“WE’RE AIMING FOR A CAMPUS WHERE THE ARTS ARE VIEWED AS AN INTEGRAL WAY OF EXPERIENCING THE WORLD.”
"I was basically groomed for medicine," Bañagale says. "That had been my whole academic upbringing."

With one slight deviation: He’d taken piano lessons from the age of 5. Other than that, his limbered fingers brushed mostly through science books.

So on that night, after that lab, which he describes as “particularly grueling,” this question written in chalk on the bricks greeted him: “Do You Really Love What You are Doing?”

With the emphatic “no,” he came to realize he felt more chemistry with music. The next day he enrolled in his first music course, Creating New Musical Theatre.

“That class, almost 25 years ago, set me on the course to be a music and theatre double-major, a composer, an arts administrator, a music historian, a teacher, and now a director. Once I came to embrace the power of the performing arts in a liberal arts education, I kept moving forward.”

His latest step forward came this summer when Bañagale became director of the new Office of Performing Arts at CC.

Bañagale says by CC creating the OPA, the college understands the importance of arts and the role they play in people’s everyday lives.

Born from the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College strategic plan, the OPA’s key roles are to make the arts at CC more collaborative, prominent, and accessible — in essence to broaden and strengthen the roles of music, theatre, dance, film, creative writing, and journalism.

“We’re aiming for a campus where the arts are viewed as an integral way of experiencing the world,” Bañagale says. “Everyone has a role. There are opportunities for students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community members to engage at all levels. We have our public performances, our academic classes, and our student-run groups. People can be a part of the performance or the audience, sometimes both.”

Bañagale adds that a few weeks ago, he told all first-year students that the core tenets of the performing arts — improvisation, interpretation, and communication — are skills that apply to all areas of life.

“When people get to observe and learn new ways, get to improvise, interpret, and communicate in performing arts, we witness the true power of the arts.”
That’s one reason Jaiel Mitchell ’18 is excited about working at the OPA as its first paraprofessional. “At CC, I engaged in performing arts programming at nearly every level and I grew so much. I’m grateful to help curate that atmosphere for other students.”

Another former student, Nick Stephens ’14, who has returned to direct music for the Theatre and Music Departments’ production of “Spring Awakening,” says performing arts at CC have moved “so far forward” in the five years since he graduated. He’s also noticed more collaboration.

Bañagale plans to keep moving forward despite the ambiguity that often accompanies new ventures.

“The fact that none of us exactly know where this will all end up is thrilling. We have a strategic plan and a structure, but we’re improvising our way toward what comes next. And that process is something embraced by the performing arts at its core.”

Collaboration Floats ‘Men On Boats’

A textbook example of robust collaboration at Colorado College is the making of “Men On Boats,” the play that retells the 1869 expedition of the Grand Canyon.

The production marks the first time the Fine Arts Center’s Theatre Company has joined with CC’s Music and Theatre and Dance Departments, says Shawn Womack, associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance.

“We came together for the love of a play,” Womack says.

Students also have a role via a CC course called Men On Boats: Reimagining History Through Collaborative Theatre, Movement, and Sound. It’s a hybrid class with both academic and hands-on production work.

“The class will directly inform the creative and production choices that bring the play to the stage,” says Ryan Bañagale ’00, director of performing arts.

Womack adds that classes in the arts help students address challenges with creativity. “They learn how to imagine new solutions and to be adaptable … to stay present under difficult conditions, to dive deep, and to be truthful — all excellent skills not only for the workplace, but also for a life well-lived.”

“Men On Boats” will run from April 24 to May 2, 2020, at CC’s Edith Kinney Gaylord Cornerstone Arts Center.