

NU alum talks acting, magic and career

By BENJAMIN DIN, Northwestern University

Brett Schneider is no stranger to taking leaps of faith. Given his line of work, he can't afford to be.

The blond 29-year-old actor and magician sinks into the grey L-shaped couch in his living room. Natural light streams in, illuminating his airy Lincoln Square apartment. With his feet propped up on the couch, Schneider is noticeably at ease with a deck of blue playing cards firmly grasped in his left palm.

The Oakland, California, native, who is currently in "The Life and Sort of Death of Eric Argyle" at Chicago's Steep Theatre, is no stranger to the stage. Schneider's gray blue eyes light up when he recounts learning one of his first magic tricks, the French drop, at a young age from his father, which led to his interest in performing.

A 2007 alum of Northwestern University, Schneider studied theater and philosophy and acted in student productions, which helped him transition to the real world.

"Honestly, my education came from the student theater more than anything else," he says. "You're in a room with a bunch of creative people. You have to put on a show, figure out how to do it. If you are put in that situation, it's going to be trial by fire."

For Schneider, acting at Northwestern and in the professional world is "apples and oranges." Northwestern's culture fosters the idea that the more talented one is, the more work one will get. But that's not how the industry works, he says.

"You somehow think that if you get better, that it's all a meritocracy," Schneider says. "In the real world, it's actually a service industry where they need all these different types of people. ... If you get cast, great, but that doesn't mean you're going to get the next job any more likely."

Schneider's peers remember him as a mischievous person, which shines through when a devilish smile breaks out across his face.

"Brett Schneider, up to no good," Andrew Lampl says, describing Schneider with a laugh.

Lampl and Schneider met their freshman year at Northwestern. As theater majors, they ran in the same circles and roomed together their junior and senior years.

"He's a mischief-maker," Lampl elaborates. "I think he's aware of what you're thinking."

Schneider remembers himself a bit differently.

"I think (my friends) would remember me as definitely driven and took myself pretty seriously at times, but still had a lot of fun and loved performing," he says.

He pauses briefly. His fingers move adroitly, shuffling and cutting the deck one moment and fanning the cards the next, as he thinks of his answer.

"...And maybe a little bit anxious," he concludes.

This anxiety comes with going into the fine arts. At Northwestern, Schneider's concern was whether he wanted to pursue magic and theater.

However, "time and experience" have allowed Schneider to conquer those fears.

"I'm more grounded, and I'm probably more secure and happier with the things I'm doing and more confident in the fact that I'm doing them," he says.

From experience, Schneider says the best thing to do at first is to "try to get as much work as you possibly can."

"When you start, ... you're taking a leap of faith," he says. "You prep something, you have no idea if it's good or not, and you just have to go into a room with a couple people just watching you that aren't going to applaud or laugh, and you just have to do it."

Schneider doesn't know what will happen next or if he'll stay in Chicago for the long-term.

"Chicago's been a wonderful artistic home for me for a long time, but I am definitely open to going out and about, too," he says.

This spring, he's headed to New York to work and audition. Beyond that, it's almost impossible for him to predict his schedule. That's the trade-off for pursuing his passions. An audition, a new project, or a magic gig could come at a moment's notice.

However, as he's learned since leaving Northwestern for the real world, it will only require a leap of faith.