DARIUS ESLAMI ’09 HAS A PROBLEM. It’s his ears.

Eslami plays the title role in The Babson Players production of Bat Boy: The Musical. His character is a bit unusual, a half-boy, half-bat found living in a cave, and Eslami is working out his costume’s final kinks.

His fangs look fine, and the fake blood is working well, as evidenced by Eslami’s stained shirt, though he unfortunately spurted some on the band. “It got on the guitarist or the bassist,” he says. “I couldn’t tell.” But his fake pointy ears aren’t cooperating, having fallen off during the last rehearsal, and that’s not good news. One can’t be a proper Bat Boy without them. “I wish they worked easier,” he says.

The ears are one of the final trouble spots to be smoothed over during this April night’s dress rehearsal. The show’s opening performance is just 24 hours away, and the cast and crew have assembled at the Richard W. Sorenson [MBA ’68, P ’97, P ’00] Center for the Arts. They sit on the stage, anxious and excited, as director Jim Fagan runs through his notes. He talks of enunciation and energy level, of lighting, singing, and choreography.

Tomorrow night there will be magic on the stage, but rehearsals are how that magic is conjured, crafted, and ultimately brought to life. It takes long hours and lots of work, and just before the cast begins its run-through, Fagan gives them a pep talk. “Take a minute and remember why you do this,” he tells them. “It’s about love. It’s about friendship. It’s about excitement.”

Participating in creative expression can be exhilarating. It is indeed about love, friendship, and excitement, as well as stretching oneself and seeking the truth and finding new perspectives and a million other things. That’s the power of the arts.

Some may be surprised by how big a presence the arts have at Babson. The College may be a first-rate business school, but it’s teeming with performances, exhibitions, and readings. There’s theater and dance, music and poetry, painting and photography. And look beyond campus to Babson’s alumni, and you’ll find many involved in artistic fields.

At first blush, one may wonder what a play, poem, or piece of pottery can teach about business, but the arts actually can have a multitude of benefits for students’ careers and personal lives. Furthermore, the arts help to create an electric place to learn. “I do strongly believe having students with an interest in the arts creates a dynamic and interesting campus,” says Dennis Hanno, dean of the Undergraduate School.

Finally, the risk taking and imagination at the heart of the arts are also at the heart of entrepreneurs. “There’s a lot we can learn from artists,” says Heidi Neck, associate professor of entrepreneurship. Whether starting a business, innovating at an existing one, or tackling a societal problem, people need fearlessness and creativity. “We live in a time that will require far more creative solutions than we needed in the past,” Neck says.

A Look at Sorenson

In the nearly 11 years that Burl Hash has been at Babson, he’s seen the arts grow on campus, and he’s witnessed many a performance.

Sorenson’s director has watched The Vagina Monologues actresses speaking of empowerment, Black Student Union actors staging August Wilson’s landmark works, the South Asian students of AMAN sharing their culture, the Babson Olin Jazz Ensemble bringing together musicians of two campuses, and the popular Babson Dance Ensemble.
Darius Eslami ’09, as Bat Boy, and Annie Maraschiello ’12, as Shelley, star in The Babson Players production of *Bat Boy: The Musical.*
playing to packed houses.

Hash fosters the artistic spirit on campus any way he can. If students want to organize an arts event, he’ll help them. If prospective students express interest in the arts, he’ll contact them. “[The arts] add a lot to the life of the community,” he says. “It’s a major part of the social life and identity here.”

Sorenson is at the center of this artistic activity, assisting student groups, sponsoring exhibitions, providing practice spaces and a band room, and supporting noncredit workshops and for-credit academic courses such as black and white photography and the London theater survey. Most visibly, Sorenson operates its namesake performing arts facility, which hosts 250 events a year and is booked six months in advance.

Hash believes the arts provide students with critical career skills. Putting on a musical such as Bat Boy involves scheduling rehearsals, hiring a director, developing a budget, building the set, and promoting the production. That’s a tall order. “You develop your management skills,” Hash says. “You feel the pressure of putting on a good show.” That experience looks good on a resume, differentiating students from other job candidates.

Just as important, the arts are a stress reliever, allowing students to unbutton their top buttons and let their hair down. “Babson without this stuff would be all business all the time,” Hash says.

Helping Babson’s driven students take a time-out from business is Brad Thoennes’ mission. On a Friday morning, the adjunct lecturer in the Arts and Humanities Division waits in Sorenson to begin class.

Thoennes teaches acting. In the graduate school, many international students, unsure of what’s appropriate in a Western business environment, take his Acting for Business workshop to feel more comfortable presenting and communicating. “I’m helping them navigate their way through American culture,” Thoennes says.

