Erik Altemus made a critical decision when, in the eighth grade, he transferred to the Orange County High School of the Arts. Prior to attending the Southern California performing arts school, he went to a “stereotypical” junior high school, he says: “It was all about whether or not you were on the football team. I hated it. I was completely ridiculed, and talent didn’t mean anything to those people.”

Continued on page A2—
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Noah Robbins nearly experienced a similar derailment of his college plans. Although he didn't go to a performing arts high school per se, he says that his school, Georgetown Day School in Washington, D.C., gave him excellent opportunities in theater (he played Max Bialystock in its production of "The Producers"). While still in school, he went out to L.A. and acquired an agent, and as he was finishing his senior year, he landed the role of the young Eugene Jerome in the Broadway revival of Neil Simon's "Brighton Beach Memoirs." "It was perfect timing," he says. "I had just got into Columbia a couple of days before, so I knew that I could take a year off from college.

He graduated from high school in June 2009 and two months later started rehearsals for the Simon play, which began previews in October. Within a month, however, the revival closed, just one week after opening. But Robbins was soon cast as the young lead, opposite John Glover, in Primary Stages' Off-Broadway production of Jonathan Tolins' "Secrets of the Trade." He finished that run just in time to start a liberal arts program at Columbia University this fall. Speaking of the shuttering of "Brighton Beach" and the cancellation of its sequel, "Broadway Bound," Robbins says, "As bad as I am that it happened, I'm glad that I had a taste of such disappointment so soon, so that now that I've experienced that, I can take it all in my stride. I was still lucky, compared to some people who didn't get to perform. At least I got that one week.

One person who didn't get even one performance in "Brighton Beach Memoirs" is Getzug. He was cast as Robbins' understudy prior to starting his senior year at LACHSA. But things worked out okay for him too. He returned to Los Angeles to complete his senior year and then chose UCLA for college, "because they let you spend your time between music and other academic education," he says. In April, however, he landed the role of Moritz in the new national tour of "Spring Awakening." He'll take a year off to do the show, but he fully intends to continue his education. "As much as I love theater, I want to be well-educated and have a broad spectrum," he says. "I think that if I know more about history, psychology, English, whatever, all that will inform what I do when I'm acting."

Taking Your Time

Ahern, now 23, is about to complete one year Off-Broadway playing the love-struck youth in "The Fantasticks," and he has just completed a role in the pilot for a new HBO series, "The Mysterious Year," written by John Logan ("Red") and directed by Oscar winner Kathryn Bigelow. "I see it as a kind of adult 'Glee,' " says Ahern. "It's about this family, and the central character is a deranged but very brilliant and successful composer, in the vein of Sondheim. My character is a young dancer who is willing to do whatever it takes to come out on top."

His first choice for college after graduating from OCHSAA in 2005 was NYU, but he wasn't accepted. Instead he chose the small but intense conservatory program in musical theater at the University of Cincinnati and has no regret. "Moving to Ohio from Orange County was a culture shock," he says. "It prepared me for understanding what it was like to live in a huge city like New York now."

He advises others to think carefully about their choices for after high school: "I think people need to be patient. I know what it feels like to want to jump into the industry and get started immediately. Our youth-obsessed culture doesn't help any. But I don't think it's worth giving up that time, which, in retrospect, goes by so quickly that you actually end up missing it."

Dancer Samantha Barriento, who graduated from LaGuardia Arts in June, came to a similar conclusion. She ended up choosing the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at Ailey/Fordham, a partnership between Fordham University and the Ailey School in New York. "It's as intensive as a conservatory, but you're also taking academic classes," she says. From reading the bios of numerous dancers she'd seen perform in the city, she noticed that nowadays contemporary companies are taking a lot more dancers who have graduated from college. "I think it's because you gather more life experience, and that definitely adds to the nuances and texture of your dancing. I notice that you gravitate towards those dancers when they're on stage because they have more to offer."

The younger dancers probably can do more physically, but that doesn't necessarily make them better performers.

Patterson, who also graduated from LaGuardia Arts this June, decided to pursue her higher education at UCLA, even though it doesn't offer a BFA acting program. "I took some time and chose the B.A. program," she says. "I'm not sure acting is what I want to do being. I'm a person who values other experiences as well. The program at UCLA is structured a lot like a BFA in the sense that it's very intense, but half of my classes are outside the school theater."

Such choices are not easy to make, particularly when you're still a teenager, and Patterson offers this advice to her peers: "I would say evaluate how you feel about your art. If you're the kind of person who honestly cannot fathom doing anything but acting, singing, or dancing, and if you're absolutely dying to take academic classes during college, then do a BFA. Or you can do what she did and pick a program that feeds your other interests as well. "Research your program," she says. "Find the ones that offer classes that you cannot wait to take, and go for it."

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA
Department of Communication and Theatre, 5751 USA Dr. SE, Mobile, AL 36688-0002. Dr. Leon Van Dyke, chair; van.dye@saumag.edu; www.saumag.edu/theatre; 870-235-4255; B.A. in theatre. M.F.A. in theatre. Theatre programs at colleges and universities in the United States and the United Kingdom, including those that grant degrees in acting or in another major with an acting component or concentration, are listed below. In general, B.A. and M.A. programs are more academic in nature (though they may also include a performance component or concentration), while BFA and MFA programs focus on training professional performers. An A.A. is a two-year junior-college degree. The list also includes nondegree acting programs that have a structured curriculum.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH ALABAMA
Department of Theatre and Mass Communication, 715 University Blvd., Huntsville, AL 35807-0239. William Teague, chair; christopher.teague@uaa.alaska.edu; www.theatre.uaa.alaska.edu/; phone: 907-786-1792. B.A. in theatre. M.A. in theatre.

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