

1-1-2013

# Remembering Thespis: How Former Student Actors Value Their Experiences In High School Plays

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**REMEMBERING THESPIS: HOW FORMER STUDENT ACTORS VALUE THEIR  
EXPERIENCES IN HIGH SCHOOL PLAYS**

by

**MICHAEL EDGAR BUTTERWORTH**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2013

MAJOR: THEATRE

Approved by:

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Advisor

Date

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## DEDICATION

To my students—they have always been my best teachers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all of the people who have made this research study possible. My advisor, Dr. Mary Anderson, has given me sage guidance throughout the process. She encouraged me to explore uncharted avenues and to experiment with different forms of writing and research. All the while she held me to the highest standards and challenged me to do the best work possible. I have learned and grown under her tutelage.

I am also grateful to the following: Dr. James Thomas, for his indomitable wisdom; Dr. Mary Cooney, for her gentle guidance; and Dr. Michael Barbour, for his insights. My parents, Fred and Ritajean Butterworth, have always asked the right questions; my brothers, Fredde, Dan, Jeff, and Tom, also peppered me with questions that gave me valuable ideas. I am grateful to Melissa Masnik Pasanen, Rita Spiess Black, Jane Rockhold, and Doug McFalls, without whom there would be no chapter 3. Thanks also to Ruben Van Kempen, Michael Tatlock, Patricia Costa Kim, Christine Roberts, John Overmier, Dr. Ann C. Wright, Matt Foss, Greg Bailey, Aaron Westlake, Jennifer Goff, Kassy Skoretz, and Julia Moriarty.

And finally, special thanks to Scott Smithson, whose love and support have made the whole process worth it.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*The auditorium of Cavanaugh High School<sup>1</sup> in the southwest part of the city looks decidedly odd from the outside. It looks to me like the stern of the upside-down cruise ship from the movie The Poseidon Adventure. The part of the auditorium closest to the street is like the rounded hull of the ship poking out of the water where the beleaguered passengers emerge at the end of the film. On the inside, the auditorium seats 1000, one of the largest school auditoriums in the school district. All of the seating is essentially on one level; the majority of it, about 800 seats, gently rakes up from a very wide stage. The distinctive up-ended hull shape is due to the last two hundred seats, which bank up from the floor at a steeper rake. The ceiling of the auditorium curves above the seating area. Its distinctive street profile is because it has no fly space. It is cavernous.*

*When I first arrived at Cavanaugh High School to teach drama and direct plays, the auditorium had not been used for productions in over a decade. My first plays in the space barely attracted an audience of 100. By the time I left eight years later in 1999, our audiences had grown to fill most of the lower sections on closing nights.*

*So in the spring of 2000 when I returned to Cavanaugh to see my successor's spring musical I was a member of the audience, seated in the back section, the part with the steep rake, just below the light booth. The play was the stage version of a much beloved movie musical. I was in an odd mood, regretful for having left my teaching position at this school, but excited to see my former students. I had built the program from scratch the previous eight years and was interested in seeing what my successor had done with the fertile ground I had left him. By the time I left my position I had found a comfortable rhythm and had made great strides in the inner*

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<sup>1</sup> Cavanaugh High School is a pseudonym.

*truth of the students' characters and clarity of staging. Production values had become ever more complex and professional. I was confident that regardless of how my former students were directed, they would prevail.*

*However, the evening did not go as I thought it would. I remember cringing through the entire production, wondering what this neophyte had done with my program. The costumes were shoddy, the set painting amateurish, the acting disconnected and tedious. Of course, I ignored the fact that it was much better and far more ambitious than many of my first efforts when I arrived at Cavanaugh. But at the time, I could not wait for the ordeal to end.*

*When the final notes sounded and the curtain call began I was shocked. The audience members cheered. They clapped. They stood. This piece of high school theatre that I indignantly believed to be quite a step down from what had come before was being applauded. I wondered what the students could possibly be getting out of this experience. And then I had an epiphany.*

*The audience did not care for the aesthetics of the experience in the same way I did. They were there to support the efforts of their children. The students were clearly proud of their endeavors, excited to have accomplished a finished production. I have been curious about it ever since—it is a question that has dogged me. What is the school play? What are its unique aesthetics? What place does this perennial event have in American culture? Is it merely an imitation of professional theatres, or does it have its own guiding principles, ones that are both stated and unstated? What are the misconceptions about the school play and what is its relationship to other kinds of theatrical products, from the professional, semi-professional, community, and collegiate? Do student actors really learn bad habits here, needing to be broken by subsequent training, or should the high school theatre experience be praised that it instills a love of performing arts at all? What do students make of their experiences in the school play once they have graduated and moved on to their adults lives? What is the value of the school*

*play?*

*The questions have stayed with me for over a decade. When I started my doctoral studies, I wondered if these were the kinds of questions that had enough merit to warrant further investigation, to become the subject of a research study. Although I had lofty ideals of grappling with the entire subject of the high school play, my research study has narrowed down to a version of the last question listed above. What is the value of the high school play, and even more specifically how do former student actors remember and value their experiences in the high school play?*

As you are reading this, somewhere in the United States students and teachers are producing a high school play. The play is being thought about, discussed, planned, rehearsed, agonized over, celebrated, and performed—and it is considered a “tradition” (Landy 1982; Leonhard 1991; Carey and Farris 1995; Cousins 2000; O’Toole 2009). Charles Leonhard’s 1991 study, *The Status of Arts Education in American Public Schools*, finds that 78.5 % of secondary schools presented plays and 39.2% presented musicals during the 1988-89 school year (32). Leonhard reports that 63.5% of schools offered theatre courses during the school day (37). According to the National Center of Educational Statistics in 1995 (Carey and Farris), the last year for which this information is available, an average of two formal theatre productions were produced nationally among secondary schools during the 1993-94 school year. This study finds that 54% of American high schools offered drama as a course subject during the school day. These statistics from 1995 are misleading, because they do not take into account that some schools might present three or four productions while other schools may not present any. Unfortunately, the most recent survey from the 2009-2010 school year does not include information on formal presentations. The offerings of drama as a subject during the school day

have dropped to 45% (Parsad and Spiegelman 2010). In contrast to these findings a recent joint project between Utah State University and Educational Theatre Association (Omasta 2012) reports that 79% of American high schools offered “at least one course in the theatre during the 2011-12 school year” (13). According to this survey, just under 95% of the reporting high schools offered some kind of extracurricular performance activity such as a school play for its students. Omasta notes the difference between the Department of Education study (Parsad and Spiegelman 2010) and the Utah State University study, explaining that the 2010 study focused on music and visual arts and surveyed only administrators, while his 2012 study captured data from teachers. Omasta’s study suggests that formal school performances in high schools are a nearly universally practiced aspect of theatre education in the United States.

Historically, teachers and scholars have characterized school plays as productions of scripts by established playwrights presented in schools in a manner that replicates the standards of professional theatre (Motter 1929; Coggin 1956; Landy 1982; Smith 1988). More recently, educators discuss the school play as the latter part of a continuum that runs from informal dramatic play such as that associated with young children to formal presentation in front of an audience (Hornbrook 1998; Woodson 1998; Bolton 2007; O’Farrell 2007). Heather Cousins (2000) foregrounds the iconic status of the high school play, writing “the school play is as much a part of American high school culture as the junior prom and the Homecoming Football Game” (85).

I have been intimately involved in the high school play since the age of eight when I first attended a production of *Dark of the Moon*. My brother was in that production, and when I finally got to high school myself, I too became involved in the drama program. I became so interested in theatre that I eventually majored in drama in college and became a certificated high school theatre teacher in 1990.

During my twelve years teaching drama and directing plays, eight of those years at Cavanaugh High School, my definition of the high school play evolved. I was traditionally trained, and when I started directing high school plays I believed that published play scripts were central to my program. With the introduction into my repertoire of scripts devised by students, my definition of what was possible for a high school play expanded. Ultimately, my definition of a high school play became what my students and I chose to put in front of the general school audience, an audience that consisted of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and members of the community.

Although scholarship in theatre education regularly discusses the school play as one of the most common forms of theatre education (Landy 1982; Hornbrook 1998; Cousins 2000; Bolton 2007; O'Toole 2009), scholarly studies of the school play are rare (Catterall 2002; Mackey 2012). Studies of the school play can also be hidden and difficult to locate. One of the most intriguing studies of a school play is a chapter in Peter Woods' 1993 study of what he calls "critical events" in teaching and learning (2). The subject headings for this book in one of the most comprehensive online library catalogs, WorldCat, do not mention theatre education or drama. When the school play is discussed, it is often dismissed, marginalized, or criticized (Cousins 2000; Brown and Urice 2003; Lazarus 2004; Bolton 2007; O'Toole 2009). For example, Brown and Urice (2003) argue that "because of inconsistencies, uneven production values, and inadequately trained teachers, the contributions of educational theatre often are not recognized by university practitioners, administrators, or the public" (25). In an essay included in a comprehensive study of arts education research, James Catterall (2002) appeared surprised at the lack of research studies about formal drama in educational settings:

We found no explicit conception of drama as an art form in the research studies we surveyed or in the studies we summarize here. And we found no empirical research into the academic and social effects of what was termed or even might be

called the theater arts of any sort. This means that a great many things potentially relevant to a discussion of the academic and social effects of drama and theater do not enter the present conversation, especially things having to do with formal theatrical production and performance (59).

This study seeks to fill in some of the gaps in the literature about high school drama, claiming the school play as a practice that is central to theatre education, rich in tradition, and brimming with potential as an area of serious scholarly concern.

My dissertation is a qualitative study of the value of the high school play for the student actors who participate. My primary and secondary research questions are:

1. What is the value of the school play for former student actors?
2. How have the participants incorporated what they experienced into their present lives?

I used one-on-one interviews and primary source documents such as show programs and photographs to gather data. In this study you will meet seven former student actors. All of these participants performed in school plays while in high school. They are now adults and this study captures their impressions, feelings, memories, and stories about taking part in school plays and what those experiences have come to mean to them as adults. Six of the participants in this study are former students of mine. I interviewed and recorded each of these students individually over the course of two weeks. Each interview lasted from ninety minutes to two hours. Although it is somewhat unusual to put it this way, the seventh participant is myself.

When I began researching the school play, I had no idea that my research would take me so deeply into my personal relationship with the topic. When I decided to interview six of my former students, I never imagined that there would be an extensive self-study that amounts almost to a seventh interview. The study is about the value of the school play to its participants—it is also a very personal exploration of what the school play has meant to me in my personal and professional life. Education scholar Britzman (2003) writes:



Teachers bring to their work their own idiomatic school biography, the conflicted history of their own deep investments in and ambivalence about what a teacher is and does, and likewise they anticipate their dreams of students, their hopes for colleagues, and their fantasies for recognition and learning (2).

I have collected stories from my life in an attempt to clarify for myself my own conflicted history surrounding productions of school plays. Along the way I have found confirmation of many of the beliefs about what theatre education can bring for students. Sally Mackey (2012) summarizes the widely accepted affective and cognitive outcomes of theatre education to be “increased confidence and self-esteem, a sense of community, a nurturing of pride in achievement, discipline and attention to detail and, of course, performance skills....” (42).

Beyond the widely accepted outcomes of theatre education, I have also had to confront myths and dreams about what students achieve through the arts. The dreams and desires, the accrued mythologies around arts education, are not just my own, but also those of other researchers. Theatre educator Jonothan Neelands (2004) complains about a tendency in theatre education research towards mythologizing “the efficacy of drama education” (48). The resulting discourse leads to advocacy and rhetoric that extols the virtues of how drama changes people. Neelands writes, “Drama cannot, of course, of itself, teach in any kind of way, nor can it, of itself, be powerful” (48). Neelands argues that when theatre educators discuss theatre and drama in this manner, they inadvertently hide the presence of human agency:

What is hidden in the claim that “drama is powerful” are the distinctive and preferred values, ethics and aesthetics of the author and how these socially constructed subjectivities have shaped pedagogical actions, intentions and the interpretation and presentation of the efficacy of the “results” or effects of drama (48).

The chosen techniques, exercises, and pedagogy of theatre educators affect the outcomes and the interpretations of those outcomes. According to Neelands, pedagogy is not neutral.

Memories are not neutral either. While some of the stories collected here tend to confirm

earlier research as to what is valuable about the theatre arts for young people, the act of remembering adds a level of depth and complexity. The seven participants discuss what we remember about the experience of being in a school play. What we value today is rooted in experiences we had in the past, but is also shaped by our present circumstances. What remains for each of the participants of these experiences on high school stages is not easily reduced to just confidence, cooperation, and empathy, although all of these affective aspects are present. What remains is a complex and intricate matrix of impressions, funny and sad stories, feelings, scattered photographs, and even tap dance routines.

### *Chapter Outline*

In chapter 2, “Literature Review,” I briefly discuss the historical progression of plays presented in academic settings and how teachers and academics have valued the school play. I also discuss the current trends in theatre education and their impact on the value and production of school plays. Although there is a dearth of research about the school play, several scholars have recently published accounts of their practice, arguing for a socially responsible pedagogy when approaching school productions. I then discuss research into adolescent development which has shaped my response to the interviews I conducted. Finally, I discuss three studies that were particularly influential to this study. The three studies by Woods (1993), Larson and Brown (2007), and Barnett (2006) present qualitative studies of adolescents in school settings focused on issues of cognitive, social, and emotional development. The students were all studied in the context of their involvement in school activities—school plays in the studies of Woods and Larson and Brown, and cheerleading and dance team in the study of Barnett. Woods’ organizational framework guided my study with his three main categories for describing the

educational progress of students through engagement in theatrical projects: personal development, emotional development, and social development.

In chapter 3, “‘What I Am to Be, I Am Now Becoming’: A Heuristic Inquiry,” I use methods of heuristic inquiry to explore my own relationship to school plays. Heuristic inquiry is a method of intense self-study designed by psychologist Clark Moustakas (1961; 1967; 1981; 1985; 1990). I researched my own experience of being in high school plays using photographs, show programs, journals, yearbooks, and other memorabilia. I wrote six short anecdotal episodes and related them to the categories used by Woods (1993) to evaluate the educational outcomes students gained through critical events. Exploring my own relationship to school plays aided me in developing interview questions for the other participants in the study. I also discovered more about why I was drawn to the topic of school plays and its importance in my life.

In chapter 4, “Methodology and Methods,” I turn my attention to the interviews with the study participants. This part of the research is a qualitative case study of former student actors at Cavanaugh High School in the years 1991-1999. I interviewed six of my former students who are now adults. I explain the criteria for choosing these participants, how and why I gathered information from them through interviews, and the questions I asked. I provide a basic demographic overview of Cavanaugh High School, emphasizing its status as a school with a large population of students considered at risk for dropping out.

I discuss how the heuristic inquiry influenced the design of this part of the study, in particular the questions asked and my awareness of my own subjectivity in the research. I go on to explain the processes for managing, organizing, and analyzing the information from the interviews, starting with categories created by Woods (1993) and expanding those categories using an approach to data analysis based on Robert Stake’s (1995) case study method of using both “direct interpretation” and “categorical aggregation” (74). Finally, I explain the limitations

of the study discussing issues of generalizability, validity, reliability, and subjectivity, defining these terms, and explaining how they relate to the data gathered through the interviews with the participants.

In chapter 5, “The Setting, the Context, and the Participants,” I describe the context and setting of teaching at Cavanaugh High School in the 1990s. I explain how Cavanaugh was in the midst of several initiatives that were changing curriculum and governance of the school. I recount three stories from my eight years at the school that provide more background about my teaching and the many kinds of dilemmas I faced within the dynamic environment of this urban high school. I include an extensive introduction to each of the six former student actors I interviewed for this study, Tim, Liz, Jeremy, Dallas, Annie, and Rosie.<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 6, “Noticing What’s There to Be Noticed: Analysis of the Data,” I analyze and discuss the data from the interviews. I include extensive selections from the interview transcripts. I compare the responses of the former student actors to Woods’ 1993 study, to my heuristic inquiry, and to each other. I explore how the former student actors said they valued the experience of being in school plays through the stories they told and the ways in which the participants perceived their own growth and development that occurred as a result of their participation in high school theatre.

In chapter 7, “The Value of the School Play,” I present what the former student actors revealed about what they value about their experiences in school plays today and how their experiences affect their present lives. From their comments and stories I argue that three significant themes emerged: role-playing, the centrality of affective learning, and narrative memory. The students reported that their relationship to the characters they played affected their personalities, making role-playing a significant aspect of the value of the school play. Their

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the former student actors are pseudonyms.

intense emotional memories of being involved in the process of school plays, from audition to performance, revealed a long-lasting set of outcomes in the area of emotional development and affective learning. The students' memories of the stories of the plays suggest that the narratives linger long after the students have left the high school stage. Finally, I make suggestions as to what questions should be asked and explored in future research.

I will now close this first chapter with a slightly edited journal entry I wrote in October of 2012, just after I had completed the interviews with the participants. I am including it here for several reasons. It introduces the use of raw data into the study—the occasional presence of artifacts. It is also a demonstration of some of the techniques of temporal disruption I use throughout the study. For example, I interrupt the flow of scholarly discourse with an anecdote or, in this case, with an artifact that has not been rewritten extensively and yet retains some of the immediacy of the moment in which it was originally written. Although most writing improves upon reflection, revision, and feedback, occasionally the original version preserves an emotional quality in ways that the craft of revision can often leave behind.

*This is a research study. However, there is a story that weaves throughout the research, the literature review, the findings, and the conclusion. It is a story of a teacher, me, and an odyssey of self discovery and re-discovery. Dissertations have a reputation for being dull, dry, objective, and analytical. To weave my own story and experiences deliberately throughout my dissertation is perhaps to take a bit of a risk, but also to rise to the challenge of several of my committee members and advisors: what is in this research topic for you?*

*I took some time arriving at an answer to that question even as I balanced such queries with the actual focus of my study. I took to heart Maxine Greene's (2001) comment that education in the arts is often about learning to "notice what is there to be noticed" (6). That I*

*am a former student actor myself became an intriguing entry point for me to uncover the personal connection I have to the topic. We are almost to the point where graduate students no longer need to apologize for or defend the use of non-traditional methods or non-traditional ways of presenting research—I say almost, because despite over thirty years of pioneering work on the edges of social science research, including research in the arts and education, wherein the subject of academic voice and subjectivity have been regularly challenged and pushed, it is still a tricky matter to present both an organized and easy to follow argument and set of findings, and honor the messy chaos that is lived experience.*

*I started this research by simply wondering. I took the somewhat dusty cliché about “writing what you know” to heart, and started with the school play as a cultural product, a cultural process, that schools have been engaged in for at least a century, or so I thought. The discovery that school plays go back to the very founding of what we would recognize as organized schooling, in the late middle ages and the start of the Renaissance, was startling to me.*

*And then I ran smack into another surprising discovery. The school play was largely seen by most researchers as a somewhat retrograde activity. Indeed some, especially theatre educators of some prominence in the United Kingdom, had almost palpable disdain for the practice, even as they acknowledged its ubiquity. Ah! Where there is controversy, there is something to be discovered. Although as in all dutiful dissertations, my topic is no longer a grand sweeping cultural analysis of the school play, the grander narrative of a practice little researched but about which much is assumed, remains simmering under the surface.*

*The study is now rooted in the lived experience of seven individuals, all of whom were student actors when they were in high school. One of those individuals is myself, the rest of the seven are former students of mine. Our lived experience of school plays takes us out of the realm*

*of mere theory, and into a realm of real lives, real impacts, real feelings, real lessons learned and retained. This is a dissertation about what remains, about remembering, as I say in the title, Thespis, the original first actor of antiquity and mythology. Thespis, according to legend, was the first person to step out of his proscribed role as narrator of events to actually take on the attributes of a character (Nagler 1952, 3). For most of us in this study, our time in high school had us acting for the first time, and for many, the only time in our lives. Thespis seems an appropriate figure to have guiding over this inquiry.*

*Along with Thespis is another figure from mythology who guides this research: Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory in Greek mythology. Mnemosyne is the mother of the muses of art, rhetoric, and music (Hamilton 1942, 36). Without memory, there is no art. Without memory, there are no respondents for qualitative studies, or heuristic inquiry. Mnemosyne along with Thespis, are the muses that guide this dissertation because I found that among other things, both physical, emotional, and educational, the stories of the plays, the narratives of what was acted, are among the most powerful things that remain for the student actors in this study.*

*I suppose the idea that the story remains should not be a surprise to me. I've had some evidence of this my whole life. My father can still recite the opening lines of The Canterbury Tales that he memorized in grade school and in Middle English no less. My mother used to recount stories of playing Penny Sycamore, the mother in You Can't Take It with You in high school in the late 1940s. As the play was first performed on Broadway in 1936, I suppose it was still a relatively new play when my mother was in it. It had yet to calcify into one of the clichés of the high school play.*

*And that really is one of the aspects of this research that haunts it. School plays have a kind of cloying set of mythologies about them. Britzman's (2003) point about education is also true about theatre in schools (6). Because we were all students in schools, we believe we are all*

*experts about what happens in them. The school play is ignored because we think we know what is there. I am now a firm believer that the things we take for granted are the very things we should take another look at, poke and prod a bit more rigorously. Where there are mythologies, there are all of the culture reasons for the mythologies. Where there are clichés there are also surprising novel discoveries.*



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Introduction*

In about 1560 in the old English city of Windsor, the Head Master of Eton College, William Malim, wrote guidelines for the use of plays at his school (Motter 1929). His *Consuetudinarium* is one of the earliest recorded justifications for the use of theatre in an educational setting. Malim promoted the use of acting because it taught effective speaking habits and therefore had high educational importance. Malim wrote that “the art of acting... is a trifling one, but when it comes to teaching the action of oratory and the gestures and movement of the body, nothing else accomplishes these aims to so high a degree.” Furthermore, Malim admitted that there might be other purposes for theatre, such as entertainment. He allowed for the performance of plays in English if they had “subtlety and humour” (in Motter 1929, 51). The oratory argument for the use of plays in schools would persist for the next four hundred years. The entertainment value of such an endeavor has had a much more checkered reputation.

In the review of the literature that follows, I begin by placing the school play into its historical context, with recorded instances of dramatic activity in academic settings going back at least five hundred years. I then discuss the prevailing contemporary educational movements in theatre education: creative dramatics, drama-in-education, process drama, and applied theatre. Proponents of these approaches to theatre education often stand in opposition to formal theatre production in schools. I argue that the school play has been virtually ignored as a topic of serious scholarly concern.

Following the discussion of current trends in theatre education, I explain what recent scholarship says about formal theatre production in schools and the pedagogy associated with directing and producing plays in educational settings. This literature is scarce, but seemingly on

the rise. I close the review of the literature with an analysis and discussion of three qualitative studies that influenced the present research project. The issues raised in these studies include how students understand their own learning process in the arts (Woods 1993), emotional development (Woods 1993; Larson and Brown 2007) and the positive and negative effects of high stakes tryouts on students who want to be involved in school activities (Barnett 2006). Together these studies explore the development of adolescents through interviews with the adolescents themselves raising issues of social, emotional, and personal learning processes that resonate throughout this research project. In particular, Woods' study (1993) provides crucial testimony as to how the school play is valued from the perspective of its participants. It also provides a convenient organizational structure for topics of analysis that I use later in the dissertation.

I conducted the review of the research literature on formal theatre performance in schools over a four year period from 2009-2013. Landy's *Handbook of Educational Drama and Theatre* (1982) and Berkeley's "Changing Views of Knowledge and the Struggle for Undergraduate Theatre Curriculum, 1900-1980" (2004) were important starting points. I started by creating an historic timeline of the topic of school performance which included the above mentioned advice from William Malim. Although I tried to limit my research to school performance in secondary schools, I quickly realized that such distinctions in the historical record only emerged as the high school itself came into prominence in the last half of the nineteenth century. I also started by limiting my research to the United States, but found that such important research and debate occurred in the U. K. and Canada, that I had to expand my search to include other English speaking countries to adequately capture the full range of discussion on the topic of theatre education. So, while the focus of this research study is on high school plays in the United States,

I do not ignore pertinent scholarly resources and research in other countries and in other levels of education.

The topic of the school play has some immediate dilemmas when using contemporary internet-based search engines. The word *play* itself is problematic and caused no end of problems because it has so many meanings. Using the search term *school play* only resulted in works about the use of games and other such non-academic approaches to learning in educational settings, particularly with younger students. Search terms that provided useful results were *theatre, education, drama, production, school, secondary, teaching, directing, and high school*. I used all of these search terms in various combinations. I relied heavily on *WorldCat*, which provided the most comprehensive results, as well as the search engines, *FirstSearch* and *ArticleFirst*. Two of the most helpful subject headings in *WorldCat* were *College and School Drama* and *Theatre-Study and Teaching*. I occasionally consulted *Google Scholar* which produces results based on popularity. For example, *Google Scholar* alerted me to the importance of JoBeth Gonzalez' work in the field of Educational Theatre. Three journals were particularly useful, *Research in Drama Education, Youth Theatre Journal, and Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Three other book length collections of articles provided some of the most effective and relevant contemporary sources with extensive reference lists of their own. *Research Methodologies for Drama Education* (Ackroyd 2006) contains articles that describe current approaches to writing about educational theatre practices including reflective practice (Neelands 2006), narrative inquiry (Zatsman 2006), and case study (Winston 2006). *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education* (Schonmann 2011) is a compendium of short articles reflecting on current issues in educational theatre, including applied theatre (Nicholson 2011), formal theatre (Pinkert 2011), and production (O'Farrell 2011). Finally, *The International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Bresler 2007)

includes comprehensive selections on the history of educational theatre practice (Bolton 2007) and issues related to drama pedagogy in the classroom (O'Toole and O'Mara 2007).

I prominently feature research conducted since 2000, although in a few instances I have chosen to include authors whose work predates this demarcation. For example, I include the work of Winifred Ward in creative dramatics because she sets many of the terms for the debate about school performance. Dorothy Heathcote, Nellie McCaslin, Richard Hornbrook, Maxine Greene, and Wallace Smith are several other educators and theorists whose work informs the discussion of theatre and aesthetic education, but who were written about or who published significant contributions prior to 2000.

Lichtman (2006) argues that the importance of a literature review lies in its ability to survey the landscape of what is currently known about the topic, but also in its ability to provide context, evaluation, and analysis about the strengths and weaknesses of the research available (104). Boote and Biele (2005) argue that a successful literature review provides the context for how one's research builds on what has come before. I have attempted to provide such a context throughout. In the instance of the present study, I have attempted to locate the contemporary issues involved in producing plays in schools within the broader context of the history of theatre education and to demarcate the school play within the multitude of different contemporary techniques and approaches to theatre education.

### ***Historic Backgrounds: "The Charm of Well-Bred Men"***

The development of theatre practices in schools has a long history that goes back nearly as far as existing records will allow us to see (Motter 1929; Bolton 2007; O'Toole 2009). The earliest recorded instances of dramatic activity in schools are the performances of plays. Some scholars point out that because the philosophy of Plato is written out as dialogues, the origins of

drama as a teaching tool in a western context could be considered as starting in Ancient Greece (Coggin 1956; Bolton 2007; O'Toole 2009). But if we are looking for the origins of school drama in academic settings that look more or less like our contemporary models, the origins lie in the late Middle Ages with important developments throughout the Renaissance (Motter 1929; Coggin 1956; Courtney 1968; Allen 1979; Bolton 2007). We can extrapolate patterns from the records, but all we really know for certain are the various instances of play performances written down in the accounting books of schools in Europe during the medieval period. As mentioned above, the *Consuetudinarium* of William Malim is one of the earliest records concerning the justification of the performance of school plays for the educational benefit of students (Motter 1929).

The Jesuits established their colleges in Europe starting in the 1550s. Their use of drama in schools was humanistic in purpose, but became one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the communities where they were performed for the next two hundred years (McCabe 1983). In 1586 the Jesuits wrote the *Ratio Studiorum* as a guide to standardize the curriculum across all of the Jesuit schools and it recommends the performance of plays in Latin. The stated purpose is for “Latin eloquence,” “the art of declamation,” “to teach as well as delight,” and to create “the charm of well-bred men” (21). Much like the school master of Eton College, such a set of justifications for school drama would be used for the next four hundred years. What’s clear from the record is that dramatic activity was used to demonstrate proficiency in Latin, but also for entertainment purposes. Eloquence and charm, deportment and comfort speaking in front of audiences are outcomes that educators still value for students to receive from their encounter with a school play.

Until the end of the nineteenth century educational theatre was closely tied to the study of rhetoric and oratory (Motter 1929; Jackson 2004). Mixed into the study of rhetoric and oratory

was the study and recitation of plays in foreign languages, especially Latin and Greek. In the United States, the study of classical languages did more to include dramatic literature and, by extension, dramatic performance than perhaps any other factor (Clark 1954, 522-524). But there was in general, a deep academic prejudice against dramatic literature, and by extension the performance of plays, exemplified by Harvard College president Cotton Mather's invective in 1723 against "Satan's library" which included plays (Clark 1954, 522). According to historian Jonathan Levy (1989):

Historians will probably never know the true extent of theatrical activity in American schools between the end of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century, for performances and recitations of one kind or another were simply too common to be taken special note of (5).

Levy further comments that plays done in schools were often not called plays "lest they be confused in parents' minds with that seminary of vice, the professional stage" (5). However, there is ample evidence that by the end of the nineteenth century, plays were a regular and often secret or transgressive activity in schools and academies in English speaking countries on both sides of the Atlantic (Mottet 1929; Clark 1954).

In the United States prior to the twentieth century, the production of school plays was largely confined to plays in Latin and Greek, the occasional Shakespeare, and plays that had a particular educational or social function, often as part of festivals and other celebrations. For example, the tragedy of *Cato* was presented by "the young Gentlemen of the Colledge" in Virginia in 1736 (Clark 1954, 521). In another instance, a school for young women in Litchfield, Connecticut presented "highly didactic, moral pieces" in the "tradition of the college commencement plays" in the early years of the nineteenth century (533). O'Toole (2009) makes the point that drama was usually found "hanging about the doorways" of schools (23), relegated to "pre-school dress up corners and play spaces, in out-of-school plays, dance drama displays

and masques, in Christmas nativities,” and other such places outside the school day (23).

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, academics began arguing for the placement of theatre as part of the liberal arts curriculum in colleges (Beckerman 1971; Jackson 2001; Berkeley 2004; Jackson 2004; Berkeley 2008). As the discipline of academic theatre expanded, many of the graduates of newly created drama departments took their expertise and interest into American primary and secondary schools (Popovich 1967; McCaslin 2000; Jackson 2004). One source of tension in the performance of plays in schools was the relationship between school plays which were largely an extracurricular activity, and the offering of drama as a subject in its own right during the school day. As school plays became a regular feature of the American high school, sometimes as fundraising activities known as the junior or senior class play (Whitmire 1921; Beckerman 1971), a variety of approaches to theatre education were implemented in classrooms. The pedagogy of the classroom began to overshadow the pedagogy of the school play, a trend that continues to the present day.

### ***Contemporary Techniques and Practices in Theatre Education***

There are a multitude of current techniques in drama education, each characterized by a specific set of beliefs about its value for students (Hornbrook 1998; Henry 2000; McCaslin 2000; Bolton 2007; Gallagher 2007; Nicholson 2009). These approaches influence the production and use of the school play and also explain the relationship of the school play to current research. Scholars have responded to the wide variety of techniques, finding many ways to research and describe the effectiveness of educational practices in drama classrooms. However, the proliferation of techniques in theatre education has led to a somewhat bewildering and shifting vocabulary to describe the various practices (Henry 2000; Catterall 2002; Schonmann 2005; O’Toole and Mara 2007; Boswell 2010). Some scholars even suggest that theatre education has

no established or agreed upon theory (Urian 2011). In the following section, I focus on the current field of theatre education and situate the practice of the school play within it.