On this Friday, Thoennes teaches an undergraduate course, Introduction to Acting. As his students arrive, they call him “Professor Brad” and discuss the scenes they’re working on. Thoennes wears a brown sweater with stripes on the sleeves and a big emblazoned B, which stands for Brad, on the front. He wears the sweater to every class, and it’s looking a bit worse for the wear.

ALUMNI MIX MUSIC & BUSINESS

Playing in a rock band isn’t easy. You make little money, you practice often, and you pack and unpack lots of gear during gigs.

Despite all that, it can be a glorious ride. “When I play, that’s all I care about,” says Seth Decoteau ’06, bassist in Us Against the Archers. He calls the band’s sound “experimental pop rock,” something that pushes music’s boundaries but still would be at home on the radio.

Decoteau may be a hard-working musician, but he continues to use the business skills he learned at Babson. He’s an account-ant with Bridge Nine Records, a record label based in Peabody, Mass., and he’s the founder and owner of Topshelf Records, a Hampden, Mass., label. “When I sign a new album, I’m like a little kid hearing the music,” he says.

Decoteau needs more than just a love of music to run Topshelf. It’s a one-man shop, so he handles everything, from the marketing to the bookkeeping, but that’s not a concern. His Babson education prepared him well.

Many Babson alumni work in music and other artistic fields, but their business background is still a big part of their lives. It helps them reach a wider audience, and if one day they decide to drop music for other employment, that degree is there for them. “I have that to fall back on,” Decoteau says.

Frank Hsieh, MBA ’98, is co-owner of two Marlboro, Mass.-based companies, Sheumann Laser Inc. and Axcel Photonics Inc., that make lasers. He’s also busy as director of the Beantown Swing Orchestra.

In the late 1990s, Hsieh was living in New York City and got caught up in a swing music revival. Six or seven nights a week, he went to hear bands and experience the rambunctious atmosphere, the “people doing flips and acting crazy and having a great time.”

This wasn’t stale music from a bygone era. It was boisterous and fun, but when Hsieh moved to Boston in 2004, he didn’t see that same spirit in its swing scene. Sensing an opportunity, he started Beantown Swing Orchestra and filled it with young musicians. They make music that’s rich, fast, and swinging. When they play a wedding, everyone dances, from the young, who enjoy the band’s energy, to the old, who relish seeing swing come alive. “You have to feel the beat,” Hsieh says.

Hsieh works hard on marketing, a skill learned at Babson. He focuses on Web search because he doesn’t have a big marketing budget, and he hustled to have the band featured in the 2008 movie My Best Friend’s Girl, after learning a wedding scene called for a swing band. Unfortunately, marketing is an important skill that many musicians don’t have. “Most musicians in the band just want to play,” Hsieh says. “I’ve noticed how little they know how to promote themselves.”

Describing herself as an “odd combination of left brain/right brain,” Pamela Pantos, MBA ’06, was a double major in
“There are more holes than I thought,” says Thoennes, an actor who, besides appearing in plays, movies, and TV shows, does commercial voice-overs. In the 1990s, he was the voice of the dietary supplement Beano. “There’s money in voice-over,” he says. “Beano voice-overs were great for me.”

Thoennes wears the sweater because he wants to set a mood of fun and ease. The days of playing are lost in the teenage years, he says, as people hit high school and yearn to grow up. In his class, as students work with props, costumes, and imagination, he takes them back to more carefree times. “They try to joyfully pretend,” he says. “They can let their guard down.”

He also helps students feel confident and relaxed doing something that can be terrifying: public speaking. “I’ve seen students blossom,” says Thoennes, having witnessed the quiet find a voice and the mouse gain a roar.

A Place of Possibility
If Sorenson is a place of possibility, where Bat Boy roams and Professor Brad encourages and inspires, then another such building is the Sorenson Family Visual Arts Center.

To visit the arts center, you first enter Trim and walk straight, past the dining hall’s sounds and smells, until you come to a door. Once it shuts behind you, there is quiet. You’re in another world. Down one hall is a clay studio and darkroom, and down another is a drawing and painting studio. Ahead of you is a glass case full of pitchers, vases, bowls, and even a Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head, all made by hand.

The arts center is where Danielle Krcmar, artist in residence, has her studio. It’s a surreal place filled with sketches lying in drawers, gargoyles that she’s made for a Louisiana church, and a series of busts she’s created after reading personal ads and imagining who placed them.

“I have always made things since I was little,” Krcmar says. She began college as a psychology major, but her life’s music and economics at Wellesley College, and after graduation, she debated what path to take. Eventually choosing music, she left behind the world of business, at least temporarily.

