was delighted.

My first term of the first year has been hugely rewarding. I am particularly enjoying the biweekly 'tutorials', intimate group sessions where we can all contribute and dissect a topic. I am even enjoying certain elements of the coursework and exam revision, as the modules

are engaging and I am always eager to learn more. I am slowly realising that it is okay that my first plan didn't work out and that I need to stop beating myself up about it, although this is certainly easier said than done. I am also noticing that the lecturer mentioned previously was correct, as many of the skills I gained from my training and experience in the performing arts are helping me considerably with the study of law. Granted, my ballet teachers never taught me about the difference between an offer and an invitation to treat, or anything remotely similar, but other skills are proving to be just as useful.

For example, the confidence I gained from performing on stage is invaluable for public speaking skills. I am not afraid to participate in lectures or tutorials; therefore I benefit from them, even when I get the answers wrong! I am also a member of the University of Plymouth Law Society (UPLS), as they hold regular competitions and networking events, including mooting, client interviewing, negotiation and debating. The Law Society has helped me to come out of my shell, as I have met like-minded first, second and third years who offer excellent advice and guidance. My confidence has helped me greatly, especially as a first-year student who is not too knowledgeable about the legal side of things, competing against more experienced second and third years. I can stand in front of a group of students and lecturers and not feel afraid, thanks to my performing experience. Most recently, I competed in the client interviewing competition and made it to the semi-finals of the competition, judged by Wolferstans Solicitors. Public speaking skills and confidence are both vital to a career in law, as you must be able to speak to and advocate for clients.

Other transferrable skills I have noticed include the ability to network and market oneself. The performing industry is a perfect example of the phrase: 'it's not what you know, it's who you know', and from what I have gathered thus far, it seems the law industry requires similar networking skills. I am already making connections with professionals and learning from their expertise. For example, my networking skills were very helpful at the annual Cheese and Wine Networking Night at the beginning of December, where I was able to converse with and learn from many trainee lawyers, solicitors, barristers and judges. My experience in performing has also provided me with resilience and self-motivation, organisation and time management skills, and the ability to self-reflect and accept constructive criticism.

## **Conclusion**

Deciding to study law at the University of Plymouth was absolutely the best choice. My fellow students all have their own diverse stories, and I am thoroughly enjoying learning about their experiences. The number of students on my course is less than that of many other law

degrees in the UK, meaning I am treated as a person, not a number. My lecturers are kind, attentive and keen to help. I still have a long journey ahead of me and a lot to learn, but I do think that I have found my calling. I previously stated that 'nothing could ever beat the feeling of being on stage', but I was wrong. I have new successes to celebrate now, for example when I understand a tough area of the law, triumph in a UPLS competition, or receive a grade that I am proud of. The satisfaction of feeling comfortable and happy in this precise moment keeps me looking towards the future. As I continue through university, I hope to become more involved, possibly becoming a course rep or a member of the Law Society committee. I am also eager to gain some legal work experience, to witness the hustle and bustle of a law firm for myself. I do not know exactly where I am headed in life, but I am fine with that, and I cannot wait to find out.