Research in theatre education is often based on the experience of single individuals and their opinions about a particular topic (Catterall 2002; Neelands 2004; Urian 2011). Urian (2011) calls this a “repertoire” approach, with publications on theatre education featuring “full or partial description[s] of practical experience” (142). James Catterall (2002) notes that, historically, “thinking and writing about drama in education ... did not involve much professional social inquiry or research. Rather the deep experiences and up-close observations of teachers and coaches in the schools as well as the trainers of teachers engendered a broad consensus that drama can teach” (58). Although there has been some movement towards more empirical research in the last forty years (Deasey 2002), the emphasis is still on action-research and anecdotal descriptions of best practices. Catterall (2002) sums up the relationship between classroom practice and research as follows:

The presence of drama in American schools rests on informal traditions and is dictated largely by individual teacher preferences for engaging the medium. The range is wide from U.S. teachers making pilgrimages to study with Dorothy Heathcote, to the lone teacher spontaneously organizing a role-playing exercise at the pop of an inspiration, and to entire teaching staffs in schools working in substantial partnerships with local theater companies. The common ingredient is that teachers use drama in their classrooms when they believe it accomplishes something (58).

What I discuss in the following are the findings of a variety of practitioners in the field of educational drama who have published their work and who definitely believe that drama accomplishes something. These educators have become recognized experts in their chosen area through their own practice and the dissemination of their methods of teaching. Therefore most of the research in the field of educational theatre is a kind of literature of practical experience. Although clearly based on the lived practical experience of these educators, their research is



rarely presented as empirical.

### **Creative Dramatics**

Creative dramatics is one of the earliest organized strands of theatre education in American schools. Its earliest incarnations appear in the work of Elnora Whitman Curtis' *The Dramatic Instinct in Education* (1914), Emma Sheridan Fry's *Educational Dramatics* (1917) and the work done at the Francis W. Parker School by John Merrill in the 1920s (Popovich 1967). Creative dramatics is often associated with the progressive education movement of the first part of the twentieth century and the educational philosophy of John Dewey (Popovich 1967). Creative dramatics has had longevity in the United States through the work of Winifred Ward in the 1920s and 1930s, Geraldine Siks and Agnes Haaga in the 1950s, and the work of Nellie McCaslin, who published extensively on the subject from the 1960s to the 1990s (McCaslin 2000; O'Toole and Mara 2007).

Educators practice creative dramatics mostly with students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The goal of creative dramatics is to use the natural imitative orientation of young children to teach social skills such as cooperation, personal skills such as the development of self-esteem, and academic skills such as story structure and narrative (Ward 1930; McCaslin 2000; O'Toole and Mara 2007). Students encounter a story and through dramatic improvisation discover the importance of different features of narrative and character.

The proponents of creative dramatics have had strong though not always consistent relationship to formal public performance. Winifred Ward (1930) cautioned against putting young children on the stage lest they develop habits more akin to exhibition than exploration (16). If public performance was necessary, Ward encouraged the performance of original works developed by the students themselves (48). She favored the spontaneity of in-class informal

performances. She writes “much of the value to the class is lost, it is true, by thus formalizing the play. The informal method, which requires them to think on their feet, to use their own vocabularies, to be alert and original has far greater educational value than the memorizing of a set play” (48). Her beliefs here ripple throughout the literature on educational theatre in the twentieth century. As the emphasis in educational theatre shifted from the production of plays to the value of what is taught in the classroom, teachers began to question the educational value of the school play. Ward cautions that students will bring attitudes into the classroom that reflect their experiences in public performances, remembering the fun, the applause, and the congratulations: “For the production of a play has appealed to most of them as more or less of a lark” (16). She worries that students will not be prepared for the imaginative work of creative dramatics. Ward believed that creative dramatics focused on students and process, whereas formal theatre focused on the product (McCaslin 2005, 13).

Nellie McCaslin continued and extended the work of Winifred Ward in creative dramatics. McCaslin had a long career promoting the efficacy of creative dramatics, publishing extensively on the topic for forty years. In addition to her work on creative dramatics, she also published her research on the history of children’s theatre in the United States (1987). McCaslin (1990) effectively summarizes the position she had taken towards school performances, based on Ward’s cogent warnings:

Many educators since the twenties have shared Winifred Ward’s conviction that children under the age of eleven or twelve should not perform for an audience. The reasons were obvious: children’s productions were generally wooden and lifeless, teacher dominated, and lacking in imagination. Plays were often of poor quality with too few parts to go around. Adult audiences, not schooled in the values of drama for the child, often responded in inappropriate ways, laughing at mistakes or applauding for the wrong reasons. Because teachers understandably wanted productions to go well, they tended to superimpose their own ideas and to cast the same children repeatedly in leading roles, thus giving a few boys and girls a great deal of experience at the expense of the majority.... It is only when some children seem always destined for crowd scenes that opportunities for learning are

lost and, at worst, permanent damage may be done (287).

McCaslin admits that she spent much of her career focused on classroom work and against public performance. It was not until the 1990s that she realized that the desire of her students to perform might actually be a part of a natural inclination to share work with others through public performance. She believes that children hardly notice the distinctions between professional and amateur, process and product, or performing for themselves or performing for others (McCaslin 2005). However, the fluctuations in opinion about formal theatre and its authentic relationship to the processes of drama continue. Many of those tensions exist in the approach to theatre education known as drama-in-education or process drama (Gallagher 2007; O'Toole and Mara 2007; O'Farrell 2011).

### **Drama-in-Education and Process Drama**

Dorothy Heathcote is credited with changing the course of drama education in the U. K. during the late 1960s and 1970s through her dynamic application of Peter Slade's theories of Child Drama and her own years of experimental work (O'Toole and Mara 2007; O'Toole 2009). The movement became known as drama-in-education and promoted the idea of drama as pedagogy and as a learning medium. Drama-in-education is a classroom centered practice that deliberately eschews the idea of playmaking, although playmaking and improvisation are nominally what is going on in a Heathcote driven exercise. Educator Michael O'Hara (1984) sums up drama-in-education as "a developmental, creative process" that steers away from "the production of dramatic artifacts" (315)—it is a methodology unconcerned with formal theatre.

Drama-in-education stresses the importance of "teacher-in-role," a concept central to Dorothy Heathcote's practice, and one of her most important innovations. The teacher participates in shaping the dramatic experience children are having through role-playing as a

figure in the unfolding drama. The teacher-in-role does not assert him or herself into the drama, but continually probes the students through questions and dilemmas, allowing the students to use their own expertise and decision making abilities (Wagner 1976; O'Toole and Mara 2007).

Process drama is often seen as a maturation or refinement of drama-in-education (O'Neill 1995). Drama-in-education and process drama are quickly becoming synonymous, although some argue that there are still some distinctions between the two (O'Neill 1995; Nicholson 2009). This approach to drama education highlights the ability of theatre to teach powerfully about other subjects. Features of drama such as storytelling, role-playing, and improvisation, are used to immerse students in a scenario. That scenario could be designed to teach a lesson in history, government, science, or literature. The students and the teacher/facilitator work together in their roles to deepen the experience and to achieve a set of learning objectives derived from that experience. The format of process drama is extremely flexible and can be adapted to suit many different educational objectives.

For many years, especially in the UK, process drama was seen as a radical alternative to the perceived dominance of formal theatre in school settings. Teachers who adopted the practices of process drama were often very critical of educational drama's devotion to teaching theatre history or acting techniques (Hornbrook 1998; Nicholson 2009). I surmise that it is the emphasis on process drama which has privileged research in areas of theatre education other than the school play.

### **Applied Theatre**

Applied theatre has become a catch-all title that describes theatre practices in various community and institutional contexts, including schools (Nicholson 2011). Nicholson believes that the term has its origins in the 1990s (241). Applied theatre usually involves professionally

trained theatre practitioners engaging with a particular constituency for social or personal betterment. In schools, for example, this can mean the presence of outside professionals guiding students to the creation of texts around a topic of social concern (Nicholson 2011). Helen Nicholson places theatre-in-education (TIE), a popular form of theatre education that has its origins in the UK, as one potential aspect of applied theatre practices (Nicholson 2011). TIE is also a term with multiple meanings, but originally referred to the performance of texts by professional theatre-makers for school students. These performances usually had a topical social theme, and often involved students as interactive audience members or in extended workshops involved around the topic (Nicholson 2009; Prendergast and Saxton 2009).

Augusto Boal is an important theatre educator and practitioner whose work often gets categorized as applied theatre. Boal formed his approach to theatre as an educational, political, and activist tool in Brazil in the 1960s and 70s (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 2006). One of his techniques, Forum Theatre, shows up regularly in educational theatre scholarship. Educators adapt Boal's techniques, often in pursuit of their understanding of critical pedagogy, to enable students to understand various forms of oppression, either from outside, or from within (Mutnick 2006). For example, Alistair Campbell (1994) describes how a TIE performance troupe was reinvigorated by its contact with Boal's practice of Forum Theatre. Campbell's troupe was excited about Boal because "here was a theatre that went further than showing a newly-devised piece to the young people in our targeted group, handing the teacher a resource pack with follow-up ideas to maximize the educational side of the experience, and going home in our disintegrating van" (56). Instead, the practice of Forum Theatre provided ample opportunities for actual dialogue, wherein students could "substitute themselves for the professional protagonist" and actually affect the outcome of the scenario (56). Campbell and company appreciated Boal's techniques because they were "simple, accessible," and "unpretentious" (56).

Contemporary classroom practice in theatre education focuses on the processes of drama, often using them to teach about a wide variety of subjects. Formal theatre presentation is quite deliberately eschewed, emphasizing the personal and emotional, that is to say, affective development, rather than the traditions of theatre practice. At times, the practitioners of contemporary educational theatre in their classrooms can seem antagonistic towards formal theatre, believing that presentation in front of an audience leads to exhibitionism and the development of behaviors more geared towards showing off than personal discovery. Although classroom practice is the overwhelming topic of most research in theatre education, there are exceptions and a growing awareness that formal presentation may offer opportunities for students to apply classroom knowledge on the stage in front of an audience.

### *Formal Theatre*

Although I contend that it is not widely discussed as an area for serious scholarly research, formal theatre is regularly acknowledged as a part of theatre education (O'Toole and Mara 2007; O'Farrell 2011; Pinkert 2011). Even a dedicated practitioner of informal classroom drama such as McCaslin (2005) acknowledges the impulse and need for students to present in front of an audience. David Hornbrook (1998a, 1998b), an educator in the UK, has done much to bring the focus of theatre education back to the traditions, aesthetics, and skills of formal theatre. He argues that the practices of drama-in-education and process drama had become so far removed from theatre, that students could have an entire sequence of drama lessons without ever encountering a stage. The focus had become almost exclusively on the developmental and the general well-being of students. He argues "the school subject of drama embraces the whole field of drama, allowing students to sample and engage with its diverse forms in ways which establish an appropriate balance between a knowledge of drama and the mastery of its practices" (1998b,

9). Hornbrook believes that the traditions of theatre are vital elements of cultural knowledge.

Shifra Schonmann (2005) confirms the current debate and discussion in educational theatre over its purpose. She provides a useful insight into the proliferation of techniques used in educational theatre, making an argument similar to Hornbrook. She believes that process drama and applied theatre, the two most prevalent techniques in current educational practice, are primarily used as educational tools. Educators use these practices to promote the well-being and social education of students with very little content included about the aesthetic or artistic dimension of theatre.

Schonmann (2005) points to a division in educational theatre that is very pertinent to the place of the school play in current research and practice. The word *drama* has come to mean the doing, the process, and the experience of performative activities, whereas the word *theatre* has come to be associated with performance in front of an audience (36). Schonmann attempts to clarify the distinction by discussing education *for* theatre and education *through* theatre. The former emphasizes the more formal aspects of theatre —its styles, vocabulary, history, and skills. The latter emphasizes the processes of theatre such as improvisation that can aid students in learning a wide variety of other subjects. Schonmann acknowledges that the distinctions between drama and theatre are somewhat arbitrary constructs developed by theatre educators to justify their pedagogical preferences. She argues that “participating in drama and theatre education is firstly learning to use the language of the theatrical art and achieving aesthetic modes of knowing” (38). Process oriented theatre education, she contends, has overshadowed education *for* theatre.

The debate over these matters is less intense in the United States, where teaching the skills of formal theatre is a much more prevalent part of theatre education (O’Toole and Mara 2007). However, the school play does come under scrutiny as a suspect part of mainstream

culture, rather than a vital aspect of education for social change (Gonzalez 1999; Cousins 2000; Lazarus 2004). Heather Cousins' article "Upholding Mainstream Culture: the tradition of the American high school play" (2000) is one of a handful of scholarly articles published in the last fifteen years to address directly issues of the value of the high school play. Although scholarly in intention and peer-reviewed, the article is an opinion piece. It is Cousins' intention in the article to "question the educational value of the traditional school play" which she does by "examining ways in which it upholds mainstream culture and mainstream theatre" (86). Her main concern is with the kinds of plays that are routinely selected to present in high schools. She uses, for example, the Broadway musical, arguing that most of these plays take place in the United States and reflect a narrow view of American values. The dilemma for Cousins is that a majority of these plays do not reflect "the values, customs and beliefs of the multicultural society in which we live" (89).

Traditional school plays exclude minority cultures, and, sometimes, unconsciously teach that majority white culture is superior. She argues "because of the traditional school play, drama students are not receiving a well-rounded drama education" (89). Although Cousins brings up important issues about the selection of school plays and the value those plays have for students, she does not consider the attitudes and dispositions of the students involved. Nor does Cousins discuss cross-racial casting or other techniques that directors use to address concerns about inclusion within traditional high school plays. Although Cousins' article does not take account of what casting practices can do to traditional high school plays, her opinion is nonetheless a valuable critique and encourages a closer scrutiny of the totality of what schools regularly offer for students and audiences.

John D. Urice (2004) asks pertinent questions about the choice of schools plays from a policy perspective—what plays are appropriate to perform in a high school setting? His article



could join a long list of such articles, some dating back to the first forays of drama into high school curriculum (Dithridge 1915; Roach et al 1949; Siebert and Sheets 1949; and Ballet 1950). Urice argues that some theatre teachers make claims about producing controversial material that simply cannot be supported. “There is no way that anyone can assert any generalized outcome or result from mounting a particular play, especially its effect on a large and diverse population... High school dramas are unlikely to reshape personal values...” (13). He is particularly critical of schools that choose controversial materials when they cannot be sure that student actors are prepared for the “unusual emotional or physical challenges” that such material demands (13). Although Urice admits that the choice of material for play production should be based on local conditions, he is concerned that the purpose of many theatre productions in schools is extremely vague, from using theatre to promote various social agendas to entertaining the school community. Clear goals and policies at the school and district level can help alleviate the ambiguity of the choice of what plays to produce. Ultimately, Urice wishes that policies ensure that students benefit from what plays teachers choose to produce.

### ***Pedagogy of the School Play***

There is a very particular kind of literature designed for theatre teachers who are preparing to produce a school play. I refer to this material as the “how to” literature as it is geared towards answering the question: How do I put on a play? These books and articles are like manuals expressly geared towards assisting teachers who have very little experience in producing a play. While the “how to” books are valuable to their intended audience, their methods are based primarily on the preferences and experiences of the authors. The authors of the “how to” literature view school production as primarily an organizational problem, rather than as a pedagogical one (Ames 2005; Patterson 2006; Johnson 2007). Surprisingly, the

question of the value of the school play for students is hardly mentioned. For Raina Ames (2005) the extra-curricular program for theatre teachers involves maneuvering carefully through a system of administrators, school calendars, discipline problems, and forms. Margaret Johnson (2007) also takes an approach that emphasizes the organizational challenge. Where both authors mention the fun and magic of theatre, the production of a school play is subsumed by the many details that need to be attended to rather than to the overall reason or value in doing so.

Another type of publication is designed as a forum for communication among practitioners—theatre teachers talking to other theatre teachers. One such publication is produced by the Educational Theatre Association, known as *Stage of the Art* from 1998 to 2007, and *Incite/Insight* from 2007 until the present. These are not scholarly publications, but they include regular discussion of issues that confront theatre teachers when directing and producing school plays. Recent issues include articles dealing with race (Baehr 2005), creating theatre with special populations (Preseault 2006/7), cross gender casting in school plays (Popitti 2007), and producing plays on a limited budget (Ortmann 2011).

In general, the pedagogy of directing and producing high school plays is under-represented in the scholarly research (Mackey 2012). There are some rare examples. Wallace Smith (1988), a theatre educator, published a chapter wherein he reflects on his long career directing high school plays. Many of his themes have relevance to this research study. Jo Beth Gonzalez (1999; 2006; 2006) and Joan Lazarus (2012) have published works that discuss directing high school plays primarily from a socially responsible and progressive point of view.

As a high school theatre teacher and director, Wallace Smith (1988) was involved in educational theatre on the national level through the Secondary Theatre Conference and the American Theatre Association in the 1960s and 70s. He wrote an essay called “On Theatre in Secondary School” published in 1988. His essay is a series of personal reflections based on his

own experience of producing plays in high schools. He constantly probes at what lay at the heart of theatre education, challenging and changing his practice. Smith came to theatre education in the late 1940s and 1950s through teaching speech in secondary schools. He directed plays for the drama club and was immediately struck by “the unexpected and startling changes” that happened to students when involved in the “extracurricular plays” (172).

When Smith was first producing and directing plays he recruited actors from everywhere, including sports. He writes, “I learned that ‘Red’ had more going for him than a good hook shot, and so did he” (172). He learned that his student actors “brought something of value to theatre, applicable at once to its processes, and that most of them built strong identities and related better to their peers” (173). Smith argues that theatre “embraced more different kinds of students, *immediately*, than did any other school study” (173). Smith’s experiences led him to use professional theatre as his standard and model for producing high school plays. From set construction and costumes, to auditions and rehearsals, Smith “did real theatre in high school” (174).

Up to this point in his career as a drama teacher, Smith represented the zenith of a particular kind of educational theatre practice, one very much modeled after what educational theatre historian Motter (1929) calls the “imitative” style of school play production (242). Motter says schools often get stuck in an “imitative” mode, wherein they are merely copying what they see on the professional adult stage. It is a model of theatre production reinforced by such endeavors as high school play festivals, wherein theatre teachers show their productions to each other. As Smith (1988) goes on to suggest, the professionally imitative model is seductive because it produces results. The students involved certainly undergo profound changes in deportment and in the development of skills. Smith became dissatisfied with his own teaching practice, despite the successes he and his students had at theatre festivals. One day he simply

realized that he was “manipulating my adolescent puppets to do it *my* way in order to win” the local high school play contests. “Plainly,” he states, “the contest was among directors, not students” (174).

Smith began to interrogate his practice. He realized that literary based approaches to the production of plays encouraged seeing plays as “scripts decorated with necessary appurtenances” including sets, props, and actors (176). He states that he tried to move beyond this approach to plays, favoring a more message driven style, delivering the content of the play to the audience through his actors. This approach led to treating students as puppets. He wanted to open theatre practice to as many students as possible. His drama club activities led to a kind of elitism, similar to what he saw among high school athletes.

Smith’s reflections bring up one of the more complicated problems that I have encountered in researching this topic. The literature on theatre education includes a vast array of topics from drama as therapy to the uses of process drama in classrooms (Landy 1982). The school play is one of those topics. Over his career, Smith discovered connections between what he taught during his classes and during his production work. The relationship between the curriculum and the school play is complicated because there are few expressed standards for extracurricular activities. Certainly what Smith explains about unwittingly creating a culture of hierarchies and competition within a school theatre program reflects the values of the teacher, and subsequently, the value of the students and the community. There are many ways to circumvent the competition, however, some teachers probably think the competition is healthy and reflects the values of the profession outside the school. Gonzalez (1999; 2006) and Lazarus (2012) also critique the imitative style of high school play directing.

Gonzalez published the results of her 1999 study of directing students in an unconventional manner in *Youth Theatre Journal*. In her 1999 study, Gonzalez asks “whether or

not less ‘authoritative’ directing methods applied in a high school theater setting can liberate students while simultaneously produce quality art” (6). She attempts to democratize her directing of productions with students by including them more directly in decisions usually left up to the director such as casting of roles. She calls this a process of implementing “critical drama pedagogy” (18). Gonzalez uses theories of democratic and liberatory education promoted by John Dewey, Paolo Freire, and Henry Giroux.

Gonzalez gathered data from five sources: videotaped rehearsals, personal journals, student actor journals, and interviews with teachers and students conducted by another graduate student after the production was completed. She used a production of William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* which she produced as part of her regular season of offerings as a drama teacher at a high school in Bowling Green, Ohio. Gonzalez calls her study an ethnographic exploration of the “space between director expertise and student self-discovery” (8). She developed what she called Student Empowerment Strategies and Unconventional Staging Techniques. One of her Unconventional Staging Techniques was to triple cast many of the parts with actors switching off roles during the production. She admits that she did so to increase the available roles to students and left the artistic aspects of this choice up to discussion among the students. She also cast every student who came to auditions regardless of experience.

Gonzalez (1999) believes her process was successful in several arenas. She felt that students were able to manage the production without the use of a stage manager, or without the need for the teacher/director to fulfill many of these management tasks (17). She believes the journaling done throughout the process enabled students to think critically before speaking. Students also were responsible for overseeing rehearsal notes and critique which gave them the ability to align their vision of the production through discussion with the director and each other (18). Gonzalez acknowledges that “democratic directing” needs more time than the traditional

director-driven production when she writes that “directors must recognize that a play rehearsal process structure with a director and a cast of actors is an arena which ideal democracy probably can never occur” (19).

Gonzalez (1999) struggles to match her philosophical ideals of democracy with her actual practice of theatre directing. She admits that “high school theater teachers encounter limitations of time and space, and expectations for polished performances preclude our ability to implement a purely democratic theater experience” (20). Her study reveals many tensions that are present in directing traditional high school plays—how much of a teacher-director’s vision of the production is imposed upon student actors. She acknowledges that high school theatre directing vacillates between freedom and constraint, sometimes making the process extremely undemocratic. The unease the students had with the process, and the ambivalence that Gonzalez had with the resulting production are perhaps the most important points to be made of this study.

Gonzalez’s 2006 book, *Temporary Stages: Departing from Tradition in High School Theatre Education*, further chronicles her journey in developing critical and democratic teaching and directing strategies in her drama classroom and production of school plays. Her approach blends self-study, autobiography, best practice, and classroom-based research. She uses anecdote, experiences, interviews, and literature to build a strong case for her approach, advocating for a robust progressive stance in theatre education. Gonzalez’s honesty about the struggles she faces in adopting her methods is one of the books strengths. She frequently reflects on moments when she realizes that she has asserted her authority in ways that directly subvert her stated goals of teaching more democratically. At one point she reports her students objecting to some of her past experiments in casting and design: “ ‘That’s why no one comes out to our shows- they’re all so weird and ... different. It scares people; they don’t like it’ ” (39). Gonzalez’s ability to process the critiques of her students is a testament to her commitment to

consistent self-reflection, even as she wrestles with the very system of increased openness that she facilitates. At one point she admits that it is difficult for her to let go of some of her teacher-driven aesthetic expectations: “While I sought liberated students, I remained highly conscientious of the artistic outcome of the production and worried that student designs would be hackneyed and contrived” (42). She notes that this tension between her “artistic vision,” her “teacher’s instincts,” and her “liberating tendencies” allow her to constantly “problematize a notion of democratic” theatre pedagogy (42). She recognizes that working from within a rigorously hierarchical school system sometimes only leads to moments and flashes of truly liberating and progressive teaching and learning (32). Gonzalez opines that for now, she and her students must simply accept these moments on their “temporary stages” (132).

Joan Lazarus (2012) includes an extensive discussion of the role of the director/teacher in her book on secondary school theatre practices, *Signs of Change*. Rather than describing a specific research study, Lazarus more generally advocates for an approach to teaching theatre based on her experience and through informal conversations with other theatre educators. While Lazarus is convincing as a narrator because of her experience, the book does become somewhat of a variation of a “how to” book. In this case, she is describing how to become a socially responsible theatre educator dedicated to best practice. She describes and explains her vision of best practices in theatre education and how theatre education should respond to the idea of student-centered and socially responsible pedagogy. While a good portion of the book discusses approaches to a socially responsible pedagogy, she does include a chapter on directing students in formal theatre production.

Lazarus (2012) bases her philosophy of theatre pedagogy on the idea of “best practice.” The idea of best practice came about from a variety of educational reform movements of the 1990s, including standards based education (33). Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) describe

best practices in education as having several common features emphasizing student-centered teaching that is experiential, authentic, reflective, and constructivist. Lazarus critiques traditional theatre practices wherein a director/teacher dictates all of the choices for student actors. She advocates for an approach that encourages more and more independence, recognizing that different students at different levels will need different amounts of coaching, skill-building, and support (71). The school play becomes an important extension of classroom learning where students are able to build their knowledge and skills through practical application. Because being in a school play has such potential for being experiential, authentic, and other of the criteria for best practice, Lazarus encourages the use of formal theatre presentations (70).

Lazarus criticizes the standard repertoire for school plays. Much like Heather Cousins (2000), Lazarus feels that productions of professional scripts and Broadway-style musicals are problematic and often disconnected from students' experiences and lives (80). She believes that producing these kinds of scripts set students up to aesthetic and artistic standards that can be inappropriately matched to their abilities (80). Lazarus is critiquing a particular kind of training in theatre that she tends to blame on a conservatory model. She describes actors working with "directors who started the rehearsal process with a read-through and table work typically without any script exploration or ensemble building. They then were launched into blocking sessions in which their directors told them where to move, how, and then followed by immediate memorization of lines" (71). For Lazarus, the point of a socially responsible teaching practice in theatre education is to place the student in the center of all pedagogical concerns, wherein students are frequently regarded as co-creators of productions.

Lazarus (2012) and Gonzalez (1999; 2006), while each advocating for a specific kind of socially progressive educational practice also directly address the pedagogy of directing plays with young people. Their work interrogates what they view as traditional hierarchical theatre



practices by including students at every level of production and decision making. While wrestling with issues of power, agency, and voice within their own practice, they provide some of the only windows into a practice of directing young people in schools available in scholarly literature.

Smith (1988), Lazarus (2012), and Gonzalez (1999; 2006) represent more recent scholarship that interrogates the practice of the school play. Smith's (1988) chapter represents the effects of engaging in a self-reflective practice. It led Smith to re-invest his "director's" energy into his classroom, recognizing that the students in his classrooms deserved performance experiences as rich and exciting as those students engaged in extracurricular theatre. He also believed he had become too caught up in directing his students like puppets. Gonzalez (1999; 2006) and Lazarus (2012) demonstrate reflective thinking that has extended Smith's critique and taken it to new levels, bringing students firmly into the center of their pedagogy. These teacher/scholars are definitely advocating for a particular progressive stance towards teaching. While they are honest about the struggles of socially responsive practice, they present engaging stories and examples about the benefits of doing so.

Mackey's research study (2012), in contrast to the above, is not an advocacy piece, but rather a deeply reflective and descriptive account of a process of memory. She opens her article by noting that "the school play is an aspect of drama education not traditionally given much research attention" (35). Mackey uses her article to discuss the school play in terms of "evidence, artifacts, and remembrance" (36). She discusses the special status items of memorabilia have in regards to an event such as a school play. Indeed for Mackey, the school play becomes a site of memory through the items and keepsakes that people store (49).

Mackey (2012) cites Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980) wherein he discusses the special significance certain photographs have on him. By extension, Mackey folds in all kinds of

memorabilia beyond just photographs. Barthes points out that the photographs we look at are never really the photographs, but rather the objects, persons, or the moment in time captured in it. The photograph itself is almost always invisible (6).

Roland Barthes (1980) distinguishes between two types of interest in photographs. One type of interest he calls *studium*, using a Latin word, which he translates as a “general, enthusiastic commitment” and fascination with, but “without special acuity” (26). Most of Barthes’ avid concentration on photographs he attributes to *studium*—he is intrigued by them, loves to study them, but does not feel any particular emotional connection to them, but rather a feeling of participation with the subject matter of the photograph (26).

The other type of interest occurs to Barthes through surprise, and it is this reaction to a photograph that interests Sally Mackey (2012). The surprise element disturbs the *studium*, which Barthes likens to a “prick” or a puncture, as if “made by a pointed instrument” (26). It is akin to punctuation, and he uses the Latin word *punctum* to define this feeling (27). He writes, “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). The *punctum* that strikes one can be merely a small detail in a photograph that strikes out and pierces through a more general curiosity and interest. As Barthes explains, “the *punctum*, then, is a kind of subtle *beyond* as if the image launched a desire beyond what it permits us to see” (59).

Mackey (2012) extends the idea of the *punctum* to include three-dimensional objects. She writes about the keepsakes in her loft, noting that “seeing them and touching them invokes a swift onset of many emotions that leaves me feeling somehow exposed—or wounded, in Barthes’ terms” (37). It is the objects in her loft from a particular production she directed years before that lead her on a journey similar to the one I have embarked upon in this study. Mackey uses objects and mementoes as a focal point as she questions students about their participation in

a single production. Incidentally, the production is the same one that appears in Woods' (1993) study, the Roade School's production of *Godspell*. What Mackey became interested in "was noting the evidence that remained, the tangible artefacts, the lasting, physical, demonstrable signifiers of the event" (42). She is fascinated by how these tangible artifacts survive in an era of "virtual time" (44), that is a time where computers and gadgets have replaced physical memorabilia with virtual ones. We can touch and see these objects and they connect us physically and psychically to the past, helping us to claim and retell narratives of ourselves (46). Finally, Mackey returns to the idea of collections and archives of mementoes as "sites of memory" (49).

Mackey's article focuses on a single production that had a special kind of existence because it went on to be featured in several festivals. In contrast, I found that my students rarely had memorabilia to share with me. What remained for my students were the stories they had about productions along with the characters and stories of the plays themselves.

### ***Adolescent Learning and Development in Authentic Settings: Three Studies***

Research in adolescent development in settings where teen-agers actually live their lives, as opposed to in clinical environments, has a somewhat small but growing body of literature. The following studies were valuable in shaping this present study because their findings alerted me to important aspects of how adolescents experience their involvement in educational activities. These studies are in contrast to the work of Smith (1988), Gonzalez (1999; 2006), and Lazarus (2012), who used their personal experiences and classroom research to present and advocate for their particular approach to producing a school play. Although the following three studies are qualitative and therefore limited in the scope of their findings, they also have tremendous strengths in their attempts to capture the lived experiences of their participants, raising important

issues about what students learn from their involvement in school activities, including being in a school play.

One of the most thorough studies of a school play performance and its effect on the students involved was written by Peter Woods in 1993. Woods' chapter on a school production of the musical *Godspell* is part of a larger book length study entitled *Critical Events in Teaching and Learning*. In his book, Woods researched and examined several project-based learning experiences in the United Kingdom and developed theories about their impact on student and teacher learning as "critical events." Woods defines critical events as "integrated and focused programmes of educational activities which may last from a number of weeks to over a year" (2). According to Woods, critical events are "real learning" (4), building on the needs of students. The problems that students confront in a critical event represent professional circumstances replicated as accurately as possible by the teachers and other supportive personnel and involve finding solutions in real time. Woods relates critical events to constructivism and the educational philosophy of John Dewey (5). He states that "the artificial controls of traditional schooling are removed and students are liberated and empowered in the sense that they have acquired a considerable resource with which to face the world" (142).

Woods' research involved observing students and teachers in the creation of works of art: the making of a book, planning and design in architecture, producing a film, and putting on a play. Although he asserts that aesthetic education has occurred (143) he is somewhat hesitant in this regard, perhaps because such acquisition of knowledge is difficult to assess. Woods relies heavily on stating outcomes in the terms used by the students he interviewed for the study. He emphasizes the personal connection among the students to the final products, with students believing that part of themselves are embedded within the projects (143). He summarizes that the critical events were "on some occasions an emotional experience, on others an aesthetic one. In

either case it was difficult to describe and explain” (143). Woods reverts to stating that there was a “magic or mystery about it, something outside their normal experience” (143).

Woods’ research on a theatrical critical event involved a particular production of the musical *Godspell* in 1988 created and performed by the Roade Comprehensive School in Northhamptonshire in England (104). This production became more than a typical school play, in that it was entered into a national competition where it won top honors in the National Student Drama Festival in March 1989. The production garnered national acclaim and was performed one more time in October of 1989 to support a BBC children’s charity (104). For his study, Woods interviewed student participants, teachers, and other support personnel to generate theory focused on his concept of the positive outcomes of critical events. Woods argues for specific gains in student learning through their participation in a dramatic event. He discusses personal development, emotional development, social development, and “magic” (124).

