

A Place to Belong

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I was not the most athletic of children. My mother would tell you otherwise because that’s what mothers are legally obligated to do, but you’re going to have to trust me on this one.

Although my parents enrolled me in just about every sport you can imagine from the time I could walk, I’ve only had one *serious* sports-related injury: a pulled groin muscle. I wish I could tell you it was from an intense basketball game or a football tackle gone awry. No, this injury occurred when I was in fourth grade during a school limbo contest. Yes, you read that correctly. Limbo. I was one of the final three competitors. The entire student body of Lincoln Elementary was watching and chanting, “How low can you go?” For the record, I was going pretty low. The bar was probably a mere twenty inches off the ground. I bent back, emulating a scene from *The Matrix*, and had just begun my journey under the bar when I felt a pop. I collapsed, writhing in pain on the gym floor. I’m pretty sure it was the first documented limbo injury in history. I had to be escorted to the nurse’s office by two friends—you know, one arm over each of their shoulders as the crowd politely clapped? My aunt came and picked me up from school that day and helped me ice my injury, which will be discussed in a later article titled “Times I Wish I Was Dead.”

So no matter what my mother may say, athleticism is not my gift, and I’m okay with that. Because somewhere between my aunt icing my groin and entering puberty, I discovered theater, and my life has never been the same. Theater gave me a place to excel and a place to belong. It gave me a team with whom I worked toward a unified goal. Most importantly, it gave me an enormous circle of family and friends. Without it, I would have been one of those kids in middle school who slid under the radar—not a behavioral problem, not an academic concern—coasting silently through class, year after year, waiting on graduation to “find myself.” Luckily, I found myself, my

confidence, and my passion during those formative years thanks to a wonderfully inspiring community theater and, later, some school electives.

Now, at the age of 32, I have had the opportunity for almost a decade in the public education system to provide that same haven for thousands of students. As a middle school theater teacher, I get to see kids find a place to belong for the first time in their lives. I get to see the girl who is labeled an outcast blow everyone away with a powerful song. I get to see the kid who is teased for being smaller than his classmates become the school heartthrob for a day. It’s about more than putting on plays and dressing up in costumes—it’s about giving every child in the world a place to fit in, a place to empathize with others, and a place to discover more about who they are.

I am so fortunate to have found a school like Baychester Middle School that has an administration and faculty that values and prioritizes theater. When I made the move to New York City in 2013, I naively assumed that theater programs in the city’s public schools would be flourishing. I was shocked to learn that most public schools had completely cut the arts programs for budgetary reasons and were relying solely on nonprofit after-school programs to subsidize them. Shawn Mangar, the principal at Baychester, was determined to buck the norm and hire a full-time teacher to build a strong theater program.

Upon being hired, I began to slowly cultivate the theater program that Mr. Mangar envisioned, and time and again I was reminded of the transformative power of theater. Each year, I have the pleasure of directing an elaborate school musical, for which the community comes out in droves. In our second year, after a performance of *The Little Mermaid*, I watched one of my students quietly hang up her costume, remove her makeup, and slip out of the auditorium to head home alone. I ran after her and asked her why she didn’t want

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to stay and greet the audience. She told me she was sad because nobody in her family came to watch her perform. By this time, one of her castmates had caught up to us. He tenderly put his hand on her shoulder and said, “We *are* your family, and we were all here for you tonight.” The next year, I implemented a program called “Adopt an Actor,” in which teachers in my school could sponsor a member of the musical’s cast or crew. With this sponsorship, the teacher paid ten dollars to purchase a bouquet of flowers for their adoptees and also wrote a card expressing pride in the students’ commitment and accomplishment. The flowers and card would be delivered to the students before the opening night performance so that each kid felt loved and supported and so that no kid ever again felt that they had no one in the audience there to see them shine.

During my program’s fourth year, one of the kids who was “adopted” was an eighth grader from the stage crew. This kid, who many teachers might label a “problem child,” had just randomly shown up, uninvited, to one of my rehearsals for *Grease*. He asked if he could stay and watch, so of course I said yes. He came to every rehearsal for a week before he asked if he could run the sound equipment. Because it seemed important to him, I let him do it on a trial basis. That week turned into a few more, and pretty soon, he was an integral part of our team. I heard from many of his teachers that his classroom behavior had improved drastically because he did not want to risk his position on our crew. When he received his flowers and card on opening night, he scoffed and made an off-handed comment to maintain his tough guy persona. However, two of my colleagues texted me later that night that they saw this kid sitting alone at a bus stop, reading and re-reading his card while he smelled his flowers.

These are the stories that keep me going. These are the stories I relive when people ignorantly dismiss my subject or field of expertise as “less important” than core subjects. And these are the stories I use to encourage all teachers to try to incorporate the arts into their curriculum when possible. The biggest complaint I hear is, “Theater does not fit into my curriculum.” But, with enough creativity, theater can fit into literally

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any curriculum. Here are just a few examples that I have shared with fellow teachers over the years:

Geometry: Pair up two students in a head-to-head debate in which they must convince the audience why *their* assigned shape should be awarded a national holiday, including the formula for finding its volume.

Publicize it in the hallways to create excitement (e.g., *Today’s the day! Prism v. Cylinder! Who will prevail?*)

Science: Put your class in small groups and assign them to write a short skit in which all the simple machines are the characters, being sure to include a central conflict (e.g., *The lever and the pulley are having marital problems because there is a wedge between them*).

Social Studies: Play a quick round of “Press Conference.” One student stands at the front of the class and you hold a card that reads “Ulysses S. Grant” over her head. The class gets to ask her questions to give her small clues about her identity (e.g., *Was it challenging to graduate from West Point Military Academy?*). Keep a running list of clues on the board until the student can guess her identity.

English Language Arts: When choosing a student to read the novel aloud, say, “Who can read this chapter of *Holes* with Oscar-worthy emotion? I need somebody who can do voices for Stanley, Mr. Sir, and the Warden!” Watch how excited the students are to volunteer.

Incorporating theater in your classroom does not have to be daunting. Find small, simple ways to introduce it every now and then, and your classroom will become a joyful hub for learning. It might help you reach a group of students who may be struggling to grasp abstract concepts. It will encourage other students to think of those concepts in different ways, activating a completely different part of their brains. Or it may very well ignite something special in that one student who is sitting quietly, sliding under the radar, desperately searching for a place to belong.

Collin Andrulonis is originally from Chickasha, OK. He has been a theater teacher in public schools for the past nine years and currently lives in New York City, where he continues to teach theater to middle schoolers in the Bronx. He is also an award-winning actor, director, and playwright.