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Nate Dendy

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# Alumni Corner

## Nate Dendy: What Forensics Did For Me Truman State University Forensic Alumni (2001-2003)

### Nate Dendy



Nate is a professional actor, magician, and magic consultant. He competed for Truman State University from 2001-2003 in all Interp events, ADS, and impromptu (once), but his favorites events were Prose and Duo. His most memorable tournament was the “Blood Bath by the Beach Tournament” at Point Loma. He finaled all his events and took the Individual Pent Award both days. Over the course of two years, Nate earned six state championship titles, several Individual Pent Awards, and over 250 trophies to his name. He has been completely humble about it, *until now*.



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# Nate Dendy: What Forensics Did for Me

Nate Dendy

Professional Actor and Magician

New York City, New York

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**ALUMNI CORNER:** *The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program's very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni's stories.*

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*“If it was easy, we’d call it football.”*

I was seventeen years old when I joined Truman State University’s Forensics program. I walked in naive to the process; flying by the seat of my pants, coasting on talent and instinct, where dinner per diem was guaranteed, and if you played your cards right, big shiny trophies were the dessert. Two years later, I walked away with habits and words that serve me to this day. You see, I’m a professional actor and magician. What I thought would be a fun activity to feed my seventeen year old ego, turned out to be the very thing that started me on a path to success. Out of dozens of lessons learned during my time doing speech and debate, three things have allowed me to survive and flourish in my chosen profession: consistency, stamina, and insight.

In Steve Martin’s book *Born Standing Up* he talks about how easy it is to be great, but really hard to be good; he is talking about consistency. Anyone can have a moment of brilliance, but to be able to deliver something good every single time takes a lot of work. In forensics you learn, very quickly, that consistency is what wins. The performance you give in a final round late at night for 50 people has to be the same as the one you gave at 7:30 that morning to just one person. My coach had a mantra that we would all chant in unison before we began each tournament; “Every round, letter perfect, by the numbers, just like in practice.” It turns out, that expression became my work ethic.

A typical theatre contract consists of a four-week rehearsal period, with eight shows a week for maybe five weeks. Theaters simply cannot afford inconsistency. Every audience is a paying one. They expect to see a show that feels vibrant, fresh, and as if it has never happened before and will never happen again. As an actor I must be able to deliver a consistent product every single time, it must be...well, letter perfect, by the numbers, just like in rehearsals.



My most recent project was playing Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. This particular production had a great deal of magic in it. With magic there is no gray area: It's black or it's white. It works or it doesn't work. It fools you or it doesn't. The only way to become great at it is to be consistent. I am expected to deliver a fully developed performance, make sure my lines are heard clearly, hit the same marks every night, and make sure the magic works every time. The kind of focus and consistency required in major theatrical productions isn't something that is pulled from the air. It has to be developed, and competing in Forensics gave me that tool.

Another skill you quickly develop on a forensics team is stamina. My teammates and I took full course loads, practiced until 2:00 am, attended tournaments, and usually got back just in time to shower and head back to classes. The hectic schedule forced me to develop personal stamina and time management skills most college students lack. I learned to work efficiently and be more productive than my non-forensics peers. That helped me in my M.F.A. program at Brown University and in every theatre production I have worked. I am usually working on two or three projects in addition to running eight shows a week. I can't afford to waste time or get tired.

Finally, perhaps the most valuable thing I got from my time in forensics is insight. My coach would always ask me, "Nate, what greater insight into the human condition does this story give us?" An eloquent way of asking, "Why should I care?" Yes, theatre majors read a lot of plays. Eventually they develop a Zen like understanding of literature. However, imagine what you get when you read 25 short stories, hundreds of poems, and dozens of plays each year just to be ready for the first tournament. Then imagine spending 10 hours a day, 20+ weekends a year listening to some of the most talented performers in the country perform literature. I must have spent at least 100 hours on the practice and performance of each of my pieces. That experience gives you an insight into literature that is unparalleled by anything you find in a classroom. That same insight is the base of any theatrical performance. It has also helped me in auditions. I can quickly understand what is at the heart of a scene or monologue. This allows me to make richer choices as a character in auditions as well as on stage. That is a direct result of what I learned about literature and character development in forensics.

I can't imagine what it would have been like had I not joined my forensics team in college. Nor can I imagine what I would be like as a professional in the theatre had it not been for what was instilled on me during those years on the team. I'm currently in the process of writing, creating, and performing in my own stage show. It is, without a doubt, the most complex and challenging thing I have ever attempted in my life. Whenever I get scared or lost and think quitting is a real option, I think back on my two years on the forensics team. We all achieved some pretty impossible things. Whenever I hit a wall and thought I couldn't push past it, my coach would look at me and say "Nate, if it was easy, we'd call it football." We don't call it football, we call it forensics. It's a way of life, really.