Although not a study of a traditional performing art, but rather an activity most closely associated with sports, Lynn Barnett (2006) sought to complement a quantitative study on the effect of cheerleading tryouts and competition on successful and unsuccessful teenage female applicants. She conducted a qualitative study to more “descriptively probe the effects of being denied entry to these activity cultures on identity formation” (518). Barnett’s qualitative research study builds on her quantitative survey of 173 girls who auditioned for cheerleading and dance teams at three different high schools in the Midwest. Barnett and her team of assistants interviewed thirty-six of the 173 auditioners, sixteen of whom were successful in their auditions and sixteen of whom were not. The objective of the interviews was “to obtain a more complete and richer understanding of the participants’ perspective and subjective experience” (519). The interviews were conducted immediately after the informants discovered the results of their tryouts and then again two months later.

Similar to Barnett's study, and in some aspects building upon it, Larson and Brown's (2007) research study asked what positive emotional development looked like in adolescents (1083). They note that "knowledge about emotion in adolescence is comparatively limited," especially as "experienced by adolescents" (1083). They believe it is important to study emotional development "in situ," that is in surroundings in which teenagers actually experience and development knowledge about emotions and how they operate (1095). The researchers studied a high school production of the musical *Les Misérables* over three months in a small Midwestern town which included a cast and crew of 110 students. The production was overseen by two adults, the musical director and the theatre director. The researchers interviewed ten students, their parents, and the two teachers throughout the production process. They conducted follow up interviews by phone with most of the students two years after the production. Their focus of the interviews was to obtain "open-ended accounts of ongoing events and experiences in the production" (1086).

The authors of these three studies focus much of their attention on the emotionally charged atmosphere of the experiences of the participants. For example, in the studies by Woods (1993) and Larson and Brown (2007), strong emotions were considered to be an essential part of the process of play production. Larson and Brown note that the production process of a play included cycles of elation and despair (1092) and that students were practicing emotions "from actively charged experiences that were frequent in the setting" (1095). Students went through many emotional adjustments throughout the process. For example, when the cast list first went up some students reacted with distress, but Larson and Brown noted that any disappointment with casting "typically dissipated within 1 or 2 weeks as youth talked it through with their friends and got engaged in the roles they were given" (1089). As students entered the rehearsal process they often experienced satisfaction and elation as they mastered their roles (1089).

Woods' study affirms much of the positive emotional development Larson and Brown observed, only Woods attributes much of the progress to the engagement in the characters the students played as well as the synergy created by the encouraging social environment. Woods quotes G. Hardy saying that through the exploration and experience of fictional characters and situations "we come to know ourselves" and become independent thinkers (116). Students involved in acting in plays experience a depth and range of experience that have for them a deep relevance and resonance in their lives.

Woods (1993) believes the development of emotional and social skills and the resulting aptitude in critical events leads to spirit of *communitas*. *Communitas* is a Latin word that has special meaning in social anthropology, especially the work of Victor Turner. Turner (1969) suggests that *communitas* existed when a group placed personal relationships above rules and structure. *Communitas* emerges from groups on the margins, beyond the structures and rules of everyday life. It is often a temporary coming together (113), or, as Turner remarks, *communitas* "is of the now" (113). Turner believes that art and religion are often the products of this communal spirit (128) characterized by "spontaneity and immediacy" (132). Woods (1993) evokes the word to emphasize the group effort that transcends fixed roles, structures, and status. The shared purpose of critical events, according to Woods, brings about *communitas*, this almost magical quality of synergy, wherein the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (7).

While Larson and Brown (2007) and Woods (1993) focused on the mostly positive outcomes of student involvement in these theatrical activities, Barnett's (2006) study suggests that there might be a more complicated and disturbing dimension to the more competitive aspects of involvement in school plays, in particular the audition process and assignment of roles. Barnett's research findings among the successful candidates in dance and cheerleading tryouts were not particularly surprising and tended to confirm earlier research. Barnett notes that the

research supports and extends “the literature noting the beneficial effects of participating in school-related extracurricular activities for adolescent girls” (535). Students who successfully auditioned for cheerleading and dance felt more affinity for their school (533), feelings of intense elation (525), self-affirmation of skills and ability (526), and awareness that their social identity would change for the better (530).

However, the reactions among those who were not successful were more troubling for Barnett. These girls tended to feel detached from their school (534), extremely upset, angry, and sad (526), that they were failures (529), and humiliation within their peer groups (532). Barnett suggests that such high stakes, socially prized, and essentially “closed” activities, that is, ones not available to everyone, can have long term devastating effects on those who tryout and are not admitted. The significance of this latter finding haunts some of the stories told by the former student actors for this present study. Several of the participants, myself included, still recall feelings of jealousy and competitiveness that surrounded auditions and performances. Despite other successes, we have never forgotten our perceived failures.

In contrast to Larson and Brown’s (2007) study, which found that student disappointments about casting subsided after a few weeks, Barnett’s (2006) study suggests that the effects of being shut out from a prized activity can be longer lasting. Of course there are differences between auditions for a play and tryouts for cheerleading. Often times, those who audition for the play may not get the role they covet, but are still included in the overall project. This is the experience that Woods (1993) is describing in his evocation of the spirit of *communitas*. However, Barnett notes: “The devastation that can be wrought from unsuccessfully completing for such opportunities might well be more strongly negative than the positives of winning entry” (537). Barnett’s final warning has some implications for the process of casting a school play, implications that some of the stories told by the participants bear out.



One aspect of student learning in these research studies that is missing is that of aesthetic development. Although Woods (1993) attempts to capture aesthetic development in his final category of student gains, “magic,” he does not quite know how to characterize the aesthetic learning or the extent to which the students learn about the craft of acting and performance through their involvement in a school production. He, and to some extent Larson and Brown (2007), are guilty of some of the unexpected problems that occur when one uses social science methods and strategies to describe and elucidate an arts process and artistic knowledge. John Baldacchino (2009) comments, “making art and design practices fit with the social sciences carries the risk of essentialism, where practices are reduced to identifiable methodological categories. This opens itself to the risk of standardization and the loss of autonomy and immanence that characterize the arts in the first place” (6). Baldacchino objects that in research studies such as the one conducted by Woods the arts risk “becoming effective tools for social outcomes” (10) rather than as subjects to be learned on their own terms and for the unique way of knowing the world the arts represent. So while these studies entertain many of the instrumental arguments for the arts and their value, I am also aware that if an art form is instrumental to learning other things, it may also be its own way of knowing the world. Even the claim that the arts are themselves a form of knowledge, this can threaten the arts *aporia*, or what is paradoxically unknowable about our experience of art. It is within the interstices of the arts experience that this research resides.

### ***Summary of Literature Review***

Plays have been performed in schools for centuries despite cultural and social prejudices against the practice (Levy 1989; O’Toole and Mara 2007). The performance of plays was justified for its ability to teach Latin eloquence, as well as for the general ability to teach poise

and confidence while being in front of an audience. In the twentieth century, plays became part of an array of extracurricular activities in schools that educators believed had both entertainment and educative value, but also served some practical purposes, such as raising money. The subject of drama moved into the school day, taught through literature and speech classes, and sometimes as its own discrete course. As drama moved into the regular school curriculum, what to teach during those precious hours became the focus of much experimentation and research, and the school play remained a somewhat tangential concern in matters of pedagogy and instruction.

Today, many topics are regularly researched within the discipline of theatre education, though most of those topics have an uneasy relationship to formal theatrical presentation. Winifred Ward (1930) warned of the drawbacks of presentation as early as 1930, arguing that such experiences often got in the way of students authentic explorations in dramatic play in the classroom. Contemporary iterations of theatre education, from drama-in-education, process drama, Theatre-in-Education, and applied theatre all seem unsure or unwilling to engage with formal theatrical presentation with student actors as a vital and even necessary component of theatre education. The school play is not the focus of current research in theatre education. Although the school play is generally considered to be one of the most frequent forms of theatre education, it has a fairly low status among researchers and scholars for variety of reasons. Some of the reasons include: the complex relationship of the school play to classroom practice, the emphasis of theatre educators on the processes of drama, and the belief that performing scripted plays has little value to the lives of students. Recently some scholars argue for an increased emphasis in research in formal theatre, aesthetics, and the skills of theatre.

Although some educational scholars such as David Hornbrook (1998) and Shifra Schonmann (2005; 2007) have decried this state of affairs, arguing that there should be more instruction on the skills and culture of formal theatre, the affective aspects of theatre education

appear to of more interest to researchers and scholars. The work and practice of theatre educators such as Joan Lazarus (2012) and JoBeth Gonzalez (1999; 2006), critique traditional methods of casting and directing school plays, arguing for student-centered approaches that encourage treating students as co-creators of creative work. Several studies about adolescents (Woods 1993; Barnett 2006; and Larson and Brown 2007) describe the complex social interactions and emotional development that can be associated with involvement in school activities, including drama. Woods' 1993 study of a particular school production of *Godspell* in 1988 provides a somewhat unique look at the effect of what he calls "critical events in teaching and learning" upon the students and teachers involved. Woods' categories of student gains form an organizational framework for the research that follows.

It is within the contexts of this background of research that I conducted the present research study. I am extending the research of Woods (1993), using his categories of student gains through critical events in teaching and learning, and the research of Sally Mackey (2012) into the school play as a site of memory. How do those critical events extend into adulthood? When students look back, not just on the performance of a single play, but on the cumulative impact of being involved in several plays over the course of their high school career, how do these former student actors remember these experiences, and how have they influenced what they do in their daily lives today? I began my search for answers to these questions by conducting a reflective study of my own experiences in school plays when I was in high school in the early 1980s.

### CHAPTER THREE: “WHAT I AM TO BE...”: A HEURISTIC INQUIRY

#### ***Remembering a Moment on Stage: West Side Story 1981***

*The announcement of the year’s musical was made a sort of contest, with clues given throughout a few weeks, revealing the final selection with a flourish that capitalized on the anticipation. It was with eagerness that we all gathered outside the Little Theatre classroom, waiting for the door to be unlocked so we could see the final announcement. When Ms. Lloyd announced that West Side Story was going to be the spring musical, we, the Roosevelt High School drama students, were abuzz with excitement and apprehension. West Side Story is a difficult musical to produce at the high school level. Finding young men willing to dance can be quite a hurdle. And to do so with any kind of facility and finesse, even more so. The school’s jazz musicians, who usually turned their noses up on the spring musical, also got excited. They wanted to tackle the challenging Leonard Bernstein score. As the jazz ensemble was an award winning one, it was a good bet that the musical accompaniment for our production would be excellent. But would we be able to dance the show?*

*I was excited and scared. I was considered a dancer, having been given a large dance role in the previous year, but what did I know about jazz dancing, the kind of athletic dancing that West Side Story required? Ms. Lloyd was savvy. She also announced that jazz dancing classes would be offered after school during the fall, in preparation for the musical in the spring.*

*I remember the afternoons of dance classes, challenging but exhilarating. We were told to buy canvas high top tennis shoes, to break them in and get them ready for dancing on the stage. I remember that we gathered in the lunchroom, stretching and talking, while our dance instructor regularly admonished us against too much chatter. The room always had a sour smell of that days’ midday meal mixed in with bleach and other cleaners. Teachers could still smoke in*

*their lounge off the lunchroom and occasionally the acrid smell of smoke would waft through the room. Soon we added our own sweat to the smells. Suddenly dancing was hip, a least among those of us who desperately wanted to be in West Side Story. I remember my first pair of Converse High-tops, a brand of shoes that I would proudly wear for the next ten years. I remember how the soles wore out as we practiced, until the shoes became effective conduits of spins and turns.*

*Eventually I was cast as Baby John, one of the Jets. It was a somewhat obvious choice with my boyish looks. But it was a plum role, with some good scenes, a solo, and most memorably, a few featured dances, especially “Cool”. I remember that I created a particular look for Baby John—I put my hands in my pockets, a physical mannerism I never did as myself. To this day, the act of putting my hands in my pockets, a character trait I created for Baby John, is a regular part of my current physicality.*

*We did an admirable job performing West Side Story. The high school’s bad boy heartthrob was cast as Riff, and one of the popular yell leaders was cast as Tony. I remember the small controversies surrounding other casting decisions. The girls were jealous of the student who got cast as Maria. And the decision to cast the several African American students who auditioned as Sharks and not Jets was not done without comment. However, my strongest memory is a deeply personal one.*

*Baby John’s big scene occurs after the rumble where two characters are stabbed and die. I remember leaping up on the giant platforms in the back of the stage painted to look like a brick wall. I was briefly alone on the big stage, and had to work up tears of fear and horror over what just happened. Soon after I had a solo during the song Officer Krupke, where I got to play the social worker, the last person that sings.*

*“Eek!”*

*Officer Krupke, you've done it again  
This boy don't need a job, he needs a year in the pen.  
It ain't just a question of misunderstood  
Deep down inside him, he's no good!"*  
(Laurents, Bernstein, and Sondheim 1957, 117)

*A small solo, but one night I got applause for it. It was thrilling.*



**Figure 1. Jets Jacket. I still have my Jets jacket from Roosevelt High School's 1981 production of *West Side Story*. Author's Collection.**

The above recollection is representative of the kinds of reflection this chapter features. It is a short vignette—the only part of it that is truly a memory is of the applause that arrived after I finished my solo. The rest of the recollection is general, full of impressions, feelings, and flashes of insight. This memory reflects what memoirist Patricia Hampl (1996) considers emblematic of sitting down to write our reminiscences because they invite “broken and incomplete images, half-recollected fragments of all the mass (and mess) of detail” (209). My memory of *West Side Story* is accompanied by an artifact, the Jets jacket that has somehow survived countless moves as an adult (fig.1). Edward S. Casey (1997) calls such artifacts “reminiscentia” (110). These artifacts, according to Casey, are not essential to remembering the past; however they supplement the process by adding texture and depth. They are *aides-mémoire*, assistants to our

memory, (110) giving us a chance to relive the past from within it. Mackey (2012) uses memorabilia as a central motif in her article on memory and the school play. For Mackey, the objects we keep and display become an archive and exist as physical sites of memory (49). Memories are curious things; and performance memories have special qualities of their own. Pictures and artifacts can help round out a memory and give it context.



**Figure 2. Cast Picture, *West Side Story*, Roosevelt High School, 1981. I am at the far right, seated. You can catch a glimpse of the Jets jacket!- Author’s Collection.**

For example, the cast picture of *West Side Story* (fig.2) helps create a more rounded sense of the account of this production. Roland Barthes (1980) points out that a photograph is a social construct designed to reassert the power of the familial, or in the case of some of the photographs in this chapter, including the one above, the social milieu of school (7). The physical photo can almost disappear because its importance is in the moment it captures. The above photo asserts the fact of my participation. The photo proves that I was there; and other items—the buttons, posters, costume pieces, programs, and “best wishes” cards—are testaments to the experience. Their existence as solid objects is almost incidental. They too disappear as they are literally

*aides-mémoire* (Casey 1997, 110). In the formal cast picture of Roosevelt's 1981 production of *West Side Story* (fig. 2) we are proudly posing in costume in an alley near the school. The somewhat laughable seriousness of our posing, including the unlit cigarettes, does tell the story of how serious we teenagers took our mission of creating the world of the play. We have internalized our characters, the dancing, and as much of time period of the play as we can. Whatever else this photograph might reveal about our production, it reminds me that Roosevelt High School was a place where drama, and the school play, was taken seriously.

### ***Heuristic Inquiry: Remembering as Research***

As I prepared to interview my former students, I was inspired by Clark Moustakas (1961, 1967, 1981, 1985, 1990) and Peter Erik Craig (1978) to explore my own experiences in school plays while in high school. Moustakas (1990) calls using one's own experience as part of research, heuristic inquiry. He notes that the word heuristic "comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find" (9) and that it is related to a word derived from the same source, *eureka*, a word associated with a moment of delightful discovery (9). The exploration of my own experiences in school plays has lead me to several *eureka* moments that have reminded me of forgotten emotions of adolescence as well as flashes of intense elation associated with performance. These insights have helped me understand how my experiences in school plays shaped my identity, propelled maturation, and taught me lessons in caring about others. A similar tactic was employed by Craig in his 1978 study *The Heart of the Teacher*. In order to discuss with other teachers their inner professional life, Craig writes, "I felt drawn to exploring in depth my own experiences as a teacher" (90). Similarly, in this chapter I am exploring my own experiences as a student actor in order to discover a more nuanced connection to the experiences of my former students.



Rosemarie Anderson (2000) writes that “to know a phenomenon of experience or of nature, we must love it and become its friend...” (31). Heuristic inquiry was developed most extensively by Clark Moustakas (1985, 1990) and the techniques are rooted in phenomenology and psychology (Patton 2002). Heuristic inquiry is an approach to formal research that uses personal knowledge to facilitate the understanding of a phenomenon of experience—in this case, the school play. While heuristic inquiry does not ensure that every researcher will come to love his or her subject, I have found that the approach has deepened my esteem for and curiosity about the topic. The principle behind heuristic inquiry is that one can get a deep sense of a phenomenon by exploring one’s own experience of it at ever increasing levels of detail (Craig 1978, 45).

Heuristic inquiry demands a question at its heart (Douglass and Moustakas 1985, 41). At the heart of my research is the question— what do those of us who have been involved in the school play acquire from the experience—what is its value for us? The methods of heuristic inquiry demand that I ask that question quite deeply of myself first—then I can turn my attention to my former students.

Heuristic inquiry requires an unflinching gaze back into the past (Moustakas 1990). More than using memory as a set of remote events to unfold in narrative form, a heuristic approach also encourages one to remember the reasons behind actions, and even to make new assumptions as why behaviors and events unfolded as they did. As Moustakas and Douglass (1985) write, “when pursued through intimate and authentic processes of the self, the ‘data’ that emerge are autobiographical, original, and accurately descriptive of the textures and structures of lived experience” (40). As I gaze back first at my experiences as a participant in the school play and then as a teacher and director of such experiences, I have been constantly surprised by what I have found. I thought about some of these ideas and experiences for some time but much of what

I discovered has been new.

Over the course of five months, from June to October 2012, I read through old journals, yearbooks, and newspaper clippings. I searched through photographs, show programs, and other memorabilia. I kept extensive notes and wrote down many stories about my four years as a student in high school theatre from 1978 to 1982. Although I had not planned it this way, my thirtieth high school reunion occurred in the midst of all my reminiscing. I had many informal conversations with some of my high school friends, one of which appears connected to one of the stories featured in this chapter. My explorations were deliberately unplanned, a suggestion made by Craig (1978), to allow associations to arise, and to allow for surprise and revelation. Although I eventually remembered many intriguing experiences of school plays over the course of my process of reminiscing for this chapter, I realized that the explorations needed a more disciplined structure when it came to reporting them.

In other words, there have been two distinct processes at work in the development of this chapter: there was an initial phase of remembering and beginning to record or transcribe my memories; and then there has been a second phase of organizing those memories into stories that are structured in such a way that readers can apprehend or comprehend significant points embedded within the stories. Craig (1978) refers to this process as the reporting of the “key themes of my own development” (90). In translating my experiences into readable stories with “key themes” based on my personal development, I found the research of Woods (1993) to be instrumental for the purposes of organization and meaning-making.

The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. I begin by describing my first performance in a play as a freshman at Roosevelt High School in 1979. I discuss how Woods’ (1993) category of social development (117) relates to my first encounter with drama as I became acculturated into what was expected as a student actor. This section also includes

background information on my family and how I became interested in performing on stage.

Secondly I discuss emotional development and my experiences in the annual week of student-directed one-act plays called DramaFest. I participated in this festival as both an actor and a director. I focus on the cast photograph of a play I directed for DramaFest in 1981. I include reflections on Woods' (1993) research into emotional development (111), as well as a study by Larson and Brown (2007), whose investigations into adolescent emotional development were conducted in the context of the production of a school play.

My third story revolves around a very vivid memory of a performance from 1980, my sophomore year, in the musical *Brigadoon*. I relate this memory to Woods' (1993) category of "magic" (124) because it is a memory that relates to my understanding of my place as a performer in a grander scheme, as a part of a whole. I amend and extend Woods' category of magic to include aesthetic development, the process by which I became aware of form, design, and effect in theatre productions.

I conclude my reflections on being in school plays in high school with a discussion of personal development (Woods 1993, 105) in light of what happened to me my senior year as a result of my participation in school plays. In the spring of 1982 I was thrust into the spotlight and received school-wide attention that had eluded me until that time. Although it is a story that is only tangentially related to my actual performances in school plays, my six months of sudden popularity loom large in my memory. Furthermore, it was through the writing of this particular memory that I stumbled across a significant finding. Through my reflections upon my senior year I confronted old belief systems and came to rediscover a significant motivating factor in my life. I found the true value of what being in school plays and eventually directing them has been in my life.

In turning my memories, memorabilia, and reflections into a readable account I have

been influenced by two areas of research and study: narrative inquiry, and research in memory and storytelling. Much has been written in the last twenty-five years about the use of storytelling to convey research findings. Narrative inquiry describes a set of research and reporting methodologies that place an emphasis on the stories of the researcher and the researched. Zatzman (2006) states that “narrative inquiry asks us to tell our stories as research and to examine those stories critically” (111). Chase (2011) explains that narrative inquiry “revolves around an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them” (421). Narrative inquirers also construct stories out of these narrated experiences, giving order and form to them. I was influenced by the concept of narrative inquiry opening up a three-dimensional space of investigation that took into consideration time, place, and the personal and cultural contexts of the researcher and the researched. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe this process as moving “backward and forward, inward and outward” (54). Collecting and telling stories pushes and pulls—the participants in this study, myself included, are pushed back in time while the presence of the present moment continues to exert its influence as it shapes our re-ordering and retelling of these experiences.

My heuristic research, first into my own experience in school plays and then my reflections on being a teacher at Cavanaugh High School, operates in an analogous fashion to the observation research in a typical qualitative case study (Stake 1995; Merriam 1998; Patton 2002). In a sense I conducted my field study twenty to thirty years ago, and I reconstructed my experience through the use of the techniques of heuristic self-study. Techniques of narrative inquiry would typically encourage that I create a story out of the whole experience, creating characters out of the former student actors—a kind of non-fiction novelistic approach to presenting the research (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). My intuition told me that this would be an excellent technique, but I am hampered by the temporal issues in

my research. I am not interacting with the interview participants on a daily basis any more. That being said, I have nonetheless been influenced by narrative inquiry because of what this research technique encourages researchers to pay attention to.

Using personal and narrative approaches to research are not without their pitfalls. For example, my memories may be faulty, or I may tend to sentimentalize the past. However, communicating and reporting the findings of heuristic research is a creative endeavor (Craig 55) or what Moustakas (1990) calls a “creative synthesis” (50). Stories emerge and as author Thomas King (2008) suggests, “the truth about stories is that’s all we are” (14). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state the following:

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories (2).

I chose to feature stories at the heart of this research study for many of the reasons given by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) in the above quotation. For example, many of the former student actors I interviewed have long been characters in stories I tell about my years teaching. I learned from some of the stories that the participants told, that I occasionally appear in their stories too. Conle (1999) writes of the potential power of this narrative positioning as I assert my own agency in the research I am conducting, “not just chronicling events, but narrating” my “life in schools” where I can be “a narrator as well as a character” in my story (20).

The research presented throughout this study weaves together different versions of my narrative self: academic, storyteller, interviewer, analyzer, student, teacher and so forth. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) point out that researchers using narrative inquiry often use different voices within their accounts such as ones that attend to matters of reflection and

discourse, and voices engaged in storytelling (7). Such shifts in voice occur throughout this research study. I attempted to provide guides for these shifts through clear demarcations such as the explicit use of italics to mark off a different kind of voice, or organizational headings to help the reader negotiate shifts in voice and shifts in time. Therefore the research presented throughout this study operates on multiple levels, from personal accounts, to attempts to capture the experiences of others who participated in school plays, from analysis, to reflection and commentary. Through the narratives and reports of lived experiences I attempted to capture what we valued from our participation in school plays and how we have carried that value into our adult lives.

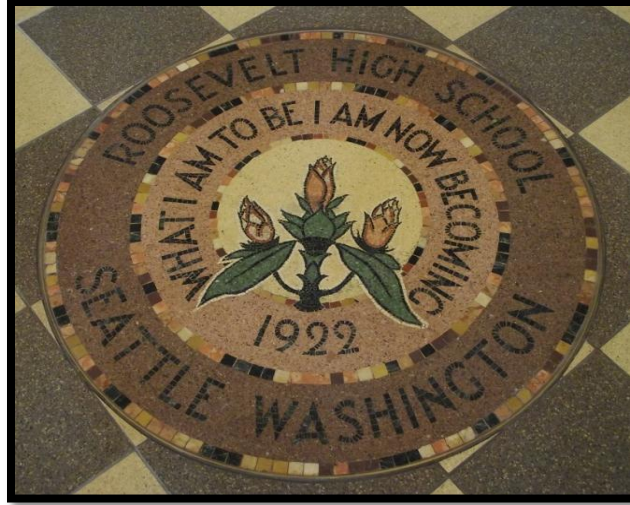
However, as I have reminisced, this project constantly threatened to overwhelm me with a variety of odd emotions. I felt a vague melancholy—tinges of regret, for example, that I did not pursue a career as performer. Casey (1997) calls this a state of wistfulness that is nearly endemic with reminiscing: “We are rendered wistful by the nonretrievability of certain experiences” (111). Casey believes that such bitter sweetness that accompanies remembering the past is also accentuated by pleasure—in short, reminiscing, even about painful experiences, is coupled with the knowledge that such experiences are indeed in the past (113).

While I experienced the wistfulness Casey describes, I also recognized a logical progression of my life. I would not want to give up any part of the journey from then until now. By actively seeking out these recollections of school plays I was also aware of how where I am in my life right now had an impact on how I view these memories. They were changed and transmuted as I transmitted them from memory to page. Memoirist Patricia Hampl (1996) writes about how much invention is included in the personal stories we craft for public consumption. Writing stories from one’s life is “not a matter of transcription,” she opines, remarking with some surprise that “memory itself is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a static gallery of

framed pictures” (205). Invention is a necessary part of memoir. But even while faced with the bits and pieces of my memory and faced with the task of shaping them as I retold them, I was struck with how important my experiences in school plays were to me. I cannot deny their seminal importance. I took these experiences very seriously! They were fun, but they also shaped me and made me long to integrate those experiences into my working and artistic life.

Maxine Greene (1995) writes: “It is against the backdrop of those remembered things and the funded meanings to which they give rise, that we grasp and understand what is now going on around us” (20). Returning to the past through recollection, the study of memorabilia, and conversations with old friends brought me into confrontation with lessons learned and wounds not perfectly healed. I have a lot of funded memories from which to muse upon in my present.

Throughout this chapter I engaged in self-reflection, thinking about my experiences in a drama program at a high school. In using my own stories, I was conscious of the doubts I had about the endeavor. Britzman (2000) writes “the narrative impulse bumps up against the work of not quite knowing if the story can do justice to the emotional experiences of learning itself” (10). What I did not realize at the time is that nearly every one of these experiences was a critical event, teaching me to self-evaluate, to explore my surroundings, to look at the world in a particular way, and to develop personal and interpersonal skills in real time solving immediate problems. I was reminded that my life then and now exemplifies a poignant echoing of our high school’s motto—a quote from Benjamin Franklin: “What I am to be, I am now becoming” (fig. 3).



**Figure 3. The Seal of the School. Author's Collection.**

### ***Social Development in a Culture of Caring: Remembering Baba Yaga***

When I was a freshman I had my first role in a high school play. I played Prince Ivan in an original adaptation of a Russian folktale featuring the cannibalistic witch, Baba Yaga. Part of the fun of our production was that Baba Yaga was played by a senior male in a bit of inspired cross-gendered casting. I had a personal connection to the Baba Yaga tales. I subscribed to *Jack and Jill* magazine which featured stories and puzzles for late elementary school and middle school aged children. I loved the magazine and devoured every issue. I was particularly fond of the Baba Yaga tales. I recalled the image of one of the magazine's Halloween covers, Baba Yaga in her flying pestle. Soon a very clear memory from my first time on the Roosevelt High School stage occurred to me from all the way back in the Spring of 1979:

*I looked out over the stage and into the endless darkness of the audience. The hot Fresnels shined at me from in front and above. Some of the lights hung off of the balcony and were clearly determined to blind me. I resisted the temptation to squint. I was looking straight*



*out, preparing for the big revelation scene. This was my first time on the big high school stage. My nerves had finally calmed. So far the play seemed to go as rehearsed, even if the chicken legs on Baba Yaga's hut got a bit stuck. Baba Yaga's hut on chicken legs is one of the more colorful aspects of the Russian tales, and the director wanted the hut to drop down from the flies, spin, and the chicken legs to drop. I got an unintentional laugh when I had to turn the hut around myself to reveal the witch and untangle the legs. However, that moment is in the past. Instead I thought about what the director has told me, about being true to the moment. I wanted to do very well for her. I was in awe of her, as she was one of my older brother's friends. He graduated two years before and was now attending acting school in New York. She had decided to cast her friend's freshman brother as the leading role in her play. It was an honor.*

*I am Prince Ivan, I thought to myself, pushing out all other thoughts, on a quest for the magic ring to save the kingdom. I am about to meet the Frost King, Morozco. I turned upstage, the lights changed, and Morozco was revealed on his vast throne, white light shining all over the stage. I saw him first in silhouette, overwhelmed by his grandeur. I was completely inside the story of the play, cowering in front of the Frost King, but fiercely determined to find my way to save the day.*

The memory of the *Baba Yaga* performance is very important to me, yet it is only a fragment. I keep tugging at it to get more, but this is the only part of my memory of this performance that feels authentic, that feels as if it is a real memory, not a re-creation of what I think happened or a pastiche of various rehearsal memories crammed together. I believe this memory is so clear because I had reached a point in the performance of the story when I was finally able to relax, breathe, and be in the world of the play as much as a brand new performer can be. It is my first memory of merging into a role and being completely present on stage.

I still have the magic ring, a simple double loop of plain metal designed to look like serpents. I also still have the script, an original adaptation of a Russian folktale featuring the fearsome witch, Baba Yaga. Its type-written pages are dog-eared and speckled with blue highlighter ink. At 14 years old, I was in my first high school play. I was excited. The play itself was a little clunky, but I still have fond memories of the rehearsals and the performance. *Baba Yaga* was part of the annual student-directed play festival at Roosevelt High School.

My participation in DramaFest as a freshman in high school, and my landing a leading role, were significant parts of my social development in adolescence. There was a definite culture of caring within the cast (Woods 1993, 117), as the seniors took me under their wing and showed me the ropes. Woods quotes a member of the *Godspell* cast saying “it’s really the group...the group in itself, I think, that has brought across the atmosphere” (118). I recall feeling a similar connection with this cast of *Baba Yaga*. The older members of the cast cared for me, made me feel special and adult. They taught me how to project my voice and take the stage. They introduced me to a kind of mutual support I had never experienced before. Of mutual support, Woods states that the students in *Godspell* “were secure in the knowledge that they were among friends, who would help to draw the best out of them, and for whom they would do the same in return” (122). The one cast member who truly exemplified this ideal was Morgaine, who played Baba Yaga’s cat. The cat in the play becomes Prince Ivan’s secret helper, keeping Baba Yaga from eating Ivan on several occasions. Morgaine became my helper and trusted guide. She helped me memorize lines and overcome my nerves. I was introduced to some of the best elements of what it meant to be a participant in a school play and carried those lessons of caring and mutual support throughout my high school career and into my teaching.

DramaFest, the week of student directed one-act plays, features prominently in my recollections and in my experiences in high school. My reflections on my own experiences have

helped me expand the definition of school plays to include not just the productions that were teacher lead and directed, but also to student initiated and directed plays. This festival of student directed plays was a very big deal. Every year, advanced drama students, usually junior and seniors, directed about ten plays, and cast as many as 100 students. The plays were adjudicated by theatre artists from the community and ended with three plays going to a Saturday night performance followed by an awards ceremony. The awards ceremony and showing of the best three plays was known as simply “Saturday Night.” DramaFest, as the week was called, was sometimes the only opportunity that students had to be in school plays. And the goal was to get to Saturday Night. *Baba Yaga* was my first chance to go to the elusive awards night, and I was hooked. It was also a first experience of losing a competition, an experience that would be repeated several more times during my high school years. I loved hanging out with the older students and being treated like an honored member of the team. I did not know then, but the school play would change my life forever.

The school play did change my life. Although that seems perhaps a bit melodramatic, the essence of that statement is true; my experiences in high school theatre profoundly influenced my career and life choices.