Pantos went to Europe and began an 18-year odyssey there. Receiving a master’s degree in musicology and becoming an opera singer, she recorded for EMI Records, earned fluency in five languages, and sang all over the continent. Her career was an amazing success, but then something happened: Her children were born.

Suddenly, the idea of touring, while leaving them behind, didn’t seem right. “That wasn’t me,” she says. “I wasn’t the type to leave my family.” She decided to quit opera. Some questioned that choice, but for Pantos, it was an easy decision. She wasn’t a diva craving applause. Family came first.

Reconnecting with her business roots, Pantos came to Babson, figuring that a school with such an entrepreneurial spirit would understand and nurture a creative person like her. “Everyone is creative and a maverick there,” she says. The College rewarded her with a full scholarship.

After graduation, she worked in corporate finance, but while she excelled at it, all was not well. She didn’t wake up feeling excited about work, as she did singing opera. “There was a hole,” she says. “I was empty.” She needed the arts.

Enter Bruce Thibodeau, MBA ‘90, president of the Los Angeles-based Arts Consulting Group, which offers services for cultural institutions. Thibodeau, who also earned a Certificate of Advanced Management at Babson, has made a career in arts management, and he became a mentor to Pantos while she was at Babson.

Thibodeau discovered an executive director position opening at Opera North, a Lebanon, N.H., opera festival. Running such an institution wouldn’t be easy. Arts organizations are very entrepreneurial, doing much with little. “Cultural institutions invented bootstrapping,” Thibodeau says. “You need the best business practices.” In fact, the ideal candidate is someone like Pantos, who has both an arts and business background, so he immediately contacted her. “Pamela, this is it,” he said.

It was the perfect fit. Pantos got the job.
course crystallized once she settled on art. “Once I shifted into that, it was like coming home.” From then on, being an artist was a matter of keeping at it, of moving past rejections and holding on to positive feedback.

Krcmar curates exhibitions placed in buildings across campus, and she teaches drawing and sculpture. She also helps with a creative competition in the Fast Track MBA program where teams build towers out of cardboard, wire, and colored paper. That may sound like an arts and crafts class, but the exercise has the serious purpose of bonding students who typically communicate via the Internet. Krcmar has witnessed students surprise themselves by what they create. Making art involves another way of thinking, and budding artists may not feel up to the challenge. “There is an opportunity for discovery along the way,” Krcmar says. “Hopefully, they go out and have a different way of seeing the world.”

Krcmar thinks of Jamaal Eversley ’10. She was holding a drawing class outside when Eversley, a first-year at the time, came walking by. He was surprised. “There’s a drawing class here?” he asked her.

Eversley remembers that day. Drawing was a love of his in high school, and as he pondered what college to attend, Eversley was caught between art and business. His parents wanted him to major in something “safe,” so business ultimately won out.

When Eversley first arrived at Babson, he put the artistic side of himself away, but that didn’t feel right. “I felt like I wasn’t being true to myself,” he says. “I lost my creative flow. I wasn’t happy.” Then he ran into Krcmar’s drawing class, and everything changed. “I didn’t think arts were important here,” he says. “I thought it was strictly a business school.”

Since that day, Eversley has reignited his artistic side, tackling poetry, acting, drawing, painting, and ceramics. He feels right again, and his parents have noticed. “You’ve become a well-rounded man,” they told him, and he agrees. After graduation, Eversley hopes to obtain an MFA in theater while working at an accounting firm.

Another student with both an artistic bent and business know-how is Jamie Kent ’09. He takes voice lessons, participates in musical theater, and plays in a band, Jamie Kent and the Options, and he owns his own business as well, Llama Tu Mama Entertainment, which provides live sound production and studio engineering. He began the business in high school, with his parents and him putting up the $1,000 needed for equipment.

Kent also took the lead his sophomore year, as president of the Babson Entertainment Initiative student group, of remodeling the campus' lack of live music. Kent proposed inviting bands to play at Roger’s Pub. Dean Hanno told him, “Go make it happen, and we’ll give you the money,” and so the Friday Night Live performance series was born.

Kent started writing music in high school, and he composes in the quiet hours of the early morning. Everything is still, and he plays guitar, waiting for songs to come. He doesn’t have to force them. “It just flows,” he says.

When he came to Babson, he assumed that he would work in the music business once he graduated. Four years later, his thinking has shifted. “I realized there was a lot of potential to create change through business,” he says. Social entrepreneurship now inspires him, but he hasn’t forgotten about his songwriting. Ideally, he wants a job that somehow combines environmental work with music. He’s been volunteering with Reverb, a Portland, Maine-based company that helps music tours to be green.

