Don’t Put Your Children on the Stage  
(A mostly affectionate look at a career in show business)  

By Jamie Widdoes ’72  

My title is taken from a Noel Coward song “Don’t put your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington,” a cautionary tale in which Mr. Coward tries desperately to persuade a certain Mrs. Worthington that her daughter does not have what it takes to succeed in a career in show business, and it is reluctantly up to him to convince the mother that her daughter’s dream should be discouraged, at all costs. He sings:  

\textit{Don’t put your daughter on the stage, Mrs. Worthington}  
\textit{Don’t put your daughter on the stage}  
\textit{The profession is overcrowded}  
\textit{The struggle’s pretty tough}  
\textit{And admitting the fact she’s burning to act}  
\textit{That isn’t quite enough}  
\textit{She’s a nice girl and though her teeth are fairly good}  
\textit{She’s not the type I ever would be eager to engage}  
\textit{I repeat, Mrs. Worthington, sweet Mrs. Worthington}  
\textit{Don’t put your daughter on the stage}  

Minus the cleverness of Noel Coward’s words, this was pretty much the sentiment of the day when I was a boy in 1950’s Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Truth be told,  

\textit{The profession was overcrowded}  
\textit{The struggle was pretty tough}  
\textit{And admitting the fact that I was burning to act}  
\textit{That wasn’t quite enough}  

As some will recall, back then a boy’s career dreams pretty much ranged from policeman to fireman to professional baseball player, and for some strange reason in my case, becoming president of United Airlines. That was no doubt from the combination of my early love of travel coupled with my need to run things. However, knowing what I know now, I can safely say I am content in these current economic times with the security and stability of my career in show business.  

But the fact is that in the Pittsburgh of my youth the notion of making a living in the entertainment business was not something one imagined — those dreams were seemingly reserved for people who lived in New York and Los Angeles, and had some dreadful experience in their past that drove them to a life of emotional exhibitionism. Whether you wanted to act, write, direct, play music, or dance, if you wanted a career in any of those fields you were clearly counter-culture, an outsider — a bohemian if you will.
Comedian (and coincidentally Pittsburgh native) Dennis Miller puts it this way: “There's no doubt about it, show business lures the people who didn't get enough love, attention, or approval early in life and have grown up to become bottomless, gaping vessels of terrifying, abject need. Please laugh.”

Or another favorite of mine: “You can pick out actors by the glazed look that comes into their eyes when the conversation wanders away from themselves.”

With this in mind, I want to introduce you to Pete Widdoes, my father. Pete was a wonderful guy with a giant sense of humor and an even bigger smile. He coached my little league team, he stood behind me and taught me how to tie my bow ties in the mirror, and he was one of the most quotable men I have ever known. One of his favorites was, “Get the work done … and then have the fun.” A saying that hit home for me in my junior year at Loomis when one late fall morning, I walked out of Flagg to see Headmaster Torrey, my advisor Jim Wilson, and MY DAD coming to pay me an unannounced visit! In short my father had taken a day off from his work in Pittsburgh as a commercial real estate broker and flown to Hartford to light a little fire under yours truly. Apparently, way too much fun and not enough work was the diagnosis, and I needed to get serious.

Then there was Babs, my mother. She was as close to show business as anyone I knew back then. She had been a theater major at Vassar and grown up in New York, so she went to every Broadway show as soon as it opened. If there was any performing gene passed along, one would think it was clearly on her side. But while Mom had every cast album from every Broadway show, Dad answered with the complete Bob Newhart, Bill Cosby, Allan Sherman, Bob and Ray, Stan Freeberg, and Spike Jones collections. Fred Allen was another of his favorite comedians. He was famous for saying: “An actor's success has the life expectancy of a small boy about to look into a gas tank with a lighted match.”

As you can imagine, that was not helpful to my cause.