I was a shy, bookish, and decidedly nonathletic adolescent. I was in thick with the burgeoning geek set in middle school, perfectly happy and content to play *Dungeons and Dragons* on summer weekends in our various backyards. I loved reading, and regularly got lost as a child in Edward Eager’s delightful series about magic, books by Enid Bagnold such as *Five Children and It*, and some of the usual fantasy fare of pre-adolescence such as the Oz Books of L. Frank Baum and *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. *Dungeons and Dragons* was a natural pairing with my imagination. When it came out as a boxed game in the late 1970s, my mother bought it for me one memorable birthday. There was one attribute I had that set me off from my other *D &*

*D* friends. I had this odd theatrical sense that most of my friends did not understand. My theatrical flair often revealed itself when I played *Dungeons and Dragons*. After all it is a role-playing game.

I had always been interested in performance. When I was younger, I performed puppet shows for my family on Christmas (fig. 5). Even earlier, members of my family would pay me a quarter to imitate comedian Flip Wilson’s Geraldine character because it was funny to have me say things like “The Devil made me do it!” at six years old. Of course it is impossible to really know why performing was wired into me at such an early age. All children imitate which is the basis of much of creative dramatics (McCaslin 1990). I seemed to gravitate towards performing as an avocation.



**Figure 4. My puppet stage and me, circa 1972. Author’s Collection.**

One of my older brothers got involved in high school theatre. I went to see his plays and I couldn’t wait to get involved myself. So when I got into high school I took the beginning drama class and auditioned for DramaFest. The weekends and afternoons of *Dungeons and Dragons* quickly gave way to rehearsals and performances.

I learned how to project my voice, how to memorize lines, and other skills associated

with being in school plays. But I also learned other things—how to go to parties, how to fit in, how to compete, how to lose with dignity, how to not get a part in a play and be disappointed and yet excited for the whole project and the fact that I was cast at all. But mostly, drama took me out of my shell. I learned that elusive quality known as deportment. I developed a good speaking voice. I became a reader at my church, and even the youth representative on the parish council. I learned to be a little less socially awkward. I attribute all of these endeavors to my successes in school plays.

It would be a tempting cliché to say that the school play and its concomitant group of dedicated student performers filled some sort of emotional void for me. The school play did not fill in for some deep familial or emotional void in my adolescence. I am the product of a stable household with some unfortunate but also somewhat standard American familial dysfunctions. Alcoholism, sibling rivalry, identity confusion, co-dependence, bickering parents, adolescent loneliness, and my own emerging sexual identity are all mixed into my upper middle class upbringing. Of course there was pain and suffering involved, and when a little dash of Irish Catholic theology is added in, I suppose you could say I had a unique but not altogether unusual upbringing. Luckily, violence in my childhood home was a vague threat that was never a reality—as a child there was only the threat of a spanking with a wooden spoon. I don't recall ever seeing the wooden spoon. I was never hungry and never without a roof over my head. I had one saving grace, and it was an extremely important one. It was much commented upon by my friends growing up. I have a nurturing, soft-spoken, and very sweet father. Love was distant and reserved, but present.

I suppose that's why I often say I learned a hugging warmth from the school play.

The *Baba Yaga* cast was full of huggers. The culture of caring that I was introduced to through DramaFest as a freshman would sustain me throughout the rest of my adolescence.

That's what theatre folk did, or so I was lead to believe. We hugged each other, we cried when we didn't get to go to Saturday Night, we celebrated the victories of those who did go... with hugs.

The confessional tone of the above section is no accident. Private reflections and profound, if uncomfortable truths are part of a heuristic inquiry. Sharing my story is a deliberate attempt to use my reflections of my past to evoke memories in others (Craig 1978, 94). I have included the original paragraph I wrote above, the one beginning with "It would be a tempting cliché..." because I think it is an effective illustration of the layers of memory and truth telling demanded by heuristic inquiry—the encouragement to go deep, to go beyond the surface. I was tempted to alter the above paragraph and edit it to be more truthful. Instead I opted to use it as an example of the process of heuristic inquiry.

What I wrote above is glib, coy, and while strictly true, it glosses over many things and obfuscates more than it reveals. I was writing what I want to be true—that I did not get involved in high school dramatic activities in order to escape my chaotic home life. The truth is much more nuanced because it is a blend of factors. I was always intrigued by performance and a little experience in drama classes as a freshman had me wanting to try being on stage. I found something I liked to do and began to find a set of friends that were fun to be around and supportive. I also seemed to have some facility in acting.

Was I consciously extending school hours so I did not have to go home? I now think that was a side benefit. The drinking at home was unsettling and unpredictable. As the youngest, my opinions on matters were never valued. In school plays my input was valued. So, like countless others before me, I found belonging in the theatre. Once I found hugs in the theatre I became known as a hugger. So it was not just a "hugging warmth" that I discovered, but the ability to give a hug and mean it.

The hug is a metaphor for emotional development, another important aspect of Woods' (1993) research findings about critical events in teaching and learning (111). And DramaFest was an annual event that taught me a lot about feelings.

### ***Emotional Development: Remembering DramaFest***

As I stated above, I learned to hug through my involvement in school plays. I learned to emphasize the warmth of my personality, to charm through sweetness, to be social. I moved from being bookish and self-absorbed to being social and outwardly focused. I was voted “friendliest” in the infamous senior poll (you know, the one that includes “Most Likely to Succeed” and “Dreamiest Eyes”—that poll). The only reason I even made a blip on the senior poll was because of my experiences in high school theatre.

One of the more startling discoveries has been the centrality of DramaFest to my experiences of school plays. I was startled because I was not expecting these student-driven projects to feature so prominently. When I started this phase of my research, I had a prejudice against the DramaFest experiences, deeming them unworthy of serious consideration. In my mind, school plays were those projects firmly in the hands of my various high school theatre teachers and directors. As I have progressed through the project, I have come to realize that the ownership that I had over the DramaFest plays is perhaps what has made them feature so prominently in my memories. Woods (1993) points out that the ownership of students in his study over their production of *Godspell* was one of its most enduring features (117). I share a kinship with those students in his study, as the emotional investment I felt in DramaFest productions is still palpable. The competitive part of this festival of one-acts, although treated with an appropriate lightness, was also serious business at the time. I can still feel the pangs of loss and the sweetness of what victories and failures came my way.

I have already shared how DramaFest worked—a week of student-directed one-acts adjudicated by local theatre professionals culminating in a Saturday night performance of the best plays and an awards ceremony which included prizes in acting and design from the whole week. Although I was aware of the competitive nature of DramaFest as a freshman, it was not until the following years that I felt its full force.

The tenets of heuristic inquiry demand an unflinching gaze into the past. I have discovered that the memories I want to overlook or disregard are the ones that end up being at the core of my development. At several key points in the process of writing this chapter, photographs have become key elements in my heuristic inquiry. I had moments of *punctum* (Barthes 1980; Mackey 2012), and similar moments of *eureka*, of being punctured and pricked as I made surprising discoveries. For several months I avoided the inclusion of a particular picture, because it caused me to flinch, to feel pangs of regret (fig. 6).



**Figure 5. Cast of *No, No, A Million Times No!* Drama Fest. From *Strenuous Life*, Roosevelt High School Yearbook, 1981.**

Any photograph must be used and viewed prudently. James Kaufmann (1982) reminds us that “photographs show us something undeniably real, but only a part of the whole reality; they



tell us something about real life, but not exactly what is real about it” (195). For example, the photographs I use in this part of the chapter are mostly posed. They involve pictures in and out of costumes for various productions. There are undeniable layers of artificiality to these pictures. Susan Sontag (1977) writes simply that “photographs furnish evidence” (5). Yet that evidence is layered, nuanced, saturated within culture, and interpretive. Our personal photographs are “a portable kit of images that bears witness” (8) to our connections to family, school, and other aspects of daily living—but in the past. The manner in which photographs freeze our pasts, Sontag contends in an idea she shares with Barthes, always carries a reminder of our mortality as they “testify to time’s relentless melt” (15).

I feel pangs when I look at the cast photograph of *No, No, A Million Times No!* in my 1981 Roosevelt High School yearbook (fig. 6). I feel the pangs of jealousy and loss, of joy and fun. I see four of my closest friends in high school among the cast and crew and wish that geography and time did not separate us so much. I see the young woman who asked me to my senior prom, a whole story unto itself. Although I have many different memories sparked from this picture, I will discuss four of them: the gingham dresses, Phil Williams as Noble Hart, playing the piano in rehearsals and performances, and how this production fared in the DramaFest competitions. The *punctum* for this picture is acute.

Indeed the pangs are so strong that for the first four months I was engaged in my heuristic inquiry of the school play, I avoided writing about this production. I believed this story was not really necessary. Eventually I thought I could briefly describe what happened—give it a few quick lines and move on. As I have found over and over in this research certain stories associated with a production would not release me so easily. In this case, the picture pulled me into the memories, and the picture provided me with a way to recount this particular story.

*No, No, A Million Times No!* is a silly musical written in the style of a traditional

melodrama complete with black clad moustache twirling villain, and a heroine who went to the city and returned still “pure as the driven snow.” The jokes are silly and the music fun but forgettable. My knowledge of this style was confined pretty much to the musicals of Nelson Eddie and Jeanette McDonald, to various melodramas that local theatres did in the parks during the summer, and the cartoon spoof *Dudley-Do-Right*.

The first details of the photograph that leap out at me are the gingham dresses on the small chorus of women. I think immediately of the costume room which was hidden back stage behind a large sliding door. After disengaging the padlock, I would have to pull hard and heave the enormous metal door along its track. We are talking hardware that dated back to 1922, or so it seemed. Once the metal door was pulled to the side, I had to unlock another smaller door. The smell would hit me first—a musty smell of mothballs and decaying cloth. It was not an unpleasant smell. The sight before me was always a bit of a shock. The room was two stories high, but very narrow and long. Enormous poles held the costumes on two giant racks to either side of the room. A large rickety ladder allowed for access to the second and much higher racks of clothes. The costumes were roughly organized by time period and represented a virtual catalogue in fabric of the production history at Roosevelt High School. A small section high up in a corner held the beautiful seventeenth century costumes made for a production of a Molière play many years before my time at the school. Another rack was filled with 1920s gowns made for the musical *The Boy Friend*. I was searching for the gingham dresses used to costume most of the chorus in a production of the musical *Carousel* from my freshman year. I thought they would be perfect for *No, No, A Million Times No!*

I recall the panic and frustration I felt looking for the dresses. How could so many of them be missing? When I finally found the box, there were just enough for my cast. They were all colors. Despite the frustration, the search also included elements of fun, with detours into

caressing silk dresses, sneezing at mink coats, and fawning over frock coats and white tuxedos.

So when I look at the photo, I immediately think of the search for those gingham dresses. I wish the picture were in color, because I remember the colors so clearly—one was yellow, one was green, one was lavender, one was blue, and one, the only one that was a full circle skirt, was red. It was destined to costume the one chorus member with a featured dance solo. It would really stand out. How lucky was that?

When I examine the photograph I also think of Phil<sup>1</sup> who played one of the leading roles. He was woefully miscast, but he had a lovely singing voice. Phil was a troubled young man, plagued by acne and depression. I had long conversations with him throughout the rehearsals, and for some time after. He would complain about his life, his parents, and his lack of friends. His social skills were sparse. He bathed irregularly. He just did not know when or how to give people space, and his jokes always teetered on the inappropriate. They were too crude. But he tried, oh how he tried. He made such improvements throughout the rehearsals, both in stage presence and in attitude. His singing really was lovely.

After I graduated and lost touch with him I heard that he had committed suicide. His awkward smile in the yearbook photograph makes me sad.

In addition to directing the play, I played the piano for this production, and I was very proud of this accomplishment. I took piano lessons from the fifth grade, so this was after six years of piano lessons. The music was just on the edge of what I was capable of playing. I had to learn a short but complicated overture. I recall that one of the cast members had some facility in transposing music, as one of the songs was too low as written. She wrote the transposed version out by hand, as this was before computers would have made the whole process amazingly simple. I was suddenly faced with learning to play this rather simple ballad with something like

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<sup>1</sup> Phil is a pseudonym.

four sharps.

I invited one of my non-theatre friends to accompany me on the violin, which sounded perfect for a couple of the songs. I remember how nervous I was sitting at the piano waiting to start the performance. I played the short overture hesitantly at first, building up confidence as I progressed. I can still recall how dry my mouth became. I had a large cast, one of the largest casts for a DramaFest play, and we put all the little touches in, including a couple of cute dance routines. I put everything I knew about musical theatre into the show. But, truth be told, the script as I said above, was just plain silly, and probably did not hold up very well.

The play won a couple of awards: Best Supporting Actress and Best Set Design, but it was not picked to go to Saturday Night. I also got two special awards, designed I think by Ruben, my drama teacher, to take the sting out of not making it to Saturday Night: Best Choreography and Best Musical Accompaniment. It is a little disturbing to me that thirty years later I can still rattle off the awards—or as I thought of it at the time, the consolation prizes. I was told the judges were very harsh because I did not know whether the show was a musical or a melodrama—the fact that it was both seemed not to matter. I jumbled the style, I guess. And it was up against some very stiff competition.

A friend of mine who acted as my assistant director on this project recently told me that there was one thing she really remembered about my stated goals at the time. I wanted big casts in my show because I wanted to get as many people involved as possible in DramaFest. She remembers it as a very earnest statement from me. I am heartened that my altruistic self was more present than the part of me that wanted to win.

And yet, I think I lost with grace and humor. Whatever disappointment there was at the time, there was also a lot of pressure to celebrate the friends that went on to Saturday Night and did well. Woods (1993) discusses emotional development largely in terms of the experimentation

that occurs when young actors are exploring their roles in a play (111-116). However, he does go on to discuss the discipline required in being inside and outside of their roles. In a way, my role as director involved as much need of experimentation and emotional development as the actors. When we did not get picked to go to Saturday Night I had to act mature and console my cast, and not behave in a petty manner towards my friends and colleagues who were chosen. My emotional experiences with *No, No, A Million Times, No!* mirror somewhat those described by Larson and Brown in their 2007 report on a study for *Child Development*. I encountered cycles of elation and despair and had to learn quickly how to respond appropriately. I was nurtured throughout the experience by my high school drama teacher, Ruben.

Ruben's presence behind the scenes was very reassuring, especially in the emotionally charged atmosphere of DramaFest competition. He counseled me when I lost a coveted spot at the Saturday night performances, assuring me that my work was good and that he was surprised by the judges' decision. He knew how important my emotional investment had been in the project, and felt a little guilty as an advisor that he had not coached me to a winning performance. Ruben's steady hand and quick humor were definitely an integral part of learning how to behave with emotional maturity.

I have to dig a little, under the disappointment, to find the joy of this particular production. I remember teaching the waltz to two rather clumsy actors, the scarecrow we made to go into the set. I remember how proud the set designer was for winning an award. I remember trusting two of my closest friends to put together a little soft shoe dance and how amazed I was at the result—it was a showstopper! I remember the fun of a little joke at the end, when the heroine said “At last the clouds have parted...” and we bumped the lights up. It got a good laugh. I can still feel joy tinged with melancholy when I sit down at the piano and plink out bits and pieces from the show. Perhaps the lingering embarrassment I feel is because the play has no

redeeming social value. It is cute and a piece of fluff.

So I got to learn about rejection and disappointment. Many times. Although my disappointment was around the competition, Larson and Brown (2007) discuss the emotions that students went through after auditions and casting. It is one of the few places I've seen the issue discussed at length and it is analogous to the emotions I went through in relation to *No, No, A Million Times No!*. Larson and Brown compare the emotional letdown around casting school plays to studies done of the similar distress caused by being turned down after cheerleading tryouts. In cheerleading, the emotional distress is often long term. Larson and Brown found that the disappointments after casting last only a few weeks "as youth talked it through with their friends and got engaged in the roles they were given" (1089). In my case, DramaFest was never the only project going on. I was busy in the spring musical when DramaFest happened, and I had good roles both my junior and senior years. My friends often did well in DramaFest, so I was also able to be happy for them. All of the issues described by Larson and Brown were arguably present—my emotional maturity was enhanced by these experiences, even as I had to struggle to work through them.

That neatly wraps up that story. But there are hints of other images, of me on the phone trying to counsel a depressed peer, or me trying to coax the young woman cast opposite him to hang in there as he continually violated her personal space in rehearsals. And I can still hear the violin strains playing along with me, recreating the sound of a bygone era. They echo in my heart.

### ***Magic and Aesthetic Development: Remembering My Death in Brigadoon***

Janet Garner Gunn (1982) believes we write autobiographically as a way of reading ourselves (31). It is an act of writing designed to aid in our ability "to comprehend our

experience in the world and to discover its significance” (33). The following is a reading of a particular memory, perhaps the strongest performance memory I have of from a high school production. I connect this performance memory with Woods’ category of “the experience of magic” (124). I take a slightly different view when using the term magic than Woods because of the different circumstances under which productions were performed at Roosevelt High School. For Woods the magic of a particular performance springs from the energy of the group and the communication with the audience (125). The production Woods describes had a specific set of extraordinary circumstances that colored all of the participants’ memories of it. Although I believe elements of Woods “critical events” occurred in the productions we produced three times a year at Roosevelt, their quotidian character alters the way I experienced these critical events. For me the magic of this moment comes from my ability to see myself as part of the whole, but I could only do so because at that moment on stage I was static, part of a larger picture connected to the plot of the play and its emotional qualities.

*Brigadoon* is a musical with lyrics and libretto by Alan Jay Lerner and music by Frederic Lowe, originally produced in 1947. It tells the magical fable of two American hunters who get lost in the highlands of Scotland, only to find themselves in the small hamlet of Brigadoon, where it looks as if everyone is stuck in the eighteenth century. It turns out that Brigadoon has been protected from the ravages of modern life by the “miracle” and the town only appears once every one hundred years disappearing back into the mists of the highlands after one day. The inhabitants experience the time lapse as only a gentle sleep. The “miracle” has a caveat—if anyone were to leave Brigadoon, the miracle would be shattered and Brigadoon would disappear forever (Mordden 1999, 169). *Brigadoon* was the musical produced at Roosevelt High School during my sophomore year in 1980. I played the character of Harry Beaton, the villain of the play. He is rejected by the woman he loves, who is to be married that day to someone else. Harry

Beaton threatens the miracle by trying to run away from Brigadoon, the declaration of which ends act one.

*May 1980. I stood in the wings of the Roosevelt High School auditorium looking out onto the stage, the spooky darkness of the fly-space looming above me. I stood next to “the cage”—a metal mesh that encircled the old transformer lighting equipment. It looked like a set piece from a Frankenstein movie: giant levers that moved up and down to turn the stage lights on and off. The drama department recently purchased a new computerized system, and the light cage was no longer a necessity. I sometimes thought of the history of the place, of performances on that high school stage reaching back to the 1920s. We called it “the barn” because of its harsh and echoic acoustics, but it wasn’t a cafetorium, so I guess we were lucky. It featured a seating area complete with unforgiving wooden chairs and a balcony, an authentic “sprung” wooden stage floor, pulley and weight fly system with real hemp ropes, and a trap room below the stage. It was a theatre space that looked like a theatre space and it was rife with history.*

*I was getting used to the challenges of the beginning of the second act. I did a lot of running around the stage and ended up exhausted at the end of the first scene. I was the villain of the musical and I had to do my best to look menacing in a Scottish kilt as I ran among the cardboard and muslin trees. After all, I was threatening the very existence of those characters that were chasing me. My character had the last line of Act One, and it still rang in my ears as I waited backstage: “I am leaving Brigadoon, and ‘tis the end of all of us!”*

*The fog machines started and I moved into position, behind one of the trees. The heavy green curtain was closed. I heard the release of the curtain’s rope lock. The orchestra started in the pit, the curtain went up, and the chase was on. I dodged in and out of sight of the audience, dashing through stage fog. The orchestra drove the beat as the other cast members sang: “Harry*



*Beaton, Harry Beaton! Run and get him, get him! Run and get him, get him! Run ye Highland men or you won't see another morning!"*

*My favorite part finally arrived—I disappeared behind a tree, grabbed a bottle of stage blood, poured it over my forehead, tripped over a papier mâché rock, turned out to the audience in one last look, and died. Dying on stage every night was enjoyable, and so was dumping enough blood across my forehead to be realistic without being messy. Privately, those of us who were in scene, thought the words that were sung just after this moment were outrageously silly—“Looks like he fell on a rock and it broke in his head.” I mean, it was pretty obvious what happened, even for a musical! But, hey, the town was saved, and the people of Brigadoon would live to see another day.*

*Meanwhile, I was carried off stage by my stage father. I had a quick change to do—clean up and come back for the gloomy dirge scene. I turned the corner into the hall behind the stage, startling Rosie. She looked at me and screamed, “Oh my god, Michael are you ok?” I was confused. “Uh, yeah...” Then I started to laugh. “Stage blood... I just died.” We laughed and I ran back to the makeup room to clean off. When I saw myself in the mirror, I understood why Rosie had screamed. The stage blood had streaked across my face, caked as it had dried, and looked grisly. I wiped it up a bit and rushed backstage for my next entrance.*

*In the middle of the second act of Brigadoon I was brought out on stage, dead. A bagpipe led the way. The sound was so eerie, mournful, and clear—the dirge for Harry Beaton. I was placed on the stage, laid out for all to see. My head was turned up stage, and I opened my eyes.*

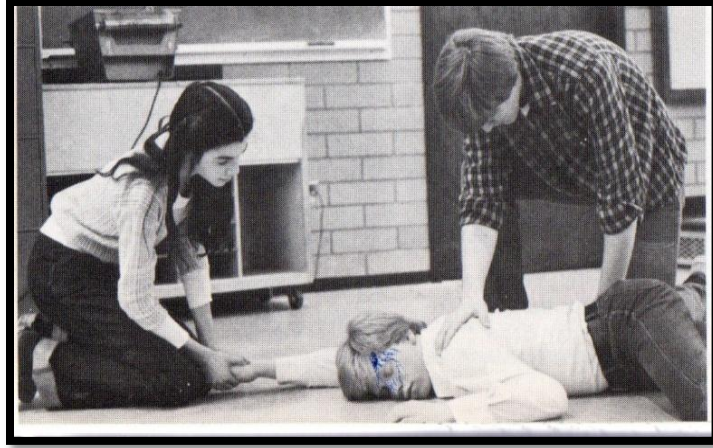
*And then it started—the funeral dance for Harry Beaton, performed by my friend Melissa. I took shallow breaths because I was supposed to be dead, and after awhile I began to feel a little bit faint. With each breath the odor of the floor rifled through my nostrils—a musty, dusty scent—and I stifled the desire to sneeze. My stationary hands could feel the ripples of the*

*thick black stage paint on the floor that had already faded to a dark gray. Melissa danced over and around me. At one point she leapt over me. The platform creaked as she landed and I caught a glimpse of her black ballet slippers, the hem of her red dress, and the flash of white stockings and petticoat. She turned in one last sad farewell to the man she loved but couldn't have. The platform creaked again as her shoes made a soft squeaking sound. She pirouetted and made one last leap, punctuated in my ears by the rustle of her skirts as she flew by. The bagpipes grew silent.*

It's an odd memory, fragmented by what I can see from my odd angle on the floor. I am breathing very shallowly, because I am supposed to be dead. And perhaps I remember it so well because I am stationary—really, just a prop on the stage. I did a flashy sword dance on stage, but I can barely recall it. Why this memory?

When I asked Melissa over the phone about her memories of this scene at first she demurred, claiming she wouldn't remember much. However, she remembered the set up of the scene right away, the funeral dance for the man she loved. Immediately she recalled what she was wearing. In addition to the red dress, she wore a long black veil which featured prominently in the dance. She also recalled that at one point she was supposed to do splits, but could not do “real” ones. The choreographer told her she would have to do “cheat splits.” She remembers feeling bad that she had to do, as she called it, “fake” splits.

Imagine my surprise after writing the above, I found a picture in my yearbook from 1980, complete with inked in blood from Melissa herself (fig. 7). Did this picture linger in my memory for thirty years, which is why the memory of my being on stage is so vivid, because it has been reinforced by this picture—a picture that I did not recall existed until after I wrote the above sketch?



**Figure 6. Melissa, my stage dad, and me on the ground in *Brigadoon* rehearsal. From *Strenuous Life*, 1980.**

Sitting in Melissa’s kitchen was a different sort of experience than talking to her on the phone. She was busy preparing waffles, the Vermont morning sunshine filtering in through the windows. We were actively engaged in memory retrieval, a process Casey (2000) identifies as reminiscing (104). According to Casey, reminiscing is a different process than solitary recollection. Because it “flourishes in the company of others” (113), reminiscing gathers its unique powers because it is communal.

In addition to the memories about the story of the play, and the circumstances surrounding the dance I got to witness from the odd angle of the floor, Melissa had very strong memories of jealousy associated with the part she played in *Brigadoon*. Another sophomore girl had ballet and point dancing in her repertoire, whereas Melissa did not. She still remembered the pangs of jealousy accompanying *Brigadoon*. She also remembered how much she loved the dance she did get to do. It was very important to her. As she talked about it, her arms and hands fluttered up, her body elongated. She was experiencing some body memories even as she spoke. She recalled that she entered the stage holding two swords in a cross pattern. As she reminisced she shared that she recently had been dancing with an adult ballet class that often resulted in performances and recitals. Melissa was still dancing.

In a series of reflections, Melissa mused about what the school plays meant to her. She mentioned the people that we learned to admire and emulate and the exposure to such a wide variety of people. She had a moment of surprise when she realized that unlike the sports experiences of her own children, involvement in school plays encouraged friendships across gender lines. Her sons had largely been involved in sports, and subsequently had friendships primarily with other males as the sports they played were segregated by gender.

When I brought up DramaFest, Melissa was again startled by her own memories. She had forgotten the competitive component of the week of plays. “I’ve always told my boys that I haven’t a competitive bone in my body.” In remembering auditions, jealousies, and competitions, Melissa confessed that perhaps her statement to her sons needed some slight amending.

Today, Melissa is an accomplished freelance writer, who has also worked in publishing and software development. But she is not a theatre scholar. So when she said that she supposed she got “you know, what everyone says about theatre, it gave me confidence” it was my turn to be startled. The confidence building aspect of theatre studies for adolescents has been a feature of the justifications for its inclusion in schools for five hundred years. Indeed, it is such an obvious feature of the process, that Melissa intuitively understood its prominence. I am sure that many adults told us when we were teenagers that involvement in drama would build our self-esteem and give us confidence. There’s an echo of the medieval teachers who understood that about drama five hundred years ago.

Our memories may be suspect but we actually rely heavily on them in qualitative studies (Weiss 1994). We want people to tell us about their experiences. Of course, once they do, those experiences and memories are shaped through many conscious and unconscious filters. One such filter is known as nostalgia. One charge that can be leveled at the kinds of memories evoked in this study is the potential effect of nostalgia upon them. Researchers seem to mistrust nostalgia

because it interrupts a clear-eyed, and I suppose more objective recollection of the past (Lowenthal 1989, 20). Nostalgia simplifies the past and smoothes over its complexities. We are also victims of a general commercialization of nostalgia in market terms—our pasts are routinely commoditized. Under the onslaught of media-packaged nostalgia how do we own our personal narratives and remembrances of the past and compare and perhaps even insulate them from the nostalgic images and stories pervasive in our culture? I believe that I had a mistaken idea about nostalgia and memory. When I started this research I only valued narrative memories. However, memories arrive in a variety of ways, and are valuable in a variety of ways.

Edward S. Casey (2000) believes that we remember in different ways—that memory is “polymorphic” and needs many different kinds of metaphors for explanation. He writes that “the past need not come packaged in the prescribed format of representational recollections” (xxi). And Casey reminds us that remembering happens in the present tense, and so thereby transforms “one kind of experience into another” (xxii). I believe there are special memory concerns with performances, especially the memories of the performers in a play. The performers repeat their actions often through rehearsals. I can never be sure if I am remembering a composite picture of a performance event, cobbled together out of the many repetitions, or if I am remembering a true single experience on the stage.

Melissa’s fluttering hands as she recalled the dance in *Brigadoon* is an extremely revealing moment. Her memory of the event is embodied in her. Her knowledge still exists as a physical presence, not just flashes of images in her mind. Words begin to fail when confronted by embodied memory—I cannot quite capture the faraway look on her face, and the brief arching of her back, the pointed foot and extended leg. Even the veil seemed to make a brief appearance across her shoulders—and the hand, the fluttering fingers reaching for the memory that still existed in her body.

And so I return to my memory of the floor. I recognized my place as part of this picture, of myself as part of a *tableau vivant*. In terms of the script, that tableau is about the sacrifice and cost of the Brigadoon miracle. In artistic terms, I began to understand the value of how theatre communicates story through dance, music, situation, and character. As I write this I am smiling. These are aspects of the Greek philosopher Aristotle's (1982) ancient observations about the essential elements of drama—plot, character, thought, language, spectacle, and melody (51).

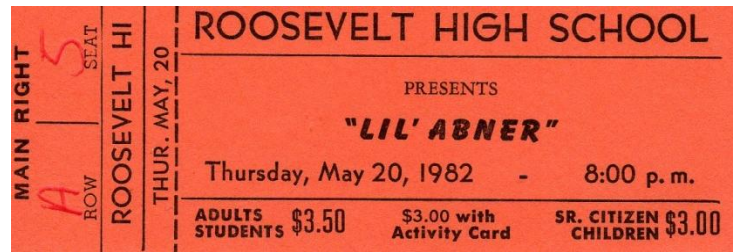
In my picture as Harry Beaton, I am very serious. This picture of me also makes me smile. I've decided to let the photographer take a picture of me in character. I am so serious, and my black shirt marks me as the villain (fig. 8). The director loved casting me, the sweet faced boy, as the villain. But what her comment forgets is that I was something of a discovery. I was a boy with internal rhythm—in short, I could dance. I was cast in the part because I could dance.



**Figure 7. The author as Harry Beaton, *Brigadoon*, 1980. Author's Collection.**

Beneath the nostalgia which can transform memories not interrogated into stories we want to tell, such as Melissa not remembering her own competitive nature, are the realities of other transformations we made into the characters we played on stage. These transformations are the essence of theatrical magic. Woods (1993) discusses how the content and adaptation of a play and its production values contribute to magic (128). How much does the content of a school play dictate the development of the spirit of *communitas*? I argue that based on my experience, school plays communicate with their casts and their audiences on levels beyond just the content of the play. Mixed into the content of the play are all the significant ways that the adults in charge shape the manner in which the cast bonds with the project, be it the silly mild satire of a *No, No, A Millions Times, No!* or the romantic pathos of a *Brigadoon*. Content can help. The tragic ending of *West Side Story* allowed all of us to emote on stage. At the same time a cast is marveling at their ability to pull this thing off, audiences are marveling at the fact that their children are up there on the stage displaying talents that they might not have fully understood were there in the service of a story. A critical event in teaching and learning happens because what is gained through these experiences exists not only in the final projects that result, but because so much of these experiences linger and shape all of the people involved. There is the interaction with the script, for example, the tragic death of Harry Beaton who tries to run away from *Brigadoon*, but there are other subtle lessons such as the cost of creating a harmonious society on those who do not fit in. In the process of putting forward the illusions of tragedy or romantic love, I also learned how these effects are produced, how my lying on the stage is part of a bigger picture of a small moment on stage, wherein a dance of love and sadness has the aesthetic function of moving a cast and an audience. It is all of these insights together that create the particular magic of a school play.

*Personal Development: Remembering Who I Am Becoming*



**Figure 8. Ticket Stub. *Li'l Abner*. Author's Collection.**

Constructing narratives out of lived experience is complex. Carola Conle (1999) describes the temptation to simplify too much, to turn our stories into easy lessons full of moral platitudes. Our retelling of our stories always risks a certain kind of fixity. She writes, “Perhaps it is our unconscious effort to lower the level of complexity that tempts us in everyday life and in research to tell stories that have a lasting, non-changing quality, or to lift them out of their temporality altogether” (16). I am guilty of this, and have avoided some of my stock stories of being a student and a teacher. When I have explored some of these stock stories of my own life, I have been careful to look at them with greater depth, to find the actual lived memories underneath the accretion of multiple tellings—to avoid the tale with a neat and tidy moral at the end. Conle further opines,

In our culture we tend to value what is uniform, consistent, generalizable, context-free, and, in a sense, portable. Narratives generally do not lend themselves to such purposes. They tend to change with every telling. It is difficult to summarize a story into a neat, portable package, and if we try and do this, something happens to the story. It may lead toward a certain type of ‘hardening’ (18).