Until that perfect job comes along, though, Kent hopes to work full time on his music, maybe even book himself a tour. He figures he has six months. After that, student loan bills start to arrive.

The Core of Entrepreneurship

A man alone with his guitar, making something out of nothing, has much in common with the essence of Babson. Students like Kent receive many benefits from the arts, including new friendships, perspectives, and experiences to fill a resume, but perhaps most importantly, they gain an insight into entrepreneurship.
Songwriters or painters must have the courage to take risks and stretch their minds creatively. So too do entrepreneurs. “In many ways, [creativity is] the precursor to entrepreneurial thinking and acting,” says Dennis Ceru, lecturer of entrepreneurship.

The relationship between creativity and entrepreneurship is examined in various College classes, and in April, the Arthur M. Blank Center for Entrepreneurship held the inaugural Babson Creative Thinking Prize, which highlighted the trial-and-error process that innovators, whatever the field, use to develop their handiwork.

As such, the contest focused less on the artistic pieces the five finalists created and more on how the students made those items. “It’s not the outcome,” says Trish Costello, P ’12, P ’12, Blank’s director. “It’s the journey.”

Professor Neck teaches Social Entrepreneurship by Design, a course very much about that journey. For the class, cotaught by Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship Stephen Schiffman, students identify societal problems and generate ideas for solving them, creating visual representations of their proposals. Their classroom, known as the Romper Room, fills with colors, cutouts, drawings, and notes. Projects hang from the ceiling, and the walls become covered.

That’s an unfamiliar way of learning for many students. “They are taken back at first,” Neck says. “For a little while, they’re paralyzed.” Students can feel uncomfortable sharing an idea, claiming it might be stolen and hiding the real reason behind their discomfort, which is fear. “When you create something, you put yourself out there,” Neck says. “The number one roadblock to creativity is fear.”

There is fear for some Two-Year MBA students, too, when on the first day of class, they’re placed into creative groups such as improv, puppetry, music, sculpture, and drawing. These different groups, part of the program’s creativity component, are assigned to an artist and tasked with putting on a performance or exhibition. The experience is meant to foster creativity, build teamwork, and encourage risk taking in a supportive environment.

Students also can discover that they have hidden talents, says Phyllis Schlesinger, who helped restructure the College’s MBA curriculum in the early 1990s and since coming back to campus has become the creativity component’s coordinator. “People say they can’t dance, they can’t draw,” she says. “Well, yes you can.” She remembers one student in a writing group who became a poet, even though he initially wanted nothing to do with rhythm and rhyme. She also recalls a usually reserved student breaking into spontaneous motions during class and announcing, “I’m in the movement group.”

The first exercise Ceru gives students in Creativity, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship, a Fast Track course, asks them to divide a square into four equal parts. As with Neck’s class, students aren’t sure what to make of the assignment. They were expecting a traditional MBA class, not a geometry lesson. “They are shocked when they see this,” Ceru says.

At first, students go with the obvious answer to the exercise, drawing two lines like a cross inside the square, but feeding off each other’s ideas, they soon move beyond that to more creative solutions, which is exactly the point. The exercise is meant to shake them from “knee-jerk mode,” to make them think laterally and divergently, Ceru says.

Students also keep a journal, which forms a habit of reflection. People typically confront problems head-on, but by stepping back and reflecting, other options present themselves. The key is keeping the mind open to possibility, as an artist does when creating. “It’s about developing a lifelong approach to creativity and entrepreneurship,” says Ceru.

**What About the Ears?**

Back at *Bat Boy* rehearsal, the cast and crew aren’t thinking about any philosophy of creativity or entrepreneurship at the moment. Tonight, their main concern is putting on a good show. They’re also still fretting about Eslami’s fake ears.

“I hope they work tonight,” says director Fagan. “People who come to *Bat Boy* want to see his ears. The ears and fangs are everything.”

When Eslami appears with his fake ears attached, Fagan walks right over and touches them. “They’re fabulous,” he says. Eslami agrees. “They’re feeling good so far.”

Back at the light board, stage manager Stephanie White ’09 prepares for rehearsal, watching the cast and crew. They have spent a lot of time together making *Bat Boy* a reality. “They are my Babson family,” she says. “[The play is] my home away from academics.”

The coming weekend’s performances will be bittersweet for her. The shows will be the culmination of everything they’ve been working towards, but then seemingly in a flash, it will all be over, and they will gather to take the set down. That’s a sad moment. “You start tearing up,” she says.

But White consoles herself, for other magic is waiting to be created. “There are always other shows,” she says.