Well from that surprise visit by my Dad the candle was lit and I got serious … enough, but something else happened along the way to my graduation from The Island: I was lured into the NEO by some wonderful teachers like Phil Lebowitz, Hal Sullivan, Helen Stevenson, Dexter Bullardm and Spencer Grey. I was encouraged by my coaches (Charlie Vola, Jim Wilson, Chuck Vernon, and Ben Meyers) to try and play sports and act in the plays. And by the time I graduated, I was not only loving what I was learning in the theater, I was also very serious about it.

After a year at Skidmore as a theatre major and two years at NYU in the professional acting training program (now the Tisch School), I announced to my parents in January of 1975 that I was leaving NYU a year early to start a career as an actor, Well I might as well have been telling them I was moving to the Horn of Africa to become — well, any number of things, most of which they probably would have supported, but none of which they would have understood.
You see, for all the love and support my folks were able to provide me growing up, they had absolutely no clue what was involved in making a career in the entertainment arts — especially for my Dad and, I am sure, to many of those men who interrupted their high school and college careers to fight in World War II. His children were meant to get good educations and then enter the workforce — and by workforce I am talking the Big 3: Business, Doctor, or Lawyer. Or if you were thinking really outside the box, you might become an architect. But that was about as “artsy” as it got.

My favorite example of the dissonance that existed between my dad’s desire for me to succeed and his total lack of understanding as to how this success might come to pass occurred in 1975 when I was performing in a summer stock production of the musical *The Fantasticks* in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. My parents were driving through the area on their way home to Pittsburgh from the East Coast, and I arranged for them to stop by the old barn of a theater I was working in to watch a dress rehearsal of the show the afternoon before we opened.

After rehearsal I walked them out to their car to say goodbye, and as we were doing our hugs and kisses and they were telling me how much they loved the show and how proud they were of me, my dad said, “Oh and tomorrow night when you open, drop dead.” I, of course, answered, “What?” And he said, “Isn’t that what you say to actors in the theater to wish them good luck?” Now for those of you who don’t know, the phrase is actually “Break a leg.” You laugh, but from that day forward in my family whenever we wish someone good luck, we say “Drop dead.” Seriously, I have a telegram from the opening night of my first Broadway show that reads “Drop dead, Love, Your family.”

OK, so that’s where it all began.

Regarding yours, dear Mrs. Worthington
Of Wednesday, the 23rd.
Although your baby may be keen on a stage career
How can I make it clear that this is not a good idea
For her to hope and appear, Mrs. Worthington
Is on the face of it absurd
Her personality is not in reality quite big enough, inviting enough
For this particular sphere

But apparently MY personality was. From that barn in the Poconos to playing Young Abe Lincoln on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to *Taming of the Shrew* in Lake George, New York, and doing about 100 TV commercials to pay the rent, throw in a fair amount of luck, shoe leather and, I would like to think, a modicum of talent, and somehow I woke up in the summer of 1978 as one of the leads in this little movie called *Animal House* that was about to become the largest grossing comedy film to date — or as my mother liked to call it, “soft core porn.”
Needless to say, that was a very heady time for all of us connected with the film. It is important to note that what made the success of *Animal House* so sublime was the simple fact that no one had a clue it would be that successful. And it was. Everywhere. It wasn’t the exclusive domain of the AD’s at Dartmouth, or the Beta’s at Stanford. It seemed like it belonged to everyone who went to college — anywhere.

I remember having lunch with my grandfather just after the movie came out. We were at the Yale Club in New York, and four men at a table across the room were *staring* at me all through the meal. So I kept trying to pay attention to my grandfather, but eventually one of the guys stood up and pointed to me with a huge scowl on his face and bellowed, so the whole place could hear him, “No food fights!” And the whole restaurant started to laugh. Except my grandfather. I explained to him that that was from a scene in *Animal House*, and he then told me, reluctantly, that he had gone out one afternoon and seen the movie and did not really care for it. What was it with my family?