The hardening that Conle refers to is the risk of narrative inquiry—of using stories for specific academic and research purposes. The stories I tell here have had to harden in many ways. As a developing scholar writing a dissertation I have to pass through certain trials of authorship and tests of evidence and value. In short, my freedom is restricted. The stories I tell must serve a purpose, must further the grand narratives of an entire chapter, indeed, of an entire research



study. As such, the stories have been shaped, put to task, set up as examples of a particular point, even as they threaten to burst out, to tell other tales, to reveal other issues in their complexity.

Such a story is that of the last few months of my senior year. I have told this story many times and it has the definite feeling of a stock story from my life, ready with a punch line, ready with a neat little tag at the end. So I have decided to retell this story from within. I have kept a journal off and on over the past thirty years, starting when I was in high school. I decided to write the story of the last half of senior year as a single journal entry, from the middle of the summer of 1982.

*My bedroom, Seattle, July 1982 IAM*

*I'm tired and restless, so I am going to write for awhile. A confusing night, with a lot of things kind of jangling through my head. Tonight I went down to David's house for a midsummer kegger. There were probably twenty-five or thirty people there. Most of my good friends are on summer trips, so I was alone, in a way. We ended up climbing over the fence nearby his house and walking through Magnuson Park at Sandpoint. Somebody even toted along the keg. I spent most of the evening sitting on a picnic table apart from the group, wondering why I was there.*

*My presence at these events always seems such a surprise to some people. "Mike, what are you doing here?" Why is that? I do not really know what most people think of me, but I guess they like me well enough. I did get that award, that "Friendliest" award at the Senior breakfast. But I sat there on the picnic table wondering over and over again how I got there. I mean, this is the "in-crowd" we're talking about.*

*So, I was sitting on a battered picnic table on a warm July night looking out over the lake. The dark green paint was peeling on the table, and I picked at it occasionally. I was in a reflective mood, thinking back over the last six months, and I suddenly found myself reviewing*

*my whole four years at Roosevelt High School. I handled the cold plastic cup in my hands with discomfort. I just turned eighteen. I graduated from high school a month ago. I have not done a lot of beer handling at parties. I took a sip, the acrid taste tingled in my mouth.*

*I heard the sound of raucous laughter to my left, though most of my fellow partiers were hidden from sight behind arching head-high blackberry brambles. The others were disappearing into the late evening dusk of a Seattle summer night, when sunset feels like it goes on forever. Although I could hear the voices, everyone was aware that if they got too loud the police would arrive. Of course it was the lure of the danger that has us all there. I think some even went skinny dipping in the lake later on. Maybe it was the fear of the police that had me nervous and weird. I don't know.*

*I feel awkward. I know that I am not really one of this group of popular teenagers. I am a temporary guest. I feel their awkwardness around me. I was invited out of politeness, out of memories of the last several months. I have a feeling that this is my last invitation—that my brief inroads into the popular crowd are coming to a close.*

*Yeah, I know how I got there, invited to a summer kegger by the lake. I was there, without a doubt, because of the school play.*

*I think Li'l Abner is kind of stupid musical. Long on cute, short on substance. But we had had a lot of fun putting it together. It was Ruben's first musical as the director at Roosevelt, an opportunity he had jumped at. The tradition had been that the full time drama teacher took on all the other directing duties, but another teacher directed the musical. Ruben had been waiting to take on the musical. Li'l Abner was a perfect choice for him, simple story with lots of athletic dancing. The athletic dancing was why I was at that party. Ruben is the advisor to the yell and cheer leaders and most of them were from Laurelhurst and Windermere. The places where the in-crowd came from. Mansions on the lake. Was I being a snob to point out that they were all*

*snobs? But they aren't snobs. They are actually really nice people. But I'm not a jock.*

*In-crowds, Windermere, mansions, jocks, keggers, snobs.*

*What could I have possibly be thinking when I tried out to be a yell leader last year? Did my best friend Doug talk me into it, or did I think I had a prayer in that popularity contest? What was I thinking? What a humiliating experience, to be voted on by the whole school, and clearly voted out. I was so uncool. Had Doug talked me into trying out? Maybe.*

*Wow, my head is really jumping around here, because now I'm thinking of another set of tryouts, for the musical this last year. Ruben really played mind games with me during the casting. The character role of Marryin' Sam was tailor made for my boisterous stage personality. And he did not call me back for the role. I got called back for other roles, but not that one. I was shaken. I was the senior male in the drama department, and this was my last musical. I was not going to get Abner, so I knew I had to go for the secondary lead. I was so nervous going to look at the cast list. But there was my name next to Marryin' Sam.*

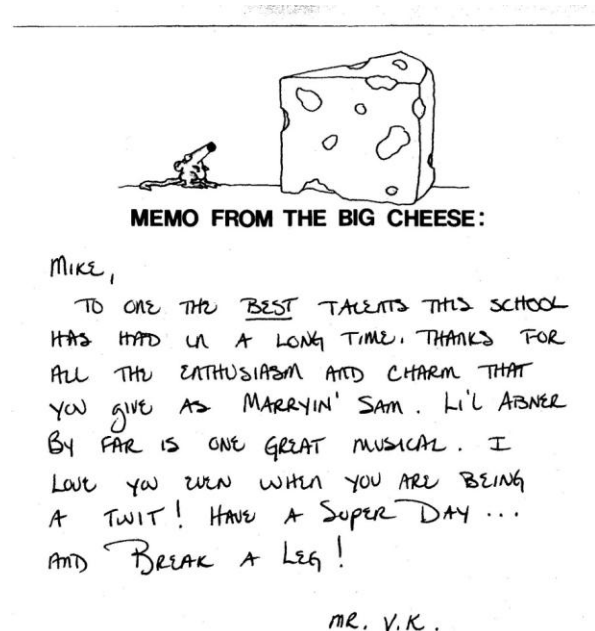
*Ruben cast me, chuckling at his cleverness. Ah, Ruben, you old devil. He wanted me to sweat a bit, is what he said. He got me sweating alright. Meanwhile, he also recruited as many of the yell and cheerleaders as he could for the chorus. He wanted an athletic show, full of dances and double stunts.*

*And there you have it, I thought. I got one of the leads in the musical and suddenly I was surrounded by the in-crowd in the chorus. And they seemed to like me. Invitations to Laurelhurst Swim Club, invitations to several keggers, and here I am, midsummer, feeling awkward.*

*I suddenly remember something. A television news channel had spent a week at Roosevelt trying to uncover the real story of local high schools. One of our dress rehearsals for Li'l Abner was filmed. I caught the story on the news, and there I was, for a brief few seconds, all decked out as Marryin' Sam, leading the whole chorus in a rip roaring dance and song. I saw briefly*

what others had seen in me. I was pretty good, in tune, and definitely exuding tons of energy. It was both embarrassing and gratifying. Was that why I sat on a picnic table at Sandpoint tonight, because the others recognized my talent? Did I suddenly belong because the in-crowd had a chance to see me up close?

Of course, there was my break down. I am a pretty even keeled sort of fellow, or so I think, doggedly unflappable. During one of the rehearsals with the orchestra I really struggled with that duet with Abner. I couldn't get the harmony right. I was frustrated and we had to stop the song and try it again several times. Ruben came down the aisle of the auditorium and tried to coach me. I snapped at him in front of the whole cast. "I can get this, don't tell me what to do, I can get this. Just let me try again." It was rude, and I apologized later. He forgave me for being a twit and I have pasted the "Break a Leg" card onto the page.



I suppose he did more than forgive me, after all he also gave me the Drama Department "Service above Self" award. Huh.

Even though there were things about the singing that I don't think I did very well, the whole production was actually very fun, surrounded by lots of people I liked, my best friends,

*just out there putting on a show. And I got to be popular for a few months. I guess it was kind of nice, even though I know it is over. Keggers will go on without me and I'll leave for college in about a month.*

*I am chuckling. I guess I got to be popular because of the school play. Not bad, kiddo.*

I have tied this story to Woods' (1993) category of personal development (105) for several reasons. My identity in high school was very connected to my position as "the senior male in the drama department." Woods discusses how students develop confidence (110) reliability (106), and the ability to "see themselves as others saw them" (106). I did other activities and was a good student, but my primary focus was being involved in the drama department. It is where I perceived that I received much of my value. It is where I was most confident, and where I developed important skills in "reflectivity" (106)—the ability to self-assess and make adjustments.

My experiences are an illustration of one of the research findings in adolescent development summarized by Lynn Barnett (2006). She writes, "one's peer crowd, with its associated culture and values, is influential on one's sense of identity, social and personal, and on one's resultant feelings of value, competence, and connectedness" (515). It was very typical for me at the time to downplay receiving an award for "friendliness" as at the time I did not really understand that truly being a decent and nice person, traits from my father, probably gave me more value than having a leading role in a school production. I learned to care about the people in the plays and to strive for communal success. The several months of popularity surprised me because it gave me an opportunity to associate with others outside my usual circle. As Barnett (2006) points out, cheerleaders (and by extension, their male counterparts at Roosevelt, the yell leaders) are "highly visible in the school culture" and are considered to be "members of the elite

school group” (516). Associating with this group was a very big deal. And it did not just happen to me—all of my friends experienced a similar sort of discovery. Our social worlds broadened and our identities were challenged and changed as a result. These experiences are related also to Woods’ (1993) theory that being in a play allows for the discovery of others because social “barriers have been broken down” (119).

It is with some hesitation that I include the following keepsake, the above mentioned Service above Self Award (fig. 10). I feel the pangs of the DramaFest losses (I did not get to Saturday Night my senior year either) more than I feel the pride I should feel in this recognition. The Service above Self Award was Ruben’s favorite award to give out, because it rewarded those who worked behind the scenes and supported the drama program in ways beyond just being on stage. It was not often given to a performer. Ruben was recognizing my organizational



**Figure 9. Service above Self Award. Author’s Collection.**

skills which helped him organize fundraisers—and I am laughing out loud remembering, for example, the Halloween fundraiser I helped to create. We sold “Boo Bags,” little white bags with ghost eyes on them full of candy. I bought the supplies and made most of the bags. I can still see row upon row of little white bags with black dots for eyes marching across the floor of my

parents' basement. It had been a remarkably successful fundraiser. The award recognized a hundred little things I had done throughout my time at Roosevelt High School. I remember being surprised by the award. But such is the nature of heuristic inquiry—the places I go in my memory are not always easily contained.

A heuristic inquiry must bring me face to face with a crux of a personal issue, must bring me into a confrontation with myself (Craig 1978, Douglass and Moustakas 1985). Here it is. A set of memories about my senior year, about popularity and success highlights my personal set of fixed mythologies. These are beliefs about success as a performer, director, and theatre artist that have accrued in the intervening years between high school and today. I internalized beliefs that success in the arts is about the professional resumé, about the number of important people worked with, about the prominence of the institutions where the work was done. Somehow, I have learned to devalue my work on high school stages, both as a performer and as a high school theatre director/teacher. Even though everything I know about myself tells me to put this unhelpful set of myths away once and for all, they continue to haunt me.

And so how to capture the poignancy of such a moment when, in September of 2012 I found myself looking at the Service Above Self Award and the sudden feelings that overwhelmed me? I saw my naïve seventeen year old self and the teacher, Ruben, who saw in me qualities that he thought would make me an excellent teacher: my patience, my enthusiasm for including others, my organizational skills.

In looking at the award, holding it in my hands, trying to get a decent photograph of it despite its shiny surface, I experienced a sense of the temporal complexity of doing this kind of research. I am in 1982 receiving the award at Saturday Night. I am transported into my classrooms as a teacher giving the service award to my students. I am also at the kitchen table writing my dissertation about to go and interview several former students of mine. Time bends

upon itself, and the word “service” keeps pulsating in my mind.

A life in service to others is a difficult thing to write about without resorting to cliché, or even worse, to heroic myths of self-sacrificing teachers (Britzman 2003, 3). And it’s not that I gave up a career on the stage to toil away in crowded crumbling classrooms. The feeling I have is much more akin to stumbling upon a self-evident truth: that I knew more about where my place in the world was than I could really reveal to myself—as the philosopher Polanyi (1966) says “we can know more than we can tell” (4). I belonged in classrooms. I may have belonged other places too, but I loved every tortured moment, and every blessed moment I had working with others. Because I have carried around a belief that the artistic work I did in schools had less value than other kinds of professional careers in the arts, I realized that there has been a desire lurking beneath the purpose of this research study. The heart of the matter is this: I have gone back to my former students to ask the question, did I matter? I am embarrassed that this is the heart of my query, the hidden agenda. A wise counselor of mine once told me that embarrassment is simply being caught doing exactly what you are doing. And I suppose that I am chagrined that I might need such validation. Have I suddenly met myself in my past and reclaimed a part of who I am? Is this the stuff of heuristic inquiry—“What I am to Be I Am Now Becoming?”

In 1982 I received the “Service above Self Award.” It has taken me thirty years to realize that that award may say more about my life than playing roles on stage and losing contests in DramaFest.





**Figure 10. Graduation Picture. Author's Collection.**

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

### *Introduction*

In the previous chapter I used the techniques of heuristic inquiry to explore my own relationship to the value of school plays in my life. This self-reflective work has been vital to the study. Reflective practice, as defined by Neelands (2006) means to “dig deep into self in order to bring into consciousness the otherwise unconscious instincts, habits, values and learnt behaviors that shape” the work life of teachers (17). For Neelands, teaching is a profound exercise in research, but research informed by practice. As I dug deep into my own history of involvement in school plays, I learned the value of service, how much my identity has been shaped by being involved in theatre in high school, and how much I associate theatre with loving and committed groups of people. The reflective work shaped the questions I asked when I turned to the other significant part of my research study, the six former student actors that I interviewed. The heuristic inquiry became an important touchstone, eventually forming a dialogic relationship with the interviews that followed.

In this chapter I turn my attention to the participant interviews, describing the approach I took to conduct the research study. It is focused on the methodology of case study research, and explains the methods I used to gather data. I restate the purpose of the research and the primary and secondary research questions. I describe and define my chosen methodology, qualitative case study, explaining why the approach is appropriate for the questions I am asking. I then describe the case I studied and how the six former student actors figure into the overall case.

Data collection methods, primarily interviews and artifacts, form the next section. I provide a table of the questions asked in the interviews, including additions and changes I made as the process unfolded. I describe how I handled follow up interviews. I explain why interviews

and artifacts were an appropriate manner of collecting data for this study. I then describe how I analyzed the data and provide a guide to the several frameworks that influenced my analysis, for example, Woods (1993) and Larson and Brown (2007).

Finally I discuss issues of reliability, validity, generalizability, and subjectivity. I explain the limitations of the study and how my own position as the former teacher of the participants both influenced their responses and added a distinct quality to them as well.

The purpose of this research study is to explore how former student actors made sense of their experiences being in school plays in high school. I collected stories, and opinions about their experiences. Such reminiscences are lacking in the research literature on theatre education. I hoped to confirm and extend what previous researchers have theorized about the value of theatre education and formal theatre. I also hoped to discover if there are topics that have not been discussed much in the literature, pointing the way towards areas that need more exploration.

My primary and secondary research questions are:

1. What is the value of the school play for former student actors?
2. How have the participants incorporated what they experienced into their present lives?

As I sought a holistic understanding of the experiences of the participants in my study, a qualitative case study was an appropriate methodology.

### ***Qualitative Case Study***

As Stake (1995) points out, qualitative research steers away from cause and effect evaluations of experience, but rather tries to capture the complexity of lived human interrelationships (37). Qualitative research emphasizes narrative, relationships “between a small number of variables,” and a search for the expected and “unanticipated” (40, 41). Qualitative research values the “the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam 1998, 6). Merriam further

describes the process of qualitative research as being one wherein the findings are most fully discovered as the research unfolds (162).

Case study research is a common practice among qualitative researchers (Merriam 1998 26). Merriam defines a case study as a system with clear boundaries. The main advantage of case study research is that it focuses the inquiry. The uniqueness of a bounded system of inquiry aids in discovery for what it can “reveal about a phenomenon” (33). As Merriam states, “data are compressed and linked together in a narrative that conveys the meaning the researcher has derived from studying the phenomenon” (179). Case studies impact the development of the methods used for gathering data.

The primary focus of my study is an analysis of a single case based on interviews conducted with my former students. These students are now adults. The purpose of the interviews was to discover how the former student actors valued and made sense of their practical and aesthetic experience of the school play and what kind of effect that experience has had on their lives. I created a single case study for analysis from these interviews. In my study, the bounded system is the approximately 200 or so student actors who were in plays at Cavanaugh High School over the eight years I taught there. Using the model of a case study allowed me to engage readers in an understanding of the richness, variety, and particulars of the phenomenon that I studied. Case studies “gain their weight from verisimilitude, dealing as they do with the vicissitudes of human interaction” (Winston 2006, 44). This case study of former student actors features their voices and captures the complexity of their involvement in a particular educational theatre practice, the school play. According to Stake’s (2005) typology of case studies, I created an *instrumental* case study designed to “provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (445). My study is designed to provide insight into how student actors value the high school play.

### *The Former Student Actors*

Each former student actor I interviewed became an embedded unit of analysis within the case (Yin 1994; Winston 2006). Each unit of analysis, that is to say, the student, helped to focus the inquiry. My selection of students was a purposive sample (Merriam 1998; Stake 2005) chosen specifically because I believed they would give me the most effective responses, or as Stake (2005) writes, provide me the optimal “opportunity to learn” (451). I deliberately chose students that had the experience and the verbal skills to give me effective and useable stories and reflections. My selection of former students was also a convenience sample. As Stake (1995) points out, “our time and access for fieldwork are almost always limited. If we can we need to pick cases which are easy to get to and hospitable to our inquiry...” (4). Many of my former students have kept in touch with me over the years mostly through social networking sites such as *Facebook*.

I refer to those people I interviewed for this research project in two ways; I call them the *participants* and I also call them the *former student actors*. I identified six participants that fit the following criteria: these former student actors were involved in the drama program at Cavanaugh High School between 1991 and 1999 for at least two years and were in at least two productions. These participants represented a mix of genders and ethnicities that reflected the population of Cavanaugh and its drama program. They also came from different points in my eight year career at Cavanaugh. Building in variety helped me to create some internal validity to the study (Stake 2005). In order to protect the identities of the participants I used pseudonyms for them. I also used a pseudonym for the school. In short, I did all that I could to reasonably disguise the respondents to protect their identities.

The former student actors, denoted by their pseudonyms, Tim, Liz, Jeremy, Dallas, Annie, and Rosie, are briefly outlined in the table 1. Annie and Rosie were juniors when I left

Cavanaugh, however, they discussed some of their experiences in plays when they were seniors. I introduce each participant in greater detail in chapter 5.

**Table 1: Participants**

Participants	Gender and Age	Graduation	# plays and dates
Tim	Male, 36	1994	7 plays, 1991-1994
Liz	Female, 35	1995	4 plays, 1993-1995
Jeremy	Male, 33	1997	4 plays, 1995-1997
Dallas	Male, 32	1998	5 plays, 1996-1998
Annie	Female, 30	2000	6 plays, 1997-2000
Rosie	Female, 30	2000	7 plays, 1997-2000

### *The Setting*

The following description of the student population at Cavanaugh High School is based on demographic data collected by the school district and sent to me late in January of 2013. The data came from the archivist of the school district and is not cited due to the need to protect anonymity. In the 1990s Cavanaugh High School was considered small for an urban public high school. The official enrollment between 1991 and 1999 fluctuated from as low as 867 students in the 1995-96 school year to as high as 948 students in the 1996-97 school year. Students on the free or reduced lunch program hovered around 50% of the school population throughout the decade of the 1990s, one of two schools in the district with such a high rate. Enrollment in the free or reduced-lunch program was seen as an indication of the level of poverty within a particular school, as eligibility was based on the income of the parents or guardians of the students.

The dropout rate, also often used as an indication of amount of students considered “at

risk” averaged 11.6 % throughout the 1990s, one of the highest in the school district. The ethnic make-up of Cavanaugh was fairly consistent throughout the 1990s, with Asian and White students each making up roughly 30-35 % of the school population, respectively. These statistics only provide some aspects of Cavanaugh High School, but support my memory of the school as a place considered to be “inner city” with a large proportion of students in poverty and at risk for dropping out.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

I used techniques described by McCracken (1988) as the “long interview” (i.e. interviews of about ninety minutes). Other researchers call these “in-depth unstructured interviews” (Lichtman 2006, 122). The moniker “unstructured” is somewhat misleading because I had a set of prepared questions and prompts designed to encourage detailed responses and to ensure that I actually received answers to some of the more complex questions I asked. They are more properly known as semi-structured interviews (McCracken 1988; Weiss 1994; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Lichtman 2006). These interviews were conducted in person. Rubin and Rubin (2012) write that such interviews “let us see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen” (xv). As scholars in educational theatre rarely agree as to the purpose and outcomes of participation in dramatic activities (Schonmann 2005), the voices of a small sample of former student actors gave me access to points of view on the school play that are rarely consulted. Qualitative interviews of this sort have the virtue of being guided by specific questions and yet open-ended enough to allow respondents to share their stories and reflections in their own words (McCracken 1988; Weiss 1994; Lichtman 2006; Rubin and Rubin 2012). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest that the respondent is an active participant in the construction of their answers, transforming facts and details in the retelling of stories (8). The

students and I became co-authors of the dialogue that we shared about the value of the high school play, using our shared memories and experiences to probe the question (Fontana and Frey 2005).

I interviewed the six participants individually over a ten day period in October 2012. I conducted follow up interviews over the next several months as the participants indicated they were available to talk again. The initial interviews varied in length from ninety minutes to two hours. Follow up interviews lasted about thirty minutes.

The questions I asked<sup>1</sup> were designed to be open-ended, starting with general demographic questions about what the participants had been doing since high school, followed by specific questions about what plays they were in, and how they got involved in the theatre department at Cavanaugh. I asked follow up and prompting questions if they started a story that seemed to have more than they initially offered. Therefore, the interviews all started in the same general order, and varied considerably in the middle as students told more and more stories, and gave more and more opinions about their experiences. All of the interviews ended with the same question, about how they valued their experience in the school plays today, and what they thought they got out of the experience. After the official set of questions, several of the participants wished to catch up with what I had been doing for the last several years, and although I kept the recording device on in case another story or opinion emerged, only twice, with Dallas and Rosie, did I find that the interviews had a second wind, so to speak.

I shared questions two, four, eight, and thirteen with the participants ahead of time as “preview questions” to start them thinking about what they might answer. Nearly all of the former student actors appeared to have thought about the questions ahead of time.

I used artifacts at several times during the interviews to evoke responses and help refresh

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for the complete Interview Schedule.



memories. I used mostly pictures that I had scanned into my laptop computer. I also encouraged the participants to bring photographs, programs, or other memorabilia to the interviews. Although all the respondents knew the fate of their collection of memorabilia, only one, (i.e., Rosie), actually had hers on hand during the interview. The purpose of the artifacts was to help stimulate memories and provide points of discussion if the participant was having difficulty remembering as suggested by Casey (2000) and Mackey (2012).

Interviewing the participants in person, rather than trying to get responses in written form or using a different sort of data collection method such as a survey, allowed me to make personal contact with the former student actors. I believe that my previous relationship with these participants and our ability to reminisce together strengthened the overall results. Creating a relationship with those you are interviewing is one of the most important features of good interviewing technique (Lichtman 2006), and having had a previous relationship with these participants gave the interviews a rich, varied, and interesting texture.

### ***Data Management and Analysis Methods***

I transcribed the interviews with the former student actors over a five week period. I used *Express Scribe* software to help with the process. *Express Scribe* has the capability of slowing down the recordings. It also includes a feature that pauses the recording and then backs it up a few seconds before letting the sound restart. This software was an invaluable assistance. I made corrections and changed the names of the students involved. During the process of transcribing each interview I made a series of notes as themes and particularly noteworthy phrases occurred. By keeping notes during the transcription process I was able to begin preliminary analysis even before I finished it (Merriam 1998, 161). Once I completed transcribing the interviews I began to contact participants for follow up interviews. I did these interviews by phone. Annie was the

only participant who did not contact me for a follow up interview. I took notes on these interviews as they were not recorded. I added the notes for these interviews as addenda to each transcription.

Rosie was the only participant who edited the transcripts I sent, making minor changes to some of her wording and fixing a couple of dates she had not remembered correctly. I listened to the interviews one more time, making small corrections to create a final draft of each interview transcript. Once the final draft of the study was completed, I cross-referenced all quotations used in the manuscript with the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy.

I based my approach to data analysis on Stake's (1995) case study method of using both "direct interpretation" and "categorical aggregation" (74). Direct interpretation is very straightforward, drawing conclusions and observations from the information collected. These observations help to create context and on some occasions, narrative. For example, in several instances, I describe how the participants looked or sounded as they gave a response, providing a more nuanced and complete understanding of an answer to a question. Knowing that Annie sometimes paused for emphasis at the end of a statement and stares, raising her eyebrows and nodding, before repeating herself, gave those statements that accompany these verbal habits a different kind of weight. Categorical aggregation refers to the process of collecting "instances until something can be said about them" as a group (74). In this case study, the categories I chose from Woods' (1993) study, in addition to the categories I created in response to the data, represent the major topics under which I have grouped certain instances or examples from the interviews. The categories are designed less to constrain the information than to provide a guiding map through the data provided by the former student actors and help in making meaning.

I was influenced by what Stake (1995) calls a naturalistic and constructivist approach to analyzing the data. The two approaches work together. By naturalistic, Stake believes that a

researcher should provide ample opportunity for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions through the “vicarious experience” of the topic (86), in this instance, what the former student actors had to say about being involved in performing in school plays. While my own generalizations accompany these interviews, they are not meant to supplant the readers own conclusions, but offer one interpretation of the data that is reasonable and descriptive. A constructivist stance towards the research amplifies and extends the naturalistic generalizations, by “providing readers with good material for their own generalizing” (102) with ample description and context. The resulting analysis is then based in the belief that meaning-making happens in evolutions of the constructed account. The interviews are recorded, their findings organized by patterns to help convey meaning, and they are described and commented upon in a logical fashion that honors the intentions of the original participant, while providing guidance towards the relevance and possible interpretations of the interviews.

The next stage in my analysis was to begin to find patterns of meaning-making within the case of the six participants. Stake (1995) writes that “the search for meaning often is a search for patterns, for consistency within certain conditions, which we call ‘correspondence’” (78). The search for correspondence occurred in several stages over the course of several months, looking at first for correspondence among the interview participants regarding background information, and moving on to using both the categories of student gains from Woods (1993), the research study of Larson and Brown (2007), and several categories I constructed as a result of finding parts of the interviews that did not fit into other categories.

The first items I looked for and coded in the interviews were pieces of background information that I used in the introduction to each participant. After finding the background information, I looked for responses about how each participant became involved in the school plays at Cavanaugh. At first I was unsure how to preserve some of the anecdotes that did not

seem to connect to the major themes of the study, primarily the categories of student gains in the studies by Woods (1993) and Larson and Brown (2007). These were stories that often came at the beginning of the interview, as students started the process of reminiscing. I thought the stories were important to represent somehow, but they were often light-hearted fragments that recounted small mishaps in rehearsal or performance. I decided to choose at least two of these stories for each student and place them into the introduction to each participant. These short tales aid in a more complete portrayal of each participant, giving a sense of their individual diction, cadence, and rhythm. Therefore I did not feel the need to adapt these stories to make them fit into the more robust analysis that forms the bulk of chapter 6. I wrote the introduction to each former student actor at this point.

Merriam (1998) suggests that “classification schemes can be borrowed from sources outside the study at hand” (183) with the caveat that the researcher should not let preordained categories limit the creation of new ones. The categories Woods (1993) uses to organize his research findings, what he calls “student gains” (105), became useful tools for organizing the data from the interviews. These categories are personal development, emotional development, and social development. I soon realized that I was falling into the trap of looking for “cause and effect” (Stake 1995, 37) relationships, looking for proof of Woods’ findings rather than really listening to the participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss this as a tendency among qualitative researchers, especially apprentice level ones, to return to positivist traditions of inquiry and science. They write, “Almost all of us—it is almost unimaginable that we could not—come to narrative inquiries with various versions of formalistic and reductionistic histories of inquiry” (46). In short, we tend to look for proofs, for generalities, for reductions of our research into findings that prove a hypothesis. While Woods’ (1993) categories have been immensely useful, this research study is better thought of as being in conversation with Woods

rather than in needing to prove or disprove his findings. Weiss (1994) points out that the researchers “preconceptions help to decide the initial organization of the material” (169). In this instance, Woods’ categories of student gains provided me with a starting point.

As I worked with the material, I discovered that I needed additional categories. As Weiss remarks, “then the material forces modifications of the investigator’s thinking, which then leads the investigator to revise the organization of materials, and so on for several iterations” (169). The reporting and analysis does more than simply support Woods’ ideas. Woods researched a single and unusual school production in the U.K. The present study looks at a more typical drama program in the United States, with multiple productions in a single year, and students involved over several years during their time in high school. Woods’ categories are extended and stretched. I also found Larson and Brown’s (2007) study to be very helpful in expanding what is meant by emotional development in adolescents. These researchers have a very different definition of emotional development than the one used by Woods. I also found that I needed to expand the idea of “magic”, Woods’ last category. He limits this category to the feelings of elation accompanying performance, but I think he is also attempting to find words to describe the complete experience. In addition, the former student actors are reminiscing about events nearly fifteen years ago. The rush and adrenaline of applause has faded somewhat so they do not have the same kind of immediate connection to that version of Woods’ category of “magic” (124). I seized upon his own link of this category to “a profound aesthetic experience” (124) and created a category I called “aesthetic development” using the educational philosophy of Maxine Greene (2001) to further elucidate this category. This category now focuses on the discernment and awareness of the participants on how a theatre production comes together to achieve its effects. Finally, I created a last category that both summed up the purpose of the study and addressed a specific question I asked at the end of the interviews, “the value of the school play.” While

puzzling out the organization of the interview data, I eventually coded the interview transcripts for each of the following categories: personal development, emotional development (Woods 1993), emotional development (Larson and Brown 2007), social development, aesthetic development, and the value of the school play.

### ***Reliability and Validity***

Validity and reliability are two issues in qualitative studies that seem to generate a lot of varied responses among scholars (Lichtman 2006; Denzin 2011). Internal validity refers to how carefully the research maps and describes the phenomenon under study (Lichtman 193). In other words, does the data collected really explain and portray the issue, concept, or idea being studied. External validity refers to the ability to generalize beyond the case explored, a topic I cover in more detail below. Reliability often refers to the ability to replicate the findings, the idea being that “there is a single reality and that studying it repeatedly will yield the same results” (Merriam 1998, 205). Postmodern paradigms as well as strong beliefs among qualitative scholars suggest that qualitative research “is not conducted so that the laws of human behavior can be isolated” (205). For example, scholar and researcher Marilyn Lichtman (2006) steps aside questions of reliability and validity, which to her are rooted in a positivist and largely quantitative tradition of research, opting to evaluate qualitative research in very different terms. She believes qualitative research should be evaluated by three concepts:

1. The explicitly revealed and self-reflective role of the researcher.
2. The study includes a convincing argument that what was studied was important and the quality of the findings go beyond “mere reporting” (192)
3. The ease at which a reader can trace how and why the study was conducted the way that it was (192).

One way to establish validity is through triangulation. Triangulation is a method of validation that employs the use of multiple sources of data, sometimes of different sorts, to help create an authentic and well-rounded portrait of the studied phenomenon (Merriam 1998, 204). I have created a rather unusual triangulation, although one suggested by the tenets of heuristic inquiry (Craig 1978). My self-study presented one aspect of the experience of the school play, a deeply subjective one, but one aspiring to be profound, honest, and revealing. When Clark Moustakas (1967) first articulated his process of heuristic inquiry, he found others who were experiencing the same phenomenon he was. These co-researchers allowed him to begin to objectify his own interior emotional life by being witness to the experience of others going through the same phenomenon. He clarifies what he means by objectivity as follows, also providing a cogent explanation for the part of heuristic inquiry that seeks to find more information from others:

Objectivity, in this connection, means seeing what an experience is for another person, not what causes it, not why it exists, not how it can be defined and classified. It means seeing attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of the person as they exist for him at the moment he is experiencing them, perceiving them whole, as a unity (103).