Well, as that little piece of “soft core porn” swept the nation and the world, it also marked the beginning of a new age of popular acceptance of careers in the entertainment industry. In fact, prior to 1980 I don’t think anyone referred to it as the “entertainment industry.” It was all just “show business” with its two subsets — Hollywood, where you made movies and TV shows; and Broadway, where you went for theater, music, and dance. Otherwise you might as well be in Pittsburgh, figuratively — or, in my case, literally.

Several things that happened in the mid- to late-1970s began to legitimize the pursuit of show business as a career. With the creation and ultimate success of the *National Lampoon Magazine* in 1971, there was a growing market for young, anarchistic comedy in this country, and this led directly to *Animal House*, which was developed by the Lampoon, and more indirectly to a TV show called *Saturday Night Live*, which took most of its original cast and writing staff from the Lampoon magazine and stage shows.

As these young, anarchistic comedies took hold, they needed people to write, perform, and direct them. And where did they come from? Well, at that time in New York the pipeline seemed to head straight to Cambridge, Massachusetts. All of a sudden Harvard men — sons of bankers, lawyers, and doctors — were creating mainstream entertainment: Doug Kenney (from Cleveland), editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*, a founder of the *National Lampoon*, and one of the three writers of *Animal House*. Al Franken, now Senator Al Franken (from Minneapolis), Harvard ’73, an original writer for *Saturday Night Live*. And this trend continued to grow on through Conan O’Brien, Harvard ’84, who wrote for the Simpsons, and SNL. These three and a host of others emerged as America’s new comedic voices.

Now, I am not saying this influx of talent was a domain that was exclusively Crimson or limited to comedy for that matter, but I am saying that as the Harvard comedy mafia of the ’70’s and early ’80’s made their way west, they helped to pave the way for other talented people from places like Pittsburgh, and Cleveland, and schools like Dartmouth, Princeton, Stanford, and Cal to become the driving forces in all aspects of show business.
The second event to further legitimize the entertainment industry occurred in March of 1973 when Time Life Inc. gained control of a company called Home Box Office. On September 30, 1975, HBO became the first TV network to continuously deliver signals via satellite when it showed the “Thrilla in Manila” boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. Within the next 10 years the Fox Network began, spelling the end of the three-network universe (plus PBS for all you Mr. Rogers and Masterpiece Theatre fans), making way for the five network/hundreds of cable channels universe of today. Direct TV now advertises that they offer over 200 channels of programming (including 10 different HBO channels) and well over half of those 200 produce some original content. Add to that the original output of Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, Yahoo, and YouTube, and you are a long way from the ABC, NBC, CBS world of my youth.

Naturally, as the number of writers, actors, and directors who were needed to create programming for all those new cable and broadcast networks grew, so did the opportunities for all those men and women who in previous generations would have gone to law school or business school or medical school then sat moping at their desks dreaming of the bright lights of Broadway or Hollywood. John Hughes, for example, who wrote and directed Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, Home Alone, National Lampoon’s Vacation, and many other great comedy films was working, like so many others, in an advertising agency in Chicago submitting freelance articles to the National Lampoon until suddenly by the late ’70s it was OK to reach in the drawer and send your scripts to Hollywood.

In fact, a study shows that in 1975 there were 15 colleges and universities that offered a bachelor’s in fine arts in film, theater, or television, and now there are more than 100. According to the Motion Picture Association of America, the film and television industry contributes $120 billion in sales each year to the U.S. economy and sustains 1.9 million American jobs. More broadly, according to leading industry officials, intellectual property industries account for half of U.S. gross domestic product. It is with mixed emotions that I draw from this the conclusion that, as we in this country struggle with how to make competitive automobiles, steel, textiles, and so on, it seems there is one product that we export more of than ever — entertainment.

Don’t put your daughter on the stage, Mrs. Worthington
Don’t put your daughter on the stage
She’s a bit of an ugly duckling, you must honestly confess
And the width of her seat would surely defeat
Her chances of her success
It’s - it’s a loud voice, and though it’s not exactly flat
She’ll need a little more than that to earn a living wage
On my knees, Mrs. Worthington, please Mrs. Worthington
Don’t put your daughter on the stage

Ugly ducklings, loud voices. Now it seems everyone wants to be in show biz. I can’t tell you the number of emails and phone calls I get from people I went to school with, people I went to camp with, people I had lunch with, and people who eat lunch. It seems these
days that everyone has a little Mr. or Mrs. Worthington in them! That’s not to say some of our beloved children don’t have talent and will do well, but in my opinion we are witnessing a very distressing cultural change in my business and, in fact, in our society.

As there has become more and more demand for product in the entertainment fields coupled with multiple ways to view that product besides the traditional television set, there is more and more media coverage of the field itself. We now seem to celebrate celebrity as much if not more than talent. With all the *Access Hollywoods* and *Entertainment Tonights* and *People Magazines* and *TMZs* out there, we are made to think we know all about how the sausage is made when, in truth, we have no clue about the real sacrifices and work that went into getting it into the store.

This has created a new kind of career in show business: the professional celebrity, the obvious being folks like Paris Hilton or the Kardashian family or the stars of shows like shows *Celebrity Rehab*, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, and *Jersey Shore*.

We used to refer to someone’s 15 minutes of fame as something that might occur by happenstance. It now seems that, to many, those 15 minutes are a birthright — and that if you play your cards right, you can turn that 15 minutes into a career — thus further obscuring the actual work that goes into being a dedicated actor, director, or writer.

*Don’t put your daughter on the stage, Mrs. Worthington*
*Don’t put your daughter on the stage*
*Though they said at the school of acting*
*She was lovely as Peer Gynt*
*I’m afraid, on the whole, an ingénue role might emphasize her squint*
*She has nice hands, to give the wretched girl her due*
*But don’t you think her bust is too developed for her age*
*No more buts, Mrs. Worthington, nuts! Mrs. Worthington*
*Don’t put your daughter on the stage*

I was asked by a friend once who taught at Yale Drama School if I would come speak to her class about the practicalities of a career as an actor. These are amazing kids — bright, curious, talented. After the class a couple of the students stuck around to ask more questions about how to break into a career in show business, and one of the girls was talking to me about her agent in New York says this, and her mother says that, and her friend who graduated Yale Drama last year and just got a 200-square-foot apartment in the West Village for $3,000 a month that she shares with four other girls told her such and such. I stopped her to ask a very simple question. I said, “Is anyone in your life discouraging you from becoming an actor?” And she looked at me very confused. I continued, “because if not, you need to go find someone who will. And make it someone you respect and care about so it will really resonate.” Well, by now I had spread a giant soaking wet blanket over her plan for stardom. But then I said, “because then when you ignore them and you do it anyway, you will have a real foundation for why you have chosen a career in show business.”
Forty-six years ago I left Pittsburgh headed to Loomis, where the acting light was turned on in me, then on to New York to study and work to be an actor — Broadway, film, TV, any and all of it. I loved the challenges, the risks, the rewards, the fun, and frankly the nobility of a life in the creative arts. And I took that with me into my directing and producing career.

The outside noises may be louder now, but the essence of why we choose a life in this business remains. In fact, my opinion is that there is more great work being done in theater, film, and television than ever before. It is just that with all the artistic and entertainment choices out there these days, very frankly, it’s hard to find and enjoy it all.

And now we all seem to have children who want to dive into this wonderful mess. What do we tell them? First of all, avoid the noise. There is no quick path to success. Value your education, respect your talent, treat yourself as a business, then go ahead and enjoy the ride. In short “get the work done and then have the fun!” That and make damn sure you have a Noel Coward or even a Pete Widdoes in your life to lovingly and elegantly discourage you. And to any of you who decide to go forward after all that, I say with all love and encouragement, “Drop Dead!”

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