The process of self-discovery is enriched for Moustakas by the inclusion of the experiences of others, through what he calls “intimate encounters” (105), that encourage human validation of what the researcher goes through, but also preserves and values the uniqueness of what each person undergoes.

Moustakas’ use of co-researchers to help validate his own experience of a phenomenon is not problem-free. There is ambivalence and contradiction within Moustakas’ method of heuristic inquiry. Sela-Smith (2002) believes this derives from a split focus in Moustakas’ method between the subjective and ongoing experiencing of a phenomenon, and the drive to objectify the feelings into a narrative of an experience of it. She believes that many researchers miss this

ambivalence when employing Moustakas' methods, avoiding the reporting of the free-fall of emotions that should occur through self-study in favor of an articulation of the self within the experience. For Sela-Smith the results of the latter are not satisfying because the transformational potential of heuristic inquiry is lost.

I experienced such a free-fall of emotions during the afternoon I was taking pictures of the "Service-Above-Self Award." I felt extremely self-conscious as I was writing that section, and in an earlier draft I described the release of feelings, the tears streaming down my face. In terms of heuristic inquiry, that moment of self-realization was transformational for me and was the result of the previous five months of inquiry.

For Sela-Smith (2002) co-researchers "are valuable as reflectors of possible areas of resistance that may be out of conscious awareness in the form of denial, projection, or incomplete search" (79). After encounters with the co-researchers, the investigator then returns to self-exploration, "allowing the transformation to be more expansive" (79). In my case, the question of whether or not I made a difference as a teacher in the lives of the former student actors, acts as a question I kept returning to, even as I explored our relationship to the school play. Sela-Smith believes "the feeling response, as experienced, is valid as it stands" (79) with or without the presence of co-participants. She continues:

Checking against others' experience can become reductionistic toward some statistical mean. Validity of the research is established by surrendering to the process that is pushing itself into the consciousness of the researcher, allowing the process to unfold and then noticing results in expansion of self-awareness, deepening of self-understanding, and of self-transformation that others can experience in the "story" (79).

My heuristic inquiry is designed to resonate within and around the interviews with the former student actors I interviewed. Within that resonance is an opportunity for comparison between my experience and the experience of the participants. However, my experience and the experiences



of the former student actors stand on their own, as testaments to our “attitudes, beliefs, and feelings” about being in school plays (Moustakas 1967, 103).

In the next several chapters of this dissertation, I present a case study of six former student actors who reflected on their experiences in school plays and what those experiences have meant to them as adults. Their responses echoed some of mine, but were also completely individualistic. Their responses were consistent with available research on the topic, but also showed an incredible variety as to how those typical responses were felt within the lived experiences of the participants. For example, increased confidence, as I have discussed in chapter 2, has long been believed to be a positive outcome of theatre education. But to hear Dallas describe increased confidence in the context of his military career takes this abstract idea and creates an individual context that feels novel and unique.

I chose six individuals who were highly involved and highly capable as performers when they were in high school. They often had leading roles in the plays in which they performed. So while I have emphasized the experiences of these highly capable performers which created one kind of validity, it is a validity rooted in ability and aptitude. I must admit that the voices of students as highly involved but perhaps not as capable, for example students who ended up being cast multiple times in the chorus of musicals, are not represented in this study. Occasionally I wish I had expanded the study to include those students for comparison, but that will need to be for future study.

I also chose students from various points in my eight years at Cavanaugh to find if there was much variation in their experience. The biggest variation appeared to be the demarcation of the 1994-1995 school year when I began to produce the fall play and spring musical out of a course taught during the school day. Although there were still extracurricular projects and after school rehearsals for the productions mostly rehearsed in a class, at this point the drama program

moved from an all-extracurricular program, to one much more like music courses such as band or choir. These activities are generally called “co-curricular” in that they have school day and course components, and required components that take place beyond the school day. The main effect on responses was that while Tim and Liz talked very clearly about the school play, for the rest of the participants, the school play and drama class were often considered the same phenomenon, which can be a little confusing.

### **Generalizability**

The issue of generalizability runs through much of the literature on the development and use of qualitative case studies (Merriam 1998; Stake 2005; Winston 2006). My study is limited within the case to the embedded units of analysis of six student actors who are now adults and who were in my theatre program at Cavanaugh High School in the 1990s. The obvious question arises as to whether their reflections on the value of the school play have any application beyond an interesting set of particular views on the subject. Case study research does not pretend to be generalizable. The single case and the units of analysis do not stand in for all cases that are similar. Stake (2005) advises that the stories told will have value unto themselves and that concerns about theory building from case studies can sometimes obscure the inherent value of the stories (448). Stake (1995; 2005) and Merriam (1995) also advise that the onus then is on the researcher through the narrative he or she writes from such cases.

My challenge has been to create a narrative re-telling of the interviews that both values the particular student actor in his or her cultural and social context, but also brings the reader into the story in such a way that generalizability is no longer an issue. It is in the re-telling of the responses that the researcher hopes to engage a reader’s empathy, sympathy, and prior knowledge (Stake 1995). The careful and detailed descriptions of the interviews give the reader

access to the former student actors' voices. It is not that reader thinks, "All students who are in plays go through this," it is that the reader activates his or her prior knowledge about students, teachers, school plays, or other activities and is able to both particularize and create generalities on their own through the reasonableness of the descriptions, and articulateness of the responses and interpretations. The particular response of the former student actors in this case may or may not shed light on what other student actors go through, but their responses point to the kinds of issues that larger studies should address, and that more comprehensive research could use as questions.

### **Subjectivity**

Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) stress the importance in qualitative and narrative inquiries of "making the social relations between the researcher and the researched transparent" (157). My presence in the research study as both the "researcher" and the former teacher/director of the student actors I interviewed created unique opportunities for the richness of the interaction but also potentially problematic subjectivities. I will briefly discuss the potential problems as well as the potential assets.

I worried that the former student actors would feel the need to give me the answers that they thought I wanted to hear. I was concerned that they would be tempted to censor any criticisms they may have had or would alter or clean up stories they thought might offend me. These were real concerns, but ones that also face researchers who are strangers to the respondents they interview (McCracken 1988; Weiss 1994). I was very flexible throughout the interview process, and encouraged truthful responses. I communicated to the respondents my neutrality when it came to criticisms. I believe I was successful in encouraging truthful responses. In particular, Jeremy and Rosie felt comfortable in asking some difficult questions

that had clearly been on their minds for years, and Annie and Rosie asked me some challenging questions about why I left Cavanaugh after their junior years in high school.

I also have subjectivities that need to be revealed and considered. The most prevalent one is the desire to know if what I accomplished as a director of school plays had any lasting impact on my students. In chapter 3 I addressed the genesis of this question. Such a desire could have negatively affected my encounters with the former students, for example, by guiding them unwittingly to heap praise upon my teaching practice. By admitting I had such an impulse helped me steer clear of deliberately asking leading questions designed to give me compliments. The sincere desire to know if being in a school play has any lasting impact does however fuel the study. My curiosity and personal connection to the question I asked gave my research a poignancy to me that helped the study. I care deeply about the question I asked and I had a commitment to discovering what the students have to say about being in school plays.

Contrary to my worries, the students very consciously tried to avoid stating any evaluation of my teaching and some of them actually apologized when they made such comments. The stories the participants told demonstrate that they trusted me enough to tell their truths. There were times when I felt that being their former teacher actually allowed them to make pointed criticisms as if this was a chance to finally complain about something that they had held onto for some time. My presence definitely shaped the interviews, but our previous relationship enhanced what they revealed, sometimes in spite of myself, rather than caused the data to be unusually skewed.

Although I have had some experience in gathering this kind of data, I do feel that my lack of experience in interviewing was sometimes a problem. Robert Weiss (1995) gives the following advice to interviewers, “Never, never fight for control of the interview” (78). I was somewhat guilty of this in the interview with Tim, the fourth interview I conducted. I was aware

that I had reached an odd plateau of interest in the subject that I attributed to the relatively short amount of time I had to conduct the six interviews. Tim was worried about his son, who needed a lot of attention during the interview. In retrospect, I should have either rescheduled the interview or done as Tim suggested at the time, take the interview outside of the home to some coffee shop somewhere. Luckily, as I listened to the interview, I realized that despite the issues raised above, Tim gave interview responses on par with everyone else, with plenty of material of value. Again, I think the previous relationship of teacher to student helped, this time to muddle through an interview fraught with distractions.

The interviews with former student actors gave me a unique opportunity to hear from those who experienced being in a school play and how they have used those experiences in their life. Through their stories, I created a case study of students at Cavanaugh High School who were involved in dramatic productions in the 1990s. The six students in this study represent a range of exemplars from which to create a portrait of what being in plays was like and what life lessons they might have drawn from the experience.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE SETTING, THE CONTEXT, AND THE PARTICIPANTS

In the following chapter I describe the environment of Cavanaugh High School and introduce the former student actors. I begin by describing the setting of the school, its physical layout, and the various performing spaces in which I worked with the participants when they were students at the school. I also describe the particular era of educational transformation that was occurring in the United States in the 1990s and how it affected teachers and students at Cavanaugh. I include two stories, *Of Kalidahs and Other Monsters* and *Roberto*, and a document entitled *A Story about Drama*, that provide further context for what it was like for me to teach at this school. The two stories extend the heuristic inquiry of chapter 3. Like the stories in chapter 3, they are ones that I do not tell frequently, and therefore have not become part of my own unreflective teacher's mythology. They are stories about dilemmas I faced and challenges that did not always work out in ways I expected. I have chosen them deliberately because they are not always heroic. The document, *A Story about Drama*, was a surprising discovery. It is a short essay I wrote in the summer of 1994, and because of its immediacy, is a valuable account of what I thought of Cavanaugh in the midst of my eight years there.

In the remainder of the chapter I introduce the six participants, Tim, Liz, Jeremy, Dallas, Annie, and Rosie, in chronological order of their time in the Cavanaugh Drama Department. In these introductions I briefly describe each participant, the settings in which the interviews took place, what they said they had been doing since graduation, and their initial reasons for participating in school plays at Cavanaugh. I complete each introduction with several short anecdotal reminiscences that the participants thought were important and favorite memories from the productions in which they participated.

### *The Setting*

Fresh coats of paint could barely disguise the reality—when I arrived at Cavanaugh High School in 1991, it was a tired cinder-block building never intended to be a school, let alone one that would last for forty or fifty years. Cavanaugh was built in the late 1950s originally as a repository for the school district’s surplus supplies. It had the rather unfortunate hangdog look of a dilapidated and shrunken airplane hangar. It was hastily converted into a school in response to the exploding school population of the Baby Boom. As the school district’s student population shrank in the 1980’s, Cavanaugh’s unique location saved it from closing, even as schools with hardy, distinctive, and much loved early twentieth century architecture were closed and converted into condominiums. It was somewhat geographically isolated, and was largely a neighborhood school, with very few students bussed in.

The physical layout of the school is somewhat unusual. The building is very long and narrow with most classrooms on a single floor consisting of two main hallways that stretched the length of a football field. As it is built into a hillside, it also has a limited number of classrooms on a lower level that are accessed individually from outside the school. At the front of the building are the performing arts spaces. Cavanaugh has two music ensemble rooms, a hallway of small practice rooms, a small theatre, and a large auditorium.

Perhaps the best symbol of my eight years at Cavanaugh was my set of keys; I had a lot of them of various sizes. I hung the plethora of keys from the belt buckle of my pants. Dallas, Jeremy, and Liz all remember my keys because they jangled, and because I had a habit of dropping them to the floor with a loud clank when I needed to charge up to the stage to fix some problem. The former student actors remember that I occasionally threw them to the floor in moments of exasperation. Jeremy joked, “Granted, with you, we liked to send you off sometimes, ‘cause you did the whole throw your keys thing. Sometimes we’d take bets, ask

Dallas. ‘I’m sure we can do it, make him throw his keys.’” The keys were one of my signature trademarks.

One set of keys led me into the Little Theatre. I entered through a small lobby with a worn scarlet carpet. I had a large key that operated the panic bars on all of the doors, allowing me to disable their ability to lock. I would tie large swathes of felt around these doors to keep them from slamming during performances, either from actors making entrances and exits, or from audience members making emergency exits to the restrooms. I also had this very strange little key that operated the switchless lights in the lobby.

A different key unlocked the door to the light booth, which also served as an office of sorts for me. In the summer of 1994 the Little Theatre was outfitted with a computerized lighting system, and I was able to operate the lights from this room. Before hand, the lights were operated with an old transformer system of levers from backstage. The theatre itself had about a hundred wooden seats in twelve or so rows of eight to ten seats. Tim remembers the Little Theatre as being “cozy” and “intimate.” The aisles of the theatre also had the slightly worn red carpet of the lobby. I was the first to use the Little Theatre as a classroom for many years. I taught Beginning Drama, Stagecraft, and Advanced Drama in this room. I directed most plays in this room from 1991-1995. Once Mrs. K. and I started producing big musicals began in 1995, I only used the Little Theatre for the production of the Fall plays, a non-musical. Table 2 is a list of plays performed in this space that are featured prominently in the participant interviews.

Every theatre has its quirks, and the Little Theatre at Cavanaugh had its fair share. The stage is actually difficult to describe because it had been modified from its original configuration. Originally, the Little Theatre featured a small proscenium stage with a tiled cement floor. At some point, a large extension was built onto the front of the stage, which extended the playing area several feet towards the audience. I believe that at least two rows of



seats were sacrificed for this extension. Therefore most of the acting area was in front of the curtain. The entire surface of the stage floor was then carpeted. Significant set changes had to be made *a vista*, or parts of the set had to be hidden behind the curtains, which ended up cutting the acting area in half when closed. There was virtually no back stage area on either side, although there was a door backstage left which led into the hallway between the Little Theatre and the music rooms.

**Table 2. Little Theatre Productions, 1991-1999**

<b>Play Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Participant and Role</b>
<i>Diary of Anne Frank</i>	Fall 1991	Tim: Assistant Director/ Peter
<i>Grease</i>	Spring 1992	Tim: Teen Angel/Lights
<i>Charley's Aunt</i>	Fall 1992	Tim: Stephen Spettigue
<i>Night Watch</i>	Fall 1993	Tim: Sgt. Walker Liz: Lt. Vanelli/ Lights
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Spring 1994	Tim: Oberon Liz: Titania
<i>The Time of Your Life</i>	Fall 1994	Liz: Student Director
<i>The Madwoman of Chaillot</i>	Fall 1995	Jeremy: The Prospector
<i>The Crucible</i>	Fall 1996	Dallas: Judge Danforth
<i>Curse the Walls</i> (with local professional theatre)	Fall 1997	Jeremy: Cast member Dallas: Cast member Annie: Cast member
<i>Cavanaugh Twelfth Night</i> (with local professional theatre)	Fall 1998	Rosie: Script Girl
<b><i>The Visit</i></b>	<b>Winter 1999</b>	<b>Annie: Claire Zachanassian</b>

The auditorium was a complete contrast to the Little Theatre. I had keys to the various doors to this space, a key to the paint room, one for the ticket booth, and keys to the padlocks that guarded the entrance to the very dangerous set of catwalks above the auditorium. It was a vast cavernous space that seated about 1000. The entire student body of Cavanaugh could fit in the auditorium, and when I arrived at the school it was used mostly for assemblies. The auditorium's fixtures also showed signs of wear and disuse. It had no fly-space, so its legs and travelers were always down, collecting dust from the floor. This meant that they were extremely

frayed at the ends, and one of the legs was virtually useless. The back curtain was an enormous buff colored canvas cyclorama weighted with heavy pipes. It was immovable and slowly tearing apart.

The legs were also a light muddy brown color, not black. The floor was a polished light wood. When I begged to paint it black, I was met with stares of incredulity from the custodial staff. I was told in no uncertain terms that this was an auditorium, not a theatre. So brown curtains, brown floor—all would stay. Recently I watched scenes on video from one of the productions and realized how much I fought for images to pop on that stage. Hard to do with brown curtains everywhere. I used to hate to close the center travelling curtain for set changes while a scene went on in front of it because of the tattered and stained look of those tan curtains. Because of the lack of fly space, scene changes involved a lot of pushing things around and usually a very economical and strategic use of some kind of unit set. Table 3 lists the plays I directed in the auditorium that are featured in the participant interviews.

**Table 3. Auditorium Productions, 1991-1999.**

<b>Play Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Participant and Role</b>
<i>The Wiz</i>	Spring 1991	Tim: The Wiz Liz: Lights
<i>Bye Bye Birdie</i>	Spring 1995	Liz: Mae Peterson Jeremy: Albert Peterson
<i>The Music Man</i>	Spring 1996	Liz: Backstage helper Jeremy: Barbershop Quartet
<i>Peter and the Wolf</i>	Spring 1997	Annie: Peter
<i>Hello, Dolly!</i>	Spring 1997	Jeremy: Cornelius Hackle Dallas: Horace Vandergelder Annie: Waiter/Dance Captain Rosie: Ermengarde Vandergelder
<i>Anything Goes</i>	Spring 1998	Dallas: Billy Crocker Annie: Bonnie Rosie: Dancing Angel
<i>Fiddler on the Roof</i>	Spring 1999	<b>Rosie: Hodel</b> <b>Annie: Chava</b>

### *The Context*

The decade of the 1990s is generally considered to be one of great turbulence and experimentation in education reform in the United States (McCaslin 2000, Vinovski 2009, McGuinn 2006, Lazarus 2012). I feel a little odd having lived through a time period that is already a distinctive part of the history of American education. But I was there, and I was a participant in these reform efforts. My memory of this period is that reform was on everyone's lips—we mostly referred to the process of change we were going through as “restructuring.”

When I joined the staff at Cavanaugh High School they were already a few years into a series of changes. Perhaps the most immediate sign that things were different at Cavanaugh was that I was interviewed for the teaching position by a committee rather than just the principal. Collaborative and collective leadership was one of Cavanaugh's main foci. There were some jokes as the process of “restructuring” took place. One of them involved the amount of butcher paper consumed by various training experiences. During my eight years at Cavanaugh it seemed we were forever dragging out the butcher paper and drafting mission statements. Vinovskis (2009) makes a telling statement about the changes in education at this time. He states that there was a lot of confusion at local levels as to just what needed to be changed in schools. So while at a federal level there was a push for “systemic reform” in academic standards, curriculum, and assessment, sometimes this was conflated with “comprehensive or school-wide reform” (216). Cavanaugh was a good example of this conflation of reform efforts. We were busy implementing ideas such as site-based management, which sought to bring in more of the school community into decisions made at the school, and we were also busy being trained in Howard Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences and theories of learning styles. Vinovski points out that all of these initiatives came under the title of systemic reform and it became difficult “to discern which specific components of reform might be the most effective” at improving student performance

(216).

*Goals 2000*, an initiative begun by George H. W. Bush and signed into law by President Clinton in 1994, also had an effect on school restructuring efforts at Cavanaugh. The school was the recipient of a neighborhood improvement grant designed to connect neighborhoods deemed “at risk” to a more comprehensive array of services inside and outside of schools. An outside government agency implemented and oversaw the grant, which included staff training, infrastructure, and some seed money for several programs, including a health clinic. The administration at Cavanaugh viewed the performing arts at the school as one of its most important features and some of the grant money was used to improve our facilities. As implied by the quote above from Vinovski (2009), the effect of the grant sometimes pulled the school in too many directions at once.

The grant and the training that went with it changed the way I thought about many aspects of teaching and the environment in which I taught. The school was my work place, but everything in it was funded through tax dollars, paid for by the community in which I lived and worked. The idea of being a steward of the building and the things in it was actually very liberating to me. It wasn’t my theatre program—the program belonged to the students, parents, school, and community. I was just the one currently occupying the position, and I would hope to leave it in better shape than when I arrived.

I tried to implement one of the ideas promoted by the training the grant implementers provided. The concept they promoted was around democratically run and student-centered classrooms, wherein teachers gave more decision making powers to the students in order to promote more actively engaged learners. I spent several days drafting with students the classroom rules for drama, instead of merely including them in a syllabus and dictating them for the group. In my production class I floated the idea of a democratically elected cast. Instead of

casting the plays myself based on auditions, the students would audition for the class, and the class would vote on who got which roles. What ensued was a very lively discussion about the merits and deficits of such an idea. Even though the class eventually voted down the idea, I took it as a compliment that they thought my casting was fair. They also had a unique opportunity to discuss casting policies which I regularly published from then on.

### *Two Stories and an Artifact*

Before introducing the participants, I am going to tell two stories and share one document from my time at Cavanaugh in the 1990s. These stories and documents extend my heuristic inquiry into the realm of my teaching life. They also create more of the context into which the former student actors worked in. I am challenged throughout this study to resist painting myself as a heroic teacher who created a drama program out of nothing for eight years in an inner city high school. The temptation lies in what Britzman (2003) calls the “heroic story of a self-made professional that can rise above beleaguered education” (6). The cultural myths that surround the teaching profession include a strong impression that teachers are self-made, are experts, and that everything depends upon them (7). As Britzman explains, the dilemma is that teachers are then reduced to being evaluated on how well they control their classrooms as if competence is merely “the absence of conflict” (7). The mythologies around teaching distort our day-to-day realities, ignoring institutional and cultural contexts in which we teach and the often conflict rich environments where learning actually occurs.

Out of all the stories I could tell I chose these two because they are stories that have not accrued a lot of personal mythology about them—these are not stories I have spent a lifetime telling and retelling in different settings. They are not part of my teacher’s bag of witty and poignant anecdotes. They therefore have a freshness about them to me. I was drawn to one of the

stories because I found an artifact that went with it, a letter that the student involved wrote as a result of what happened. The other is tale of a moment where I felt like a failure, and in light of some of the stories told by the participants, it is a story that fits in well.

### **Of Kalidahs and Other Monsters**

Her physical presence was deceptive. She looked so frail under her wild tightly curled auburn hair, her arms not quite under her control as they sometimes wiggled and shook. By contrast, her legs seemed nearly lifeless. But I had known her long enough to know that her arms were amazingly strong and she could whip around in her non-motorized wheel-chair with equal parts grace and ferocity depending upon her mood. When she laughed, as she often did, her whole body shook, while her wheel chair rocked back and forth. She had the gentlest of dispositions and a deep love of singing and performing. Cerebral palsy was simply a part of who Janet was, but it did not define her.

We had been on quite a journey together the last few months, and I was not sure how she was going to react to the news. But I knew I had to tell her as soon as possible. I thought back to the beginning of the semester when I first alerted the administration and the school district of a potential dilemma.

Cavanaugh's layout, with nearly every classroom on a single floor, made it an ideal school for wheelchairs. The school district had long encouraged students in wheel chairs to attend Cavanaugh because of its ease of access. But there was one notable exception to the accessibility around the school, one that dawned on me as I began preparations to use the auditorium for the first time since my arrival at Cavanaugh. I was going to do *The Wiz* in the cavernous auditorium space to see if I could make it work. But the auditorium stage was only accessible by stairs. Four sets of five-step stairways. Two of the stairways were built into the

front of the stage on either side, giving access from the seating area of the auditorium. Two stairways backstage. Stairs in all directions. And Janet was going to audition. She had been in the chorus of *Grease* the previous year which we had performed in the Little Theatre. She had already indicated that she was interested in auditioning again. I contacted the administration and the school district about the situation early in the second half of the school year. They needed to make the auditorium stage wheel-chair accessible.

We began rehearsals and every day Janet was lifted from her motorized chair and carried up the stairs into her more portable hand-propelled chair on the stage. Usually it was her mother who stopped by to make the transition, sometimes it was someone from the Special Education Department.

Meanwhile the school district took its time. Janet, her mother, and I got a little nervous. I made phone calls. The contractors arrived three weeks before the play in early May. They tinkered and measured, promised and tested. They decided to put in a small motorized lift into one of the wooden extensions that had long been part of the front of the auditorium stage. They were built in front of the steps on either side, and a lift would fit perfectly into one of them.

I remembered how thrilled Janet was on the day last week that we finally tested the lift. The laughter bubbled out of her. The lift meant independence. She opened the little door, drove her wheelchair in, and pushed the button. The gears popped into place with a “ca-thunk,” and the lift did its job, bringing Janet and her motorized chair up to the level of the stage. She was ecstatic. The hand-propelled chair was going to be a thing of the past. It really took a toll on her physically. Janet really wanted to be in the motorized chair, because it was so much easier. And we had planned a bit of fun during one scene. Janet got to play the Kalidah Queen, one of the spooky creatures that Dorothy and her gang meet on the way to the Emerald City. Janet wore an eerie all white face mask and wailed, as she drove her wheelchair around the stage. She had so

much fun with this part, and was anxious to actually try it out in the motorized chair.

After the rehearsal Janet got herself down to the main floor, and then we heard something, a small grind, an odd squeak. I asked her to go back in and go up again. The lift would not work.

And so I called her into the lobby of the Little Theatre, shut the doors and told her the truth. The lift was not going to be working in time for the play. The blood drained from her face, and her eyes welled up with tears. Instead, the school district was going to hire four men to lift Janet and her heavy motorized chair up and down the stairs. They had to stay the whole night, in case something happened or in case she had to use the restroom. Janet started to sob, and then, she got angry. That sweet girl apparently knew some swear words. Her chair rocked, and she just let it all out. 12 years of fighting the school district for a variety of things, small and large, were in those moments of pure rage. It was awhile before she calmed down.

These are Janet's words, from what she calls an 'editorial' she wrote in response to what happened regarding the wheel chair lift:

*The person it has affected directly is in a wheelchair. They have wanted a lift in the auditorium for four years so that they could actively participate in extracurricular activities, classes, and assemblies that require use of the stage. In order to participate, several people have to lift her up on stage.*

*In January she decided that she wanted to try out for a part in the recent spring musical. A barrier stood in the way, the play was in the auditorium. She took action and a lift was promised. In April they had not fulfilled their promise and in May they began to start work just three weeks before the play. They had not stopped to think that they may be inconveniencing and or depriving a student from access to a part of the building. It is wrong under laws passed a few*



*years ago to deprive a person from equal access to a public place. The people hired to do the installing of the lift did not have enough time to do a thorough job of installation. Therefore, because of incorrect wiring, the lift was not able to operate for the play.*

*Let me explain who this person is. I am the person referred to in the editorial. I do not appreciate the district's way of going about this at all. They should have hired the crew right away so the mistake could have been found.... During this time I have felt that this was very unfair to me and others involved in the play. As a disabled person I am prepared to keep fighting for the lift and to make schools more accessible for these students. I want to do this so that other disabled people who follow after me can sing and act and be involved in assemblies without having to feel they are excluded or left out. I hope now that people who say "Oh, [the district] does so much for the students" will realize that they don't do it without a fight! There are people out there willing to fight.*

When I asked Janet's mother, who also ended up seething with rage, if she could do anything about the situation—threaten to sue, for example, she simply let out a big sigh. Janet was going to graduate in a couple of weeks, she said. She was done fighting for every little thing. She was not going to sue, was not going to fuss. The wheelchair lift never worked again. It was not working when I left Cavanaugh seven years later. The fate of the small lift became entangled in a large lawsuit that the district filed against the apparently disreputable construction firm that built the faulty mechanism at Cavanaugh. There could be no remedy, or so I was told, until the lawsuit was settled. Of course that did not do Janet much good.

I learned a lot of lessons like this one in my first couple of years of teaching. Bit by bit, I learned that often times in the work of a teacher, there are no heroic scenes with swelling music in the background with people moving towards overcoming the odds, all played out in slow

motion. I learned to muddle through when things got broken, a skill I was finding infinitely more valuable. Over time I developed patience. Moments of true grief and anger as exhibited by Janet made other tantrums of my own, and of other students, often pale in comparison. Witnessing someone who has a really good reason to be angry somehow took the anxiety away for me of witnessing lesser tantrums about small things. Another story that features a student who was justifiably angry, this time with me, is one about Roberto, a student actor.

### **Roberto**

I pulled Roberto aside. “Can I have a word with you?”

He looked at me a little sheepishly, but there was also simmering anger behind his eyes. I’d needed to have this conversation for a couple of weeks and I wondered if perhaps I had waited too long. The jovial sweet tempered adolescent I had experienced as Roberto was gone. In his place was this assertive, sullen, and somewhat passive aggressive young man. I was nervous. He was justifiably angry, I thought.

As a senior, Roberto had looked to me for some guidance, even as he chaffed at it as he sought for independence. I encouraged his interest in performance. I saw the spark of an intelligent creative performer in him. He had been part of the drama program for several years, landing a leading role in the fall of his senior year. However, Roberto had one drawback. He could not stay on tune when he sang. Even my colleague, the music director for our musicals, and one who was completely devoted to the idea that everyone could sing if given the chance to try, gave up on Roberto.

We walked through the auditorium. Classes were over and we were in the midst of the transition to after school rehearsals. I could hear the hum of voices in the hallway outside, the din of metal lockers clanging open and shut. Roberto’s attendance in the performance class had

become inconsistent. I was convinced that he was still angry about not being cast in the leading role of the musical.

I was aware of other forces going on in his life. Veiled references to his ongoing questions regarding his sexual identity. Decisions about where to go after graduation. Roberto was also fiercely envious of one of the other cast members who had a beautiful singing voice. Indeed, I kept one of the songs nearly always cut from this musical because he auditioned and could sing it. If I had cut the song, I could have cast Roberto in this part. Not the lead, but a good acting part. I also think that this rivalry seemed to have a history about it. If cell phones and social networking had been ubiquitous then, I'm sure that much of this drama would have played out in cyber space.

Roberto sat in one of the hard wooden seats. I sat behind him, leaning forward. I had let him down, I thought. I had led him on, overselling him on his talent in an effort to bolster his confidence, and perhaps creating the unrealistic expectations.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “You’ve been missing classes and rehearsals.”

Various parts of the story came out, haltingly. He no longer really trusted me. We came to some sort of resolution, although it was not exactly the one I wanted. He dropped out of the play. I like to think that I found some way of apologizing for setting him up, creating too high expectations. I felt guilty, even though I knew that the young man I had cast in the lead was having the opportunity of a lifetime. I had cast the best singers and actors, and even the role I did cast Roberto, although non-singing, was a crucial one.

But I felt guilty. I had set him up. I was guilty of telling him he was better than he was.

I have a picture of Roberto and another student with their arms around me at some fundraiser. They are smiling and in costumes. That’s not how we left things. We left things partial, un-resolved, broken. I had led him on into the worse kind of false support and when he

fell short he felt betrayed. What's sad is it seemed to wipe out all the successes he had had before. I can now look back and see that some of fault lies perhaps in the traditions of theatre that I had barely questioned; a system of rewards, evaluations, critique, and casting.

This is a story I have never told in presentations or in conversations with other teachers. We don't often share our stories of failure. Now, Roberto does not haunt me—that would simply be too melodramatic. He did have a leading role his senior year and many successes as a performer before then. Yet, even as I write this, I realize that even though this was not my best work, I did eventually do one good thing. I forced myself to be a witness to his frustration and disappointment, even though it made me uncomfortable. I tell this story now, because the voices of those who did not always experience success within the drama department are not present in this study. I did not seek out the disgruntled students.

The stories of Janet and Roberto represent an attempt to challenge myself to not fall into clichés of presenting myself as a heroic teacher (Conle 1999, Britzman 2003). As part of the heuristic inquiry, these stories represent painful moments where things did not turn out as expected, where I fumbled through and simply did my best, however flawed that might have been. I had to force myself to be witness to the pain of others and cope with my own discomfort. I want these accounts to resonate with the interviews with the former student actors who tell their versions of what it was like to be in school plays, their triumphs, fears, disappointments, and joys. To round out my introduction to the context of teaching at Cavanaugh High School I present “A Story about Drama,” an account of what it was like for me to produce *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that I wrote in 1994.

### **A Story about Drama**

I came across the following document somewhat late in the fall of 2012, after I had

written the first draft of chapter 3, and after I had completed the transcriptions of the interviews. I was startled by its existence. I have no idea why I wrote this. It feels like a piece I wrote to be read out loud somewhere. I wrote it after I had directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so I believe it was in the late spring, summer, or even fall of 1994. I believe this piece introduces my life at Cavanaugh better than anything I could write today. I titled it "A Story about Drama." The few changes I have made are in brackets.

*It was 7:10PM, twenty minutes before curtain. The audience was filing into the theater and the pre-show music had just started. Backstage, the cast and crew were on edge. The young woman with the leading role was busily going over lines she'd missed the night before, cursing that she couldn't find her leading man. Her mother was to be in the audience that night, making her irritable and excited. Not only was the leading actor missing, but two other key people were missing as well—the light board operators. I was walking out to the main hallway, just about ready to make some phone call home, when a concerned looking middle-aged man suddenly cornered me in the lobby. He was out of breath. "They're not going to be here," he said after introducing himself as a missing light board operator's father. "They've been arrested." Exasperation and disappointment were clear in his voice and face. It seemed I had a drama going on here other than the one about to take place on the stage. I stifled my need to panic, thanked the man and dashed backstage. "Emergency cast meeting in two minutes in the hall," I urgently whispered. News spread quickly among the students and soon I was confronted with a dozen questioning faces. It was time for me to take a chance. I was their teacher and director, but always told them that once dress rehearsals began, the show became their responsibility. I laid out the situation as calmly as possible to groans and wide eyes: [no leading man, no light board operators.] I suggested a few alternatives, and left them to find a workable solution, even*

*if it meant cancelling the evening's performance. I've had my share of emergencies in the three years I've been building the drama program at [Cavanaugh] High School. And I have learned to let students take as much responsibility for them as possible. Each problem has been a lesson for us, and has let us enjoy our successes all the more.*

*Cavanaugh is an ethnically and socio-economically diverse high school of 900 students in [the southwest corner of the city.] Cavanaugh is plagued by more than its share of urban ills: gangs, violence, ethnic tensions, familial abuse and dysfunction, sexism, racism, teen pregnancy and the list goes on. The administration and staff at Cavanaugh take these problems seriously, and embarked seven years ago on a journey to cope with them. Cavanaugh signed on with other [schools in the district] as part of the Schools for the Twenty-First Century grant project, attempting to restructure curricular content and the manner in which it was delivered to better meet the needs of an ever diversifying student population. One of the goals that came out of staff meetings was to bring the arts back to Cavanaugh after a decade of decline. I was hired as a result of that goal, along with a new music teacher, and a grant was awarded to the school by the [local arts commission] to bring artists into the classroom.*

*The after school drama program that I have designed with the input of students and parents attempts to be inclusive and meet many needs. We produce as many as three full length plays a years. Rehearsals after school last until 4:00 or 4:30 to accommodate the students who work or take the bus. I build upon skills taught in the drama courses I teach during the regular school day. I replicate the policies and practices of professional theaters in the area, insisting upon tryouts, cold-readings, and dress rehearsals. I choose plays with student appeal and with the population of the student body in mind, and, more and more, with student input. We have produced The Diary of Anne Frank, The Wiz, To Be Young Gifted and Black, among others. One goal I have achieved is teaching students about non-traditional and multi-ethnic casting. I*

*have designed sets around wheelchairs and fought to get a wheelchair lift to the auditorium stage. My goal is that all students at [Cavanaugh] feel they have a chance to participate. Teaching punctuality and attendance has been difficult in an all-volunteer effort such as ours, but the students are beginning to get the message. For example, in the situation I cite above, the students who were arrested that night for vandalism learned that their actions do indeed ripple beyond themselves. These students became some of the most reliable and responsible actors I have worked with.*

*My approach is traditional, but I have learned that such an approach is revolutionary for these students for whom the whole world of theater is new. I am amazed at the indirect vocabulary building that occurs, the involvement with a character's psychological motivations, and the amazement students have after opening night at how fulfilled they feel. I have no illusions. Theater itself does not solve these students' problems, but rather gives them an opportunity to succeed should they make the choice to succeed. The responsibility is theirs ultimately. I'll cajole, I'll guide, I'll provide structure, but they have to memorize the lines and discover the character for themselves. I find I am teaching more than theater arts, more than even the life skills of responsibility and cooperation. I am guiding them into a place where they can imagine the possible. What's possible for these students to achieve is so much larger than many of them, and the adults around them, can sometimes conceive. Colleagues come up to me after every production and remark on how astonished they are at the quality of our productions and the successes of the students involved. Our production this last spring aroused many such comments.*

*Some students approached me in the fall to produce William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. I had my reservations because of the amount of work researching and understanding the language would be. But I acquiesced to their enthusiasm. I engaged an*

*army of staff and parent volunteers to build the set and make the costumes—the most ambitious effort I have yet to undertake. The play became a school wide project with Language Arts classes studying it and student-actors from our production acting out scenes for them. The production that resulted was the most fully realized, to date, of my dream for the students and the school. The project truly became their dream. Our arduous four month rehearsal schedule resulted in sold out houses, astounded audience members, and heaps of well deserved praise. This project was a benchmark for the future and a reminder to the school of what is possible with the efforts of the entire school community. As teenagers tend towards extremes, many of the students came up to me after the show and said, “Let’s do nothing but Shakespeare from now on.” We achieved so much and a love for the bard to boot. Everything is possible!*

This piece of writing reveals much about my thinking at the time. I believed I was implementing a “traditional” approach to theatre education based on my understanding of professional theatre standards. Now I can hear the critique of Motter (1929) and Smith (1988). I can hear the critique of Cousins (2000), Gonzalez (1999; 2006) and Lazarus (2012). I believed that approach was “revolutionary” for the students I served. In some ways it was. Taking the students seriously and believing that they had the talent and discipline to achieve at a high level did go against the prevailing wisdom of what students at Cavanaugh were capable.

Shortly after writing this piece, Mrs. K. came to join the faculty at Cavanaugh High School. She was hired to bring a string program to life—violins, violas, and cellos— and teach choir. Early on we decided we would team teach a musical production course in the spring. From 1995-1999 Mrs. K. and I co-taught five musical production classes. I was the stage director, and she was the musical director. It was one of the best cooperative teaching experiences I have ever had. We complimented each other very well. I was going to interview Mrs. K. for this project, as



another adult voice for this chapter. Sadly, Mrs. K. passed away quite suddenly in the late spring of 2012. I miss her contribution to my life, and her potential insights and wisdom for this project.

Once I introduced the idea of producing the fall and spring plays out of an advanced production course, the motivations for students to participate changed somewhat. Receiving credit for their involvement became a factor, and the advanced drama class became synonymous with the school plays. This was the model I experienced when I was in high school. I was conscious that I was at some level trying to replicate the conditions that I had when I was a drama student at Roosevelt High School. I was also conscious that I faced a very different kind of school, smaller, more diverse, with more students with economic hardships than those faced by students at my *alma mater*. I brought my own school biography with me, as most teachers do. I adapted my experience, but still viewed it as the model of a successful program. Looking back, I hear Wallace Smith's (1988) critique of his own practice. What had I actually accomplished with the traditional model? I have already mentioned that the hidden question within this study is a personal one—did what I do as a teacher make any difference? I went into the interviews filled with a kind of double duty—that of a researcher searching for a more general answer about the value of the school play as an educational venture for the students involved, and as a reflective practitioner, wondering what lessons I was in store for, and wondering if I had the objectivity and fortitude to hear the answers, however they may reflect on me.

### ***The Former Student Actors***

It was into this setting and this context that the six participants became involved in the school plays at Cavanaugh High School. Graduation requirements were changing and stiffening, and they were in a school where teachers were being pulled in many directions; we were to innovate and we were to improve how students were actually performing academically. The

changing graduation requirements had an impact on electives, and had an impact on electives that students tended to repeat such as choir, band, and advanced drama. While the various administrative officials and faculty members intuitively understood the important contributions the arts made in such areas as student retention and affective, there was little effort put to justify what we were up to in cognitive terms. In these introductions I try to give a sense of each participant through my subjective experiences of them, but mostly through their own words. In this introduction I have placed a few of their stories that don't fit neatly into my later categories of analysis.

### **Tim: Self-Avowed Theatre Geek**

I interviewed Tim in the evening at his home. He lives in a charming craftsman style house perched on a rise of large stones that in the region are known as rockeries. Upon entering, I was struck immediately by the toys. This was a child-centered household, and toys dominated the living room. Tim's toddler was going to be a participant in the interviews. Tim took me into his study. The lanky short student I remembered had become a professorial looking intense adult. He was comfortable in his skin, leaning back in his office chair. He was attentive to his young son, calling him "Buddy" and patiently explaining that we were talking and that he should go find Mama.

Tim is thirty-six. He graduated in 1994 and went on to college, receiving a BA in Film and Media Studies, with a minor in Theatre. He is the only one of the six participants that had completed a four-year degree at the time of the interviews. He floundered a bit after graduating from college, working a series of "really kind of crappy jobs" including cleaning gutters and driving a school bus for half a year. "There's an old adage among school bus drivers," he quipped. "Whenever a teacher tries to say how hard their job is: well, take your job and turn your

back on those students for an hour!”

Tim spent five years touring with a sketch comedy team, beginning a small niche performance festival that has gone nationwide. He said proudly, “I have the distinction of performing in the first sketch group of the first night of the first Sketch Comedy Festival. So I kinda—I kinda birthed it.” He said that it was somewhat of a surprise to find himself “falling back into theatre.” His sketch comedy group performed in small venues up and down the west coast, and even went to Chicago and New York. He recalled fondly, “Got a standing ovation from San Francisco. That was awesome.” When that group folded in 2004 he developed a one-man mixed media performance that got him an audition of sorts at HBO. Although that opportunity did not pan out, he is still developing material and animation for a project he hopes to fund in the next year. Tim considers himself a comedian, an actor, and a writer. He finds himself a little surprised to be married and “a family man” with a young son. He currently works for a technology company that specializes in educational programs as a multi-media designer.

He was a bit distracted during our interview by his curious son who was suffering from a small cold and needed a little bit of his father’s attention at various points during the interview. Tim is quick witted and clever, but never sarcastic or biting. He has a kind of scholarly charm about him that is earnest and sincere. He enjoyed recounting his feelings about the drama department at Cavanaugh, and a little startled by what he could remember. He was visibly chagrined by what he termed his “weirdness” as an adolescent, a kind of melancholy moodiness that he did not want to spend a lot of time discussing. So while other of the participants took some pleasure in recounting tales of teenage antics and angst, Tim was reluctant to do so.

Tim joined the drama department as a sophomore during my first year at Cavanaugh, participating in the program from its inception. He took the first Drama class I offered at Cavanaugh because he was interested in film directing. His father recommended taking the

course because “if you want to be a director you should probably learn how to act first.” He became involved in my first production at Cavanaugh, the 1955 adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. “I got on board as assistant director,” he recalled. “So... I was taking staging notes and things like that.” He was propelled onto the stage in rather spectacular fashion when the actor originally cast as Peter got incredibly sick and “started vomiting blood in the Little Theatre.” Tim admitted that his stepping in to play the part was a “logical choice,” even though at the time he rather enjoyed being behind the scenes. To his surprise, even though he considers himself a shy person, he loved being on the stage. He said, “To put that old cliché out there, I caught the acting bug.”

After playing Peter, Tim played Teen Angel for the production of the musical *Grease* that spring. The following year he played an old gentleman, Stephen Spettigue, one of the suitors for Donna Lucia d’Alvadorez in the farce *Charley’s Aunt*. He played the role of the Wizard in Cavanaugh’s production of *The Wiz* in the spring of 1993. During his senior year, Tim played the detective in *Night Watch*, a suspense play by Lucille Fletcher. He finished his time in the Drama Department at Cavanaugh playing Oberon, King of the Fairies in William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Tim recalls a couple of moments of comic improvisation that really stand out for him. As comedy would become Tim’s forté, these memories are part of what is likely formative to him about being involved in high school plays. The first account demonstrates a profound development in recognition of the contribution of other student actors. In *The Diary of Anne Frank* and in *Charley’s Aunt* I had cast a student, Tuan, who had only been in the United States for a short while. He was from Vietnam, and although he had an excellent command of English, he was sometimes challenging to understand. However, he was an extremely gifted comedian and what he lacked in articulation he made up for in physical expressiveness. Tim tells the story

of one night during the first scene of *Charley's Aunt*:

I mean you want to talk about someone who, when something went wrong and knew how to cover it? One time in *Charley's Aunt*, you know how in the first scene, the whole set was basically a door with the curtains covering the sides so it doesn't look like a door. And they [the three actors in the scene] ... tried going through all at once and the door almost fell down, and Tuan turns to the audience and says, "Oh, what a house!" Oh that guy ... could cover like nothing else!

Tim learned early to watch others and learn from them.

Tim's second account of improvisation involves a moment on stage of his own. Tim enjoyed playing the Wizard in *The Wiz*, a musical based on L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. *The Wiz* was originally conceived as an all African-American version of the story, with music influenced by soul, rhythm and blues, and gospel (Mordden 2003, 75). Cavanaugh's version was multi-ethnically cast, although preserved the African-American spirit of the play with African-American young women playing most of the prominent roles, including Dorothy. Tim got to play a somewhat bumbling charlatan who is the title character of the musical. He always believed that he got the role because of his audition. He sang his audition song as if he were selling us something: "I think I was left with the impression that you wanted me in that role because I really kind of carnival-barkered the guy." He remembered that I had encouraged him to do something interesting with the character by adopting a "lisp or some kind of impediment." Tim had been hesitant to try something, never really satisfied with any of his efforts. On the first night of the performance, Tim flubbed a line. Instead of saying "the Wicked Witch of the West" he said the "Wooked Weck of the Wist." It got a big laugh so he decided to say it that way throughout the rest of the performance. "Granted, the audience knew there was a screw up that was unintentional," he recalled, "because we couldn't stop laughing when I did it the first time."

After the show, I apparently congratulated him on finally finding a comic flourish for the character:

But after I made the screw up you ran up and hugged me back stage, crying with laughter. You did that, you did! You said, “Do you remember when we were rehearsing I told you we should try some sort of affectation?” And I was like, “Ok, you were right, ok!” So that’s one of my fondest memories.

Tim is still proud of that recovery. He counts it as an early success at improvisation, and in light of his later career in comedy writing, an important moment of self-discovery.

Another of Tim’s favorite memories was when we took a selection of scenes from *The Diary of Anne Frank* to the state’s high school theatre festival. In addition to remembering that I wouldn’t let him go on a “hot date” with a girl he met from another school because we had to watch a scene from a production of *My Fair Lady*, he recalled the adjudication for *The Diary of Anne Frank*. He knew that my high school *alma mater* was in attendance at the festival, and that they were also coincidentally performing scenes from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Tim remembered that our scene from *Anne Frank* earned higher scores than the scene from my *alma mater*:

And we beat them! I mean I don’t know how these things were scored or anything, but we beat [your old high school]’s production of *Diary of Anne Frank*. I don’t know if it was a pity vote or anything, ‘cause they’re the ones with the costumes and all that. You know, our costumes were just Value Village sort of flat caps and that sort of thing. Yeah, that’s what I remember.... The same show ... and we got the higher score...! Yeah, I like that memory!

Tim also recalled a simple magic trick he did as Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He had a small paper flower that he used to squeeze a love potion onto Titania. He constructed a simple apparatus to make the flower disappear after he used it: “It was ... a rubber band connected to my elbow [and] to the flower....” He recalled:

I only did it onstage a couple times, because that trick could malfunction so easily. Like the flower would get caught on the sleeve of my costume.... The way to keep it from malfunctioning would be to do it off to the side. So I did it like that. But I only did it ... the way I wanted to do it one time, where I blew it and it went down, and the audience was like “Ah!” But then I had to exit through the audience and ... while I was exiting I heard one of the underclassman who was with ... their younger sibling out loud say what had happened. Like the one time I

did it correctly there was somebody exposing me to the audience ... I mean ... it was kind of an obvious trick, but don't say it out loud!

This was a lesson in both the triumphs and disappointments of live theatre. I was also intrigued that while talking about this experience, Tim physically mimed the action of the trick, as if reliving the moment not just through the words, but also through his body. The participants often activated their kinesthetic memory while telling their stories.

Tim's involvement in high school theatre altered the direction of his life to no small degree. Originally interested in film, animation, and being a director, his experiences as an actor allowed him to make career choices later that put him on the stage, even while pursuing his love of writing and directing. He said that being involved in high school plays "was formative for me." He went on, "When I originally went into theatre I had no intention of acting. That was a pretty big revelation for me too, so it really introduced me to a whole new art."

### **Liz: The Troublemaker**

I interviewed Liz on a warm autumn morning in the private study room of the local public library close to her home. As her husband pulled up in their car, Liz beamed as she hopped out to greet me. I met her two boys, both decked out in super hero capes. "They got them in April," she explained. "And they're just now starting to put them on." Nervous at first, Liz quickly warmed up and seemed to revel in the reminiscing.

Liz is thirty-five. She graduated from Cavanaugh High School in 1995. After graduation Liz attended a local community college but dropped out before completing her A.A. degree. She said it was due "to real life getting in the way." She worked full time at a convenience store and tried to organize a union there. Shortly thereafter her mother passed away and Liz spent a few years "just kind of partying a little too hard."

She settled down a bit, got married, and went to work at a customer service department for a large bank. She said, “For not having a college degree it was a great job and planned to make my career there.” Seven years and a few promotions later, the bank closed the department, moving it to another state. Liz was expecting her first child. Since that time, Liz has been a stay-at-home mom, taking care of her two boys. Being a stay-at-home mom is “a lot harder than I thought ... it would be,” she explained.

Liz did some performing after high school, taking a theatre course at a local community college. She recalled that “it wasn’t quite the same” as being in the drama department at Cavanaugh. She believed the professor was just “going through the motions” and seemed to want to teach something else. Liz did a couple of auditions for local community theatres that did not lead to casting, and she eventually turned her attention elsewhere. She hoped that once her children are a little older she can get involved with a local community theatre because she misses it.

Liz is lively, opinionated, and energetic. Right now, her children take up most of her focus. She seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk about her life and to share her stories about the drama department at Cavanaugh High School. She calls herself a “troublemaker,” and readily confesses that she enjoys teasing people and being sarcastic. Her reflections on her experiences in drama as a student actor were tinged with melancholy and regret. She was also very frank and honest. For example, her stories were filled with late night excursions and her precocious attempts at acting like an adult. “We were party kids,” she commented. Her honesty and humor save her from becoming maudlin or bitter.

Liz said that she was interested in becoming involved in the plays at Cavanaugh from her freshman year. She did not remember what made her want to act originally, but she went to all of the plays and became curious about auditioning. She finally took a drama course from me during



her sophomore year. She also took the sophomore English class that I taught at that time. During her sophomore year, Liz confessed that she “started having some problems in school with attendance.” She was not doing her school work on a regular basis because, as she said, “school wasn’t holding a lot of interest for me.” She remembered that I recruited volunteers to help backstage for the spring musical. Her first endeavor for the drama department was working lights backstage for *The Wiz*.

Liz remembered that the board that operated the lights at that time was the original system of large levers. It was replaced the following year by a computerized board. I had forgotten that the original transformer levers had even been there. She said:

I did lighting on that ancient lighting board in the auditorium ... with the levers and knobs.... “If you flip this and those lights go off, then reroute these lights to this lever.” ... We used masking tape on our wrists so that if we blew something when we were doing the lights we could reroute the lights if needed to with a different lever.

Liz’s memories of this are vivid, and she even seemed to quote me in the middle of her recollection on how to troubleshoot if the power goes out. Her hands went up in front of her as she recounted this vignette, twisting and pulling on imaginary levers. Being backstage was a good start for Liz, but she couldn’t wait to audition to be in a play.

After operating the light board, Liz was in three plays, and was a student director for a fourth. Her junior year she played a small role as Lieutenant Vanelli in *Night Watch*. In the spring, she played Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. During the fall of her senior year she helped me direct *The Time of Your Life* by William Saroyan as part of her senior project. Her last role at Cavanaugh was playing Mae, the domineering mother in the musical *Bye, Bye Birdie*.

Liz’s stories about the suspense drama *Night Watch* are among her most vivid and detailed. Her character, Lieutenant Vanelli, enjoys showing off her knowledge of the art work hanging in the swank apartment where she is investigating a reported homicide. One of the

paintings, a Matisse, is offstage in the script. While referencing a picture of the set for our production of *Night Watch*, Liz explained:

I remember—I *do* remember the Matisse. I *so* remember the Matisse! ... The last time you moved that Matisse was the last dress rehearsal and I'm like, "Is that?"—I remember asking you opening night, "Ok, so just to clarify, where's the Matisse?" Because it didn't exist. It was offstage so we didn't have a reproduction of that one.... It was never on stage. Sometimes the Matisse was over there, sometimes the Matisse was over there, sometimes I had to stand here and look out and point. Sometimes I was to walk out and then come back.... You could not decide what was going on with that Matisse!

Liz fondly recalled that the Matisse became a standing joke between us. At the annual award banquet for seniors, I would give out certificates for those seniors who had been involved with plays for multiple years. I often accompanied the award with a small token, often a prop or costume piece, associated with that student. Liz remembered what I gave her: "I still have the Matisse book you gave me!" An inside joke that Liz still cherishes to this day.

During the rehearsals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Liz remembered that sometimes they would show up and we wouldn't be practicing: "I recall until you had a stage crew class that sometimes rehearsal was rehearsing our lines and sometimes it was, 'Hey, you guys, make some set parts because we're not rehearsing our scenes today!'" During *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in particular, the cast had an opportunity to bond over more than just rehearsing the scenes in the play. Liz opined, "It seemed like there was a lot more input from all parts of the cast on ... different aspects that weren't necessarily, you know, your standard 'go in and read your lines.' I mean, you know, we helped create the set ... we bonded over chicken wire mishaps and injuries." Liz went into detail over the chicken wire:

There were two or three trees that we constructed out of chicken wire and 2 x 4's and whatnot, and we were trying to form the chicken wire to look like a tree.... We cut it and we were not paying close attention to the rough edges so just about everybody got ... bit ... or poked by the chicken wire at some point or other. And I seem to recall jokes ... "After this is over, can we take sledge hammers to the trees?"...The trees were frustrating and then some people were working on

making the vines. I was like, “They got the easy job!” as we’re trying to wrestle the chicken wire into place. So, yeah, it’s still to this day if someone brings up chicken wire I instantly get my hackles up. “Not that stuff!”

Liz remembered another rehearsal where I was particularly adamant about finding the proper timing for a comic bit for *Bye Bye Birdie*. In this musical, Liz played Mae, the domineering mother of Albert Peterson, who is always trying to blackmail her son emotionally by threatening to kill herself when he won’t do what she wants:

I remember I was supposed to get all dramatic because Sonny wanted to go do something and he was leaving his poor old Mama to be by herself and I might as well just die and I’d get down on my knees and I’d pull the oven open and stick my head in and he says “Mama, it’s an electric oven.” So that was the whole joke but ... Jeremy [the student playing Albert] kept laughing. So you kept redoing that part and then there was a little bit we kept going back and forth of: Do I get down on my knees then open it, or do I open it and then get down on my knees? So you had me doing that a few ways and Jeremy would laugh and we rehearsed just that one bit so many times my knees were starting to hurt from dropping down on my knees on that hard floor. I was frustrated.... Just in a flash of “I’m just not doing this anymore” I yanked the thing open, bent over at the waist, and stuck my head in and I recall you absolutely lost it. And I was like, “Oh great! I know what I just did. That’s how I’m performing that now.”

She recalled that the bit got a good reaction from the audience, but she remembered thinking, “Great! They’re all laughing at my ass sticking out!” And to top off the indignity, she recollected her costume: “It involved a fake fur coat that added about two inches in fake fur on either side of it!” So, “I have this wide backside to start with and then we’re just going to bend over and show it the whole audience!” The memory is both pleasant and embarrassing for Liz. She recalled a memory about body-image and the self-consciousness of adolescence, but also about how pleased she was to have figured out the right timing on her own, even if it came out of her frustration. This kind of double edged memory was frequent among the participants. Whether consciously or not, they often told a rather simple memory that alerted me to a feeling they had at the time that they could not express to me, such as Liz’s embarrassment. Some decisions I made came with a cost.

Liz adamantly believes that she would not have graduated from high school without the presence of the performing arts at Cavanaugh. Being in school plays gave her a place where she belonged, where she felt valued and useful, and where she could experience success. She said that it “really felt like the time I happened to come through school was a really good one, and it was amazing to be a part” of the Cavanaugh Drama Department.

### **Jeremy: The Dreamer**

I interviewed Jeremy at his home. The living room was immaculate, and he had even made a fruit, cheese, and cracker plate. He speaks in many voices and it can be difficult to pin down the real Jeremy. He is extremely self-conscious of the many borders he has crisscrossed in his life: a child who lived in a housing project, a prodigious singing talent, a gay man, a drag performer, a Samoan American, among many. He can dish out sarcastic zingers in the tradition of backstage drag banter, speak eloquently of his knowledge of popular culture, and drop into harsh street slang and patois, sometimes within a single sentence. But throughout all of the back and forth, Jeremy has a calmness about him that reveals that he has reached a point in his life where he is comfortable with where he came from and who he has become.

Jeremy is thirty-three. He graduated from Cavanaugh High School in 1997. He briefly attended community college. But, as he stated, “I wasn’t cut out for college life.... I was a horrible high school student. Horrible. School was just not for me ... I was not meant to go to school.” He explained that there was a lot of familial pressure to attend college:

I beat myself up over and over and over again; listening to other people, parental units saying, “Go to school, go to school, go to school!” It didn’t make me happy. At all. I just wasn’t a “sit in a classroom and write a paper and this kinda thing” ... I was not designed to be in the classroom listening, no not me at all.

Instead, Jeremy found enjoyment in entertaining, mostly singing. “I entertained for a little while.

I did clubs here ... not just gay clubs, gay and straight. I did clubs in California, Oregon, Washington, and Canada. And I had a good time with it. I did straight clubs and gay clubs. For the gay clubs I did drag.” He said that at first he performed in clubs just for fun, but began to think after awhile that he would like to entertain professionally.

Meanwhile, Jeremy worked in a grocery store, which he loved. He helped raise eight children: his younger brothers and sisters, as well as extended family through nieces, nephews, and cousins. This last point was very important to Jeremy, as this commitment started when he was in high school. “It was just something I had to do,” he explained. He said that it was “kind of like living a double life.” The children he raised did not know about his performing life during his high school days, nor did they know about his career working in clubs. He is having fun now surprising them with what he used to do. “It totally trips them out ‘cause they had no idea!”

Within the last five years or so, Jeremy got tired of the performing, particularly performing in drag clubs. He explained, “And it’s not just fame or fortune. There’s a lot of drugs, especially doing the drag circuit. I wouldn’t recommend it to my worst enemy...unless you’re - unless you’re grounded enough to know that that’s just a persona, it’s a job.” He went on:

I reached that point where it was in, you know, the door was open and I could just keep on walking through and go through the hallway or I could turn my ass around and run for the hills and that’s what I did. I just couldn’t—it sounds bad—it’s not the kind of, it’s not the kind of gay I wanted to be. I didn’t want to be that stereotypical ‘cause I knew in my heart of heart I wasn’t that stereotypical. And I had to break the association somehow. It was too much drugs involved. It was too easy too—it was too easy too—it was too easy to get involved in that kind of stuff and mind you, I still had kids to raise, so I really, I mean a lot of the kids were getting into high school....

He decided that coming home “cracked out three nights out of a week” was taking its toll. He wanted to be a role model for the children in his life, and not in the sense of “Oh, my God, don’t be like him!” He decided it was time to grow up. At this point in his life, he stays at home and takes care of the house, while his partner works. “And now I’m a ‘housewife’ and it’s even

better. I cannot, I cannot complain!”

Jeremy was a prolific student actor at Cavanaugh. He was Albert Peterson in *Bye Bye Birdie*, the first musical I did as a class with my colleague Mrs. K. He played the villain known as The Prospector in Jean Giraudoux’s *The Madwoman of Chaillot*. He was part of the barber shop quartet in *The Music Man*. His last production at Cavanaugh was in *Hello, Dolly!* where he played the part of Cornelius Hackle. Jeremy also was very involved in making costumes for the productions, assisting a parent volunteer. He helped sew costumes for *The Music Man*, *Hello, Dolly!* and returned the year after his graduation to help with costumes for *Anything Goes*.

Jeremy shared a particular memory of preparing for *Hello, Dolly!*. Mrs. K. and I used to begin each musical theatre production course with team building exercises designed to get the cast to know each other and to bridge gaps between chorus members and student actors playing the main parts. We borrowed many techniques from a peer mentoring program called Natural Helpers. Jeremy remembered the team building exercises for *Hello, Dolly!* as being different than the previous two years he had been in the school musical.

But for this one, the team building exercise was way different. We went down to the Career Center and we had to do a bunch of different exercises. We did that one thing, the, you know, “If I fall, close your eyes, everyone stand in circle, do you feel safe, fall back.” And people thought it was dumb. It was, “Natural Helpers did that kind of stuff,” and people thought it was kind of silly. But people got into it, especially the thug kids, and I always attach myself to like the thug kids. Because I really didn’t realize how much- how many of the thug kids needed something like this. Like, they needed, you know, to walk tall in the hallways, badasses in the hallways want to go fight, want to go shoot someone, want to go do this stuff. They needed an escape too. They wanted to be somebody else just for- and being in the drama classes was one them cool things. It just turned into like one of them cool things to be a part of.

Although I will discuss the reputation of Cavanaugh High School among the participants in the next chapter, the neighborhood and the school featured so prominently in Jeremy’s interview, that in order to understand him, one needs to understand how he viewed the place where he lived

and went to school. A theme that ran strongly through Jeremy's reminiscences about his time in high school, was how important the arts were to, as he put it, "the thug kids." He would point to cast pictures and rattle off, "He was a thug, he was a thug..." He goes on to explain:

It was just that it was a rough neighborhood. I mean, you teachers had an out, 'cause y'all owned cars and y'all could go away.... We were stuck. I mean, we lived in that neighborhood; we knew what it was like. The kids needed something like that. They really did. Ghetto life here in that neighborhood, it still is hard.... And a lot of kids—myself—only showed up for that kind of thing. It was the only thing we excelled at. We weren't mathematical. We weren't scientific. We weren't well read. We, I mean, literature, please! Humanities, we couldn't even tell you.... Oh, I'm definitely one of the people who needed it.

Other participants in the study mentioned the neighborhood and the reputation of the school, but none quite so passionately as Jeremy. However, "because those kids may have either skipped Math class 'cause I was there, skipped all these other classes, we were on time for that drama class. All the kids were! We would fight McDonald's lines at the [local shopping mall] to come back to that class, 'cause all of us had to be." Regardless of their personal situations, showing up on time for the Musical Theatre course and rehearsals, according to Jeremy, was not negotiable.

Jeremy remembers the only non-musical he did at Cavanaugh, playing the villain in *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, *The Prospector*.

And that one was a challenge. And I so remember playing like this horny guy who could smell oil. He got his rocks off of oil or whatever the hell it was. I was like, "What the hell?" The hard part about it was seriously—the hard part about that one was, it was me. With musicals I knew I could sing. I knew I could sing. So getting up on stage, choir, doing all that other stuff, acting, singing, no problem, 'cause I knew, even with *Bye Bye Birdie*, there was going to be a song coming along somewhere. No problem. If I flub a line, I hit a high note, no problem. That was by far the hardest. Plus, it was in the Little Theatre. And ... the audience was in your face. So if you were sweating, they could see it, and if you messed up because it was intimate.... When you were in the Little Theatre, it's like you're doing this, the only thing separating you was a coffee table.

The intimacy of the space, and the fact that he wasn't going to be able to fall back on singing, made Jeremy very aware of the need for character and for relating to his fellow actors.

Ultimately, Jeremy wished that all of the performances could have been done in the Little Theatre, because he really enjoyed the intimacy. “I liked it way better. I really liked that way. I just loved it a whole lot more.” He explained, “When you did it in the auditorium the [fourth] wall was there!”

Jeremy credits the performing arts program at Cavanaugh for giving him a place where he could feel successful in high school. He made lifelong friends that loved and supported him. He learned that others shared his love of performance. He learned that he could be a dreamer, and that there was a safe place for him to live in a world of fantasy that helped him cope with the reality of his day-to-day existence.

### **Dallas: The Joker**

I met Dallas on a warm fall afternoon on the deck of a coffee house. Dallas was eager to reconnect, and he was among the first participants to respond to the initial invitation to be a part of the study. As he said, “Not only yes, but *hell* yes!” He admitted he was also curious about being part of the study because he was taking a sociology course that featured research methods. He was interested in seeing how a research project actually unfolded.

Dallas is a lanky and lean thirty-two year old. After graduating from Cavanaugh High School in 1998, Dallas enlisted in the armed services. As he stated, “went straight to Basic Training ... and then I got stationed with ... the paratroopers; jumping out of planes and shooting guns and stuff.” Since enlisting, Dallas has focused on becoming an expert in counter-intelligence and has served in a variety of capacities in Kosovo and in Iraq. “I did a peacekeeping operation. Keep the Albanians and Serbs from killing each other....” He loves his work. “I get tired of routines pretty quick,” he explained. “Even though with the military everything is pretty regimented ... but that job keeps changing for me which is great.” On a brief break from his



military career, Dallas earned his A.A. degree. He is currently within a year of finishing his Bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, he has had increasing amounts of responsibility in his jobs and finds himself at a crossroads between staying in the military where he is somewhat frustrated by the chain of command, or using his skills in a civilian capacity.

Dallas occasionally has an opportunity to flex his old acting skills. He took a theatre class when he was working on his A.A. degree. He also volunteered a couple of times at a local charity's haunted house.

So, I was the scary clown with the chainsaw.... And, you know, they talked about me on the radio ... I was selling it. I was chasing people down the street. People were, not to brag, but a couple people peed their pants.... The guys I was working for came over and said, "All right, listen! If you see they're already like petrified by the time they get to you, just ease up and let 'em out. Don't terrorize them." And, so, I was like, "Oh, ok, I gotta pull back." 'Cause I was trying to make people cry. That's how you know you're doing a good job!

One of Dallas' most engaging stories about using the skills of theatre after high school was told after the recording device was turned off. He considered this story to be a good example of how he continues his love of the theatrical. He got to play 'Mr. Vice' at a military awards ceremony. Being asked to portray Mr. Vice is an honor as this character is the emcee of the evening. The evening was full of pomp and ceremony. Mr. Vice's job is to keep things flowing and to strictly enforce the decorum of the evening through mock/serious penalties. Dallas enjoyed sending his colleagues into the penalty box, a small area with a children's table complete with toys, crayons, and coloring books. As this is an extremely formal occasion, Dallas wore a dress saber, and at one point a general ordered him to ride his saber like a wooden hobby horse. Dallas gleefully complied. Dallas loves the part of himself that is outgoing and silly, and has kept this part of him alive throughout his adulthood.

Dallas became a part of the drama department after I had started offering performance courses. At this time the fall and spring plays were largely cast and rehearsed as part of a class

offered during the last period of the school day. He became involved after he had a memorable confrontation with the band director. Band was also a course offered during the last period of the school day. As Dallas tells the tale:

I told [the band teacher] to kiss my rear end from across the room because he was hassling me about band candy. Selling band candy to make money for the [spring trip] and I had already gotten ripped off once and had to pay for a whole box of chocolate bars and I was just telling him ... "I'm done! I'm not doing this!" ... And he was ... just really getting on my case about ... putting forth a hundred and ten per cent.... I went straight to the principal's office and told them. I was like, "I just told Mr. K to kiss my ass and I ain't going back to band. I'm done with it. I need to find another elective." "How about drama?" "Ok." I was much happier in your class.

He recalled seeing other plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so drama as an option "always kinda stuck" in his mind. Dallas said, "I tried out a lot of different sports, and I tried band, and the only thing that really stuck was drama." He transferred into the production class because he needed an elective. He stayed because of "how much fun it was" and because "there was so many good relationships that...we developed in that class."

Dallas was involved in several plays over a two year period. He was Judge Danforth in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and the irascible Horace Vandergelder in the musical, *Hello, Dolly!*. He participated in *Curse the Walls*, the first student devised production we did at Cavanaugh in conjunction with a local professional theatre. He was in two plays directed by student teachers, *The Lottery* and Neil Simon's comedy salute to Anton Chekhov, *The Good Doctor*. He finished his acting career at Cavanaugh playing the ne'er-do-well leading man, Billy Crocker, in the musical *Anything Goes*.

Many of Dallas' strongest memories involve his best friend, Sebastian, a gifted comedian that he got to act with in *The Crucible* and *Anything Goes*. One particular memory involved an involuntary laughing session in *The Crucible*. Dallas played a judge and wore a long black robe and a heavy white judge's wig:

I remember when we were doing *The Crucible*. I think it was, yeah, it was a rehearsal, like a dress rehearsal and I was wearing that thick wool robe, and those lights were so hot on stage that the costume made me sweat bad! And Sebastian [as John Proctor] was, ah, was on a roll! And he was doing his lines but he was really impressing me. He was yelling at me—he was supposed to be angry. And he started ... a smile started cracking across his face and you know how that goes! And then it started creeping up on my face too, and we two broke and lost it. And I asked him, “What happened?” He was like, “There’s been a drip of sweat hanging off your nose the whole time I was yelling at you, and it was cracking me up!” ... Well, I guess I have to make sure that I’m wiping my face while we’re doing the real thing ‘cause it’s hot up here!

Sebastian and Dallas loved to goad me either to laugh or, in a sure sign of my frustration, to “throw my keys.” Annie, another participant, remembers that one time during *Hello, Dolly!*,

Dallas and another cast member wrapped her up in toilet paper as a practical joke:

...Wrapped me completely and I could not get free. And they signed the toilet paper. I still have it down in the box. They signed the toilet paper and they were like, “You need to keep this” and I still have that toilet paper. They’re like we’re going to toilet paper you. I was like, “Ok.” I don’t know why and I really could not literally get out of the toilet paper. It was, like, bounding. The tricks they want to play... The little freshman... I guess this is my freshman initiation.

Dallas had a well deserved reputation as a joker, though his pranks were rarely mean-spirited.

I had a memory that I shared with Dallas. During the rehearsals of *Anything Goes*, Dallas and Sebastian, who played buddies in the play, were working out an intricate piece of comic business. I quote from the transcripts:

ME: I have a really clear—one of the few really clear memories of a rehearsal with you and Sebastian and it was one of those rehearsals where you guys really clicked. Because there were a bunch of little routines that you guys do, little comic things, and I remember this moment of going, “They get it.”

DALLAS: Yeah.

ME: They get it, and you guys were playing off each other and we were having so much fun.

DALLAS: Right.... That sticks out in your head probably because it was like that moment where you could see it coming together, but for me and Sebastian—that was every day in drama class!

Dallas explained one aspect of the constant sources of their entertainment: my reactions. “I think a lot of us were always trying to make you laugh so we would try different things out. And I

know me and Sebastian used to conspire against you all the time.” For Dallas the fun and the hard work were worth it.

Dallas’ memories of *Anything Goes* are somewhat a jumble because he played a character always in disguise. “I liked that one the most because I had so many wardrobe changes and I was pretending to be so many different people to not get caught on the boat. So it was like playing four or five different roles in one production.” He also enjoyed the set which looked like the deck of an ocean liner. He recalled, “I was all over that thing. I was like a spider monkey on that stage.... That set was awesome, it had multiple layers.” One of the moments from *Anything Goes* that stands out for Dallas involved one of the disguises, when he was dressed as an old woman. “I was pretending to be Mrs. George Bernard Shaw and I had to run off stage at one point because—I don’t remember what exactly was going on but I remember my tap shoes making so much noise as I ran off stage. I’m like ‘clack, clack, clack, clack, clack!’”

Dallas credits his involvement in high school drama with his ability to overcome obstacles and work hard to achieve desired goals. He feels his experiences in drama made him more cultured and allowed him to find confidence, skills he has used to achieve success in his current career.

### **Annie: Hollywood Bound**

I interviewed Annie in her home. She enjoyed the opportunity to have some time away from her family and to reminisce. Annie was in a reflective mood. She and her husband had made a major transition within the last six months and they were still adjusting to life outside of Los Angeles. Although Annie reminisced a lot about her time at Cavanaugh, she was also eager to share feelings she had about her decade in Hollywood. Annie has a way of stressing her points when she talks with a shake of the head, a slight pause, and direct look.

Annie is thirty. After graduating from Cavanaugh High School in 2000, she was accepted at a large local four-year university. She declined to attend after finding out that she would not be able to go on stage her first year. Instead, she attended a community college with a robust performing arts department, completing her AA degree.

She and a friend decided to audition for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles. When they got accepted, they quit their jobs and moved to L.A. with no regrets. She says they lived in virtual squalor, eating Top Ramen and attending classes. Annie had a dream of becoming “a superstar” and worked towards that goal for ten years. She described her living situation when first moving to Hollywood:

I mean when I first moved there, my best friend and I, I mean we struggled. I mean when you want to be an artist and you want to be something so bad, you struggle.... We lived here in a two bedroom apartment rented for \$700.00 with two bathrooms and we moved there for \$650.00—we had not even a 300 square foot apartment. We shared a bed. We had a mini kitchen. I was so glad that I had a bathtub. I was like, “Thank you, God! I have a bathtub!” Just to relax. Like we would have to—we were in acting school together—like we would take turns as to who would work in the bathroom and who would work in the living room.... I mean we struggled to pay—I mean we paid our bills every month but it was like, “Ok, we’re going through the McDonald’s drive through. We have three dollars. We can each get one chicken sandwich, but that was it.” I mean, we struggled I mean, like Top Ramen.... We struggled for what we wanted to do.

She made student films, and finally got a few local and national commercials. But the grind of the business really wore her down. “It just kinda felt like ... I would audition, audition, audition, and maybe get one thing out of a hundred,” she explained. “You don’t realize that you go out into an audition and there are a hundred girls that look exactly like you....” She says that a friend of hers really put the predicament into perspective for her:

It was so funny ‘cause one of my good friends ... put it in a great perspective last week for me. He’s a guy that’s 6’5” and I mean when you ... look for a big ... gladiator—something like that, that’s the person you would cast. He said, “I can go into an audition, there’s like five guys. So my odds are like winning at the Bingo Hall.” He looked at me. He goes, “Your odds are like the Megamillions. My odds are so much better ‘cause I’m like the big guy. No big huge guy acts!”

It also became increasingly clear that jobs in Hollywood were often more about who you knew rather than what you had done or how good your work was.

After meeting her husband, her life took a different turn. The decision to start a family and put her acting dreams on hold for awhile was a logical yet emotional one for Annie. She remembered being in an audition with her young son, watching him being held by a stranger while she tried to get excited about Honey Bunches of Oats. That was the last straw, and she decided then and there to take a break from acting for awhile. She does not regret moving back to her hometown and is now expecting her second child.

At first, Annie got involved in acting through her church. She also took dance classes from an early age. Her stepmother was very involved in a local community theatre, so Annie always had support from her. But she recalled that she almost went to another high school with a bigger drama department than the one at Cavanaugh. She recounted the story of how she changed her mind:

You were there and then a bunch of students came up to [the middle school] and you convinced me to go to Cavanaugh for the Drama Department. I think you said, one thing you said to me ‘cause we were living around the area, you go, you said something like, “Well you can sleep in in the morning and you don’t have to wake up so early.” And you were talking about [the other high school] ... they have late rehearsals and everything.... My mom goes, “That sounds really good. You like to sleep, remember?” And I was like, “Ok!” and I then changed my mind right from there when you said we’re a performing arts magnet and then the choir and everything. I talked to some of the students and they were like, “Oh yes, Mr. B is awesome” and I don’t know if you even knew that, that that changed my whole mind to go to Cavanaugh.

Annie was very involved in the drama program at Cavanaugh. Her freshman year she was in the chorus and one of the waiters in *Hello, Dolly!* when I quickly realized her talents, and made her dance captain. She also appeared as Peter in *Peter and the Wolf*, a project we did with the local community orchestra. Her sophomore year, Annie was in *Curse the Walls* and played Bonnie, one of the main dancing parts in *Anything Goes*. Her junior year, she played the leading

role in *The Visit*, followed by playing Chava in *Fiddler on the Roof*. I left Cavanaugh after Annie's junior year, but she did discuss the two productions she was in her senior year, a project with the local professional theatre, and being student director and a featured dancer in the spring musical.

Annie recalled that she almost did not graduate from high school because she was missing a crucial occupational credit. I have included the whole exchange here, because she really revealed her passion for acting, and relived the defense she made of her career choice as she retold this story:

ANNIE: I almost didn't graduate because I needed an occupational credit. And I went to ... I put up a petition and went to—what was our principal's name? Mr.? What was his name?

PI: [Gives name].

ANNIE: [Principal's name.] And I said, "Listen here ... I'm going to act for my life, that's what I'm gonna do when I get older. I'm gonna be an actress. I don't understand why I have to take Introduction to Hotel, you know, 'Hotelism,' and this-ism, and this class, because I want to be an actress, so either you give me occupational credit for my drama credits." I mean I said, "You give me credit for gym when I play softball, so why can't I get...?" And he gave me two occupational credits and I graduated because I said I'm gonna act when I get older. I mean I told him, if you want to ask anybody that's what I want to do when I get older. I want to act. I mean, I've become ... I'm a professional actor, I've got paid to act.... That's all you gotta do is make money and you're a professional actor. So I mean, that's what I wanted to do and I told him that, I was straight flat out with him. I said, "Those things didn't interest me, I didn't want to do tourism class.... I don't want to sit behind a desk the rest of my life; that's not what I want to do. I want to act and I don't understand why I can't get an occupational credit for being in drama." I mean I showed him every single one of my credits, I mean drama, drama, drama, drama, drama, drama, drama. Signed a waiver on it! Mm-hmm.

The satisfied smirk and shake of the head that Annie gave on the last "Mm-hmm!" is difficult to convey here, but she was very pleased with herself!

Annie tells a story about working on *The Visit*, by Friedrich Durrenmatt. Annie played the part of Claire Zachanassian, a millionaire who returns to the city of her youth to wreak havoc and revenge upon the residents who spurned her when she was a young outcast and pregnant

unwed mother. It was a fun role for Annie, but she got frustrated by one of her fellow cast mates, Jerome, who played the mayor of the town, and she had to rely on another cast member, Rob, to help her out.

There were parts where... I could never get Jerome to work with me. I mean you always gave us parts, you know, yes, we could work on it in class, but there were times where I had to work with people outside of class, and you gave us that responsibility. ... I couldn't get Jerome to work with me for the life of me. And I remember that Rob was my little muse or whatever in that play. There's this one scene where Rob would—he was like feeding us dinner or something, I don't know. And he was feeding us our lines, like, he's like, "Here's your line, Jerome. Here's yours." And I'm like, "Ok, ok!" ... It was just so awkward, because we never really worked on that scene.... We're like literally... reading it off the paper. I don't know if you remember that? You were probably so mad at us. He would not work. I could not get him to work on anything, so how am I supposed to do a scene with somebody when...? ...I mean I loved getting in the old make-up. That was pretty fun. And riding on the sedan chair. I mean there were really fun parts and then there were some parts that were just like [sigh]. I think that would probably be the only mishap.... I mean it takes two people to do a scene. I couldn't do the scene by myself. There was nothing that I could do. He wasn't giving me anything. It was just hilarious that, I mean literally Rob is like, "Here's your line! Now here's your line! Here's your line." And ... I felt like that scene went on forever and ever and ever and ever and I was like, "Can we just cut this whole part out of the whole play?"

Annie was a serious student of the theatre, and working with someone who was taking it less seriously was a big frustration.

Annie credits her involvement in the drama department at Cavanaugh with encouraging her love of the performing arts and acting. Her experiences in high school made her who she is today and shaped her career. "It really molded me," she explains. Annie has no regrets about moving to Hollywood, about her struggles there. Acting is a deep part of her and she plans to never let it go, even as she raises her family.

### **Rosie: The Pragmatist**

I interviewed Rosie in her home. Her husband watched football in the background, as



Rosie served up soup and bread for lunch. Earlier in the week, she had arranged a potluck picnic for me with some of her close drama friends, her brother, and her mother, all people involved with the Cavanaugh High School Drama Department. Rosie was extremely active in the drama department and was proud of the fourteen projects and plays she was involved with during her four years in high school. She was the only participant who had her memorabilia pulled out and waiting for me when I arrived for the interview. She was also the only participant who went through the transcripts of our interview and sent me minor changes to them.

Rosie graduated in 2000 and is currently thirty years old. She started community college and was interested in a career in journalism. She quickly realized that with the growing popularity of new media, that journalism “was going to be a dead leader.” She dropped out of school, and went into retail, working some of the time in a tuxedo rental shop. She cared for a dying relative during this time as well. She married her high school sweetheart after he spent eight months in Iraq.

Rosie left retail, became an administrative assistant and has become very involved with the International Association of Administrative Professionals. She has earned several certificates through this organization and now works for an architecture firm.

Rosie sang for several seasons with the local symphony chorale until work commitments got in the way of her ability to attend on a regular basis. Rosie’s mother was very active in the drama department at Cavanaugh, helping to choreograph *Anything Goes* and parts of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Since graduation Rosie has helped her mother with summer theatre projects at a local church.

Rosie was involved in theatre projects through her church as a youngster. Her mother is still proud that Rosie played the baby Jesus in a church Christmas presentation. Her family moved to the area near Cavanaugh High School during her last year of middle school, and Rosie

remembered feeling very new. She became involved in the drama department through friends and peers in choir. “I’d already started in choir,” she recalled. “I knew I’d always wanted to sing.” So when people in choir discovered her interest in theatre “they started pulling me in.” She explained, “I really kind of felt comfortable on stage and it was something that I could always do...so I just jumped into the characters and didn’t think about it. It gave me a lot of really great friends.”

She remembered her first audition, using a piece from *Green Grow the Lilacs*, “which is the non-musical version of *Oklahoma!*.” She continued:

And I got up there and did a southern accent and I remember forgetting like one word and ... pausing. Like, “Heck, I can do this! I know what I am doing!” And then [another student] was sitting next to you and I was like, “Heh, heh, I hope that was ok, here I go.” And he was like, “What the hell? Where have you *been?*”

This was one of her favorite memories, receiving praise from another student during her first audition.

Rosie was in many projects during her four years at Cavanaugh. She was Ermengarde Vangergelder in *Hello, Dolly!* her freshman year. She was one of Reno Sweeney’s Angels, Temperance, in *Anything Goes*. She was in *The Good Doctor* and *Curse the Walls* her sophomore year. She played Kitty Verdun in *Charley’s Aunt* and Hodel, the second daughter of Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*. She had the leading role in the spring musical her senior year.

One of the first memories that Rosie shared was about her brother, also involved in the drama department at Cavanaugh. It was a short fragment:

It was *Fiddler on the Roof* and they were doing one of the scenes where... rumors had accumulated and everyone in the town had been doing their thing and all of a sudden it’s my brother, and the entire crowd is backing up on him... my brother.... He was backing up on stage and everyone was advancing on him as they were supposed to step in a line each time and he forgot what his lines were, and kept moving. And all the color drained from his face on stage underneath the lights.

She remembers feeling bad for him because he was so embarrassed to forget his line, especially when the whole cast was focused on him.

One of Rosie's favorite memories involved her first appearance on the auditorium stage as Ermengarde, the spoiled niece of Horace Vandergelder in *Hello, Dolly!*. She remembered that she felt a lot of pressure with that role, as she was a freshman who had earned a fairly large role.

Opening night of *Hello, Dolly!*... I was back stage. One of the gentlemen walked up to me and I was still in the costume actually in the back. I was wearing this baby blue skirt and then this ruffly top. And it was actually a dress that my great grandmother had kept and my grandma had took off the skirt 'cause it had been falling apart and converted it into one my costumes. I had the most costumes for that play ever, I swear. And I was standing there and I was really nervous 'cause you know, this was a huger stage than I had ever been on before. And one of the guys came up. He like stopped dead and he was in a cop costume. He looked at me and said, "Good God! I didn't think you were a porcelain doll until just now!" And I was like, "Ohhhh, ha ha! Thank you, I think!" And continued pacing.

*Fiddler on the Roof* was Rosie's favorite production while at Cavanaugh. She played Hodel, Tevye's second daughter. She got to sing the lovely ballad, "Far from the Home I Love." She pulled out an old essay that she had written at the end the semester about the opening night of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I asked her to read it out loud, and reproduce the essay here:

A loud voice called "Places!" from behind the door causing a wave of nerves to surge through my head. I quickly swallowed them down and smiled at the delight of their presence. The sound of shuffled feet began as a herd of fellow actors climbed the back stairs to the auditorium stage. A soft glow from the house lights filtered onto the pathway reflecting every colored kerchief that happened to find its way beneath the lights. The low buzz from the audience came from out front and I began to hug the line of friends wishing good luck to all. Whispers of fears and doubts echoed through the group as all the lights went to complete darkness.

I stared wide-eyed out into the darkness while reaching for the hand of the person in front of me. I felt a prayer run through my mind praying for everything to come out well and for the audience to enjoy the show. Clutching the hand in front of me, I felt the weight of my costume tug at my shoulders and waist. A spotlight clicked on and a butterfly began to dance in my stomach. I then heard the sound of a lonely violin playing a soft tune. I had heard it all before but each note had a sense of nerves and practice. A piano joined in and an unfamiliar voice began to speak. The words but I knew but I no longer knew whom was delivering the beautiful lines.

My line began to commence and I looked out on the stage, seeing no

longer my fellow actors but seeing for the first time the characters they had become. Along with the strong faces of my family came memories that could have been. The lines fade with our rehearsed steps and the platform below creaked with our unit. Slowly I felt all nerves melt from where they were as they left me alone. A proud grin formed its way up to my face and I turned it to the audience. No longer did I think of everyone around me as friends but now as people in our little town of Anatevka.

Rosie became quite emotional as she read the essay, choking up at several points.

Rosie values the problem solving and ability to interact effectively with other people that she believes she learned from being in school plays. She can see the bigger picture, and imagine outcomes, abilities she credits with having an artistic and theatrical childhood and adolescence.

Cavanaugh High School is a small urban public high school where I taught in the 1990s for eight years. During that decade Cavanaugh High School embarked on an intensive program of change and restructuring involving experimentation in curriculum, leadership, and discipline. I was hired to bring a theatre program to life, both during the school day and after school. I directed over twenty musicals and non-musicals, and countless other projects. Within that environment over 200 students participated in the school plays. I interviewed 6 of those student actors, Tim, Liz, Jeremy, Dallas, Annie, and Rosie. They represent student actors from across the eight years I was at Cavanaugh. These were students in at least two plays over at least a two year period. The participants in this study were among the more exceptional, often cast in leading roles during their time at Cavanaugh. Tim, Liz, Jeremy, Dallas, Annie, and Rosie shared with me about what they had been doing since high school. They recounted stories, shared opinions and comments about their experiences in school plays. In chapter 6, I recount more of the interviews, developing themes of student gains, and how these former student actors have continued to find value from school plays since graduating from high school.

## CHAPTER SIX: WHAT'S THERE TO BE NOTICED: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

### *Introduction*

Over the course of ten days in October 2012 I interviewed Tim, Liz, Jeremy, Dallas, Annie, and Rosie individually and followed up with further questions in subsequent months. I asked them questions about their experiences in the school plays at Cavanaugh High School where they were students in the 1990s. Although the stories, memories, and reflections about their experiences in performing in school plays share themes, they also are particular to each participant. In this chapter I continue to analyze, discuss, and draw conclusions from the responses of the participants. These six individuals defied my expectations, giving me far more nuanced and varied responses to questions than I could ever have thought.

I was primarily wondering how these former student actors valued the school play, both at the time they were involved, and how they value those experiences today. When I planned this research I thought that I would receive some predictable responses. I thought that these former student actors would discuss some of the learning outcomes that traditionally have been associated with theatre education: increased confidence, ability to speak in front of an audience, the ability to cooperate, and the feeling of accomplishment that comes after achieving a difficult goal. Woods' (1993) research and Larson and Brown's (2007) study also alerted me to some other kinds of responses to look for: awareness of others, emotional maturation, and a sense of magic when the whole project comes together.

I was surprised by three topics that were outside my expectations. I was surprised at how fresh and present the negative emotions associated with these productions were for the participants. I hesitate to use the word negative, although it is convenient shorthand for these emotions. Feelings of jealousy, anger, frustration, resentment, hurt, and sadness were very

present to the former student actors as they reminisced and relived these past experiences. I also did not expect the positive and intensely emotional connections that the former student actors still have for the characters they played, and how the very act of creating roles has translated into a variety of lifelong skills

I was also surprised by how much detail the participants remembered about the stories of the plays. I believe that this narrative memory is one of the more important findings of the research, deserves much more scrutiny, and is a distinguishing feature of theatre from its brother and sister art forms. While I will expand upon the importance of narrative memory in more detail in chapter 7, the evidence of this kind of remembering weaves its way through all of the interviews with the participants. These memories are like other memories, fragmented by time and distance, distorted by the roles the participants had in the plays. Often the former student actors could remember what they watched from the wings better than they could remember what they were doing on stage, while sometimes the plot points of the play outside their own scenes were hazy. As Edward Casey (2000) says, “In reminiscing, we try to get back inside a given experience—to insinuate ourselves ... so as to come to know it better” (117). The details of plot and character were often accompanied by physical gestures, facial expressions, and lines from the plays themselves. The physicalizations appeared to be part of the process of insinuation, aiding the participants in recreating their experiences. There was a pride among the participants in what they were able to remember. They could have been showing off a bit for their former teacher, after all these were among the more accomplished performers from my eight years at Cavanaugh.

The purpose of this chapter is to report and analyze the interviews I conducted with the six participants. The responses of the former student actors are organized according to the categories I described in chapter 4: personal development, emotional development (Woods

1993), emotional development (Larson and Brown 2007), social development (Woods), and aesthetic development. In each category I reiterate and expand upon what the researchers had to say about the category, providing definitions and examples. I quote extensively from the interview transcripts with the former student actors, aspiring to provide ample discussion and evaluation that builds to the central question of this research study, how the participants valued their experience of the school play, and how they make sense of that experience in their present lives, the subject of chapter 7.

### ***Personal Development***

*“It made me the person I am today.” – Annie*

*“I wanted rehearsals to go on forever.” - Jeremy*

Woods (1993) defines personal development as a process of self-discovery aided by the creativity inherent in artistic expression (105-108). Creativity in theatre involves improvisation and spontaneity (106). The skills needed to perform aid in building confidence especially as students get better and better at them (110). Responses from the participants in this study definitely support Woods’ point about personal development, although it is sometimes difficult to separate personal development from some of the other categories, because of the intensely social and emotional aspects of how they developed personally through their experiences in theatre.

Dallas appreciated the freedom of expression in class and in rehearsals. He recalled, “You gave us a lot of latitude to explore the stage, to try things out.... Our class was more free flowing and letting the artistic juices flow, so to speak.” That freedom to explore and try new things has been important to Dallas in his current endeavors. He also said that being in school plays helped him to develop a sense of personal confidence: “Well, it taught me to recognize that

I was afraid of certain things but that I was able to overcome them. So, that initial fear of being on stage ... eventually I just learned to deal with it. I still use that today, you know.” He felt that drama class and his experience in school plays helped him to learn to push through obstacles and be creative in working through problems in his personal and professional life.

For Jeremy personal development and emotional development are intertwined. The decision to stay involved in theatre meant he had to defy his own internalized beliefs about what was appropriate for him to do. For example, he said, “As far as ... American culture, I mean, to be a guy in musical theatre, I mean it’s like a ‘fag’ thing to do, so that’s—unless you’re like the guy who can beat up everybody then you’re ok.” Jeremy assumed that other male students could get away with being involved in the choir and school plays because they would say things like, “I’m just doing it for the credit” or “I need an elective.” At the same time he admitted that those young men also “thoroughly enjoyed being there.”

In addition to the social pressures in American culture against being involved in performance, were the pressures at home that Jeremy attributes to his parents’ culture. He said, “It just didn’t make sense. It just didn’t fit in. Having my parents...being who they are, it doesn’t fit in. It doesn’t. ‘You won’t make money.’ The frivolousness of it, the fantasy? What is fantasy? ‘Only idiots go into the fantasy. This is reality. Do this, go get a job from nine to five, go to school...you have this, you have that, you have all of these things.’” Jeremy felt compelled to separate his home life from his school life. In going against the expectations of home, Jeremy found support and belonging in the performing arts at Cavanaugh. “I needed that, I needed the—I just needed the break away, the release, the fantasy of it.” He discovered independence and freedom through the performing arts. The process of committing to the arts was sometimes an internal process of tug-of-war. For example, Jeremy described how he felt about playing Cornelius Hackle in *Hello, Dolly!*:



And then when we started rehearsing, that was hard. That hit—that was just— I wanted in and then I wanted out, and then I wanted in and then I wanted out, and then I wanted in and then I wanted *in*. And then I really wanted in. That one—that one was hard. To have the curtain open, hardest one by far, because I think I was more emotionally attached to this one.

Jeremy was deep inside a process of self-discovery throughout his time in high school. Woods (1993) believes that students involved in a critical event such as a play production can feel “almost a creation of a new-found self” (141). Jeremy’s experience in the school plays helped define who he was, sometimes in contrast to the expectations at home and in the culture at large.

Liz recalled that she had expressed an interest in becoming a drama teacher, an important aspect of her commitment to the theatre department at Cavanaugh. The interest motivated her to help direct a play with me her senior year as part of her senior project. Liz’s interest in the job of directing confirms one of Woods’ (1993) claims for critical events, that they are likely to encourage a “realization of abilities and interests” (141). Liz gained some insight into people, and it suited her personality—as she said, she’s “bossy.” She discovered that directing her peers was difficult. Apparently I would just announce that she was taking the rehearsal that afternoon and then:

It was funny, they didn’t want to listen to me because I was their friend so they thought they’d get special treatment and they found out I was probably harder on them when it was just me in there than you were and I don’t think they liked the way I directed very much ‘cause I was like, “No, you are not screwing around, we’re doing this.”

It was not until she reminded me, that I recalled that Liz had expressed an interest in knowing how my job actually operated. She frequently joked that she would come and replace me: “I remember threatening to come take your job when you were ready to leave it.” She remembered that I did several things to encourage her. I took her down to the central branch of the public library to show her the extensive play files there. I encouraged her to come back and volunteer after she graduated, which she did for *The Music Man* in 1996. Liz definitely built a strong

affiliation with the drama program to the point of entertaining the idea of becoming a theatre teacher herself. She saw how she could develop into a person who could do the job, because it interested her.

Annie exemplifies in the most extreme manner the process of self-discovery and identity through involvement in school plays. Early on in her adolescence she identified herself as an actor. For Annie there has been virtually no other identity than the one she began to construct for herself while a student actor in high school. Annie's process of self-discovery in high school only heightened her desire to make acting her career. She said, "That's where I really fell in love with acting was in high school and realized this is what I want to do. I mean I could have done anything else. I mean I could have gone to the [local university] and I was like, 'That's not for me. That's not what I want to do. I want to act.'" Annie decided to become an actor. As a result of her subsequent acting career, Annie's memories of high school theatre have a different quality about them than those of the other participants. Her experiences in high school theatre have been directly applicable to her chosen profession. For example, she had particular memories of techniques and exercises she learned in classes and rehearsals that have stayed with her throughout her career:

I think what I learned from the beginning is how to build a character. You had given us a simple [exercise]: "You are a praying mantis, now what are you going to do with this praying mantis? Build a story with it, use this...." Just, I think building from the beginning, like how to build a character, you know, how to write a synopsis. Like, I mean I remember I used to—I still do for my characters—I'd get my character. I read the play. I don't know the back story, so I need to write out the back story.... I need to know where my character's coming from. I mean that all started from Introduction to Acting. I don't know if I would have really known those things to build a character and how to take beats and how to take moments....

Annie's sense of self is very closely related to her sense of herself as an actor. The sense of self and of a purpose for her life began with her study of acting in high school. Those early lessons

stay with her.

She remembered an exercise I did with actors where they would imagine they were looking into a full length mirror. I would encourage actors to see reflected in that mirror the character they were portraying. She remembered that eventually I would have them pull the characters to them out of the mirror. “And then we become the character. And you wouldn’t think, ‘Well that’s a crazy exercise.’ ... Once you feel ... that—wow!” She recalled various energy creating exercises we would do as a group. She said she took those exercises with her, and found them useful as other actors were not doing them in the places she worked. Even as she told these tales, Annie became animated and excited. She seemed to remember more and more, even how doing some student-devised work eventually made her final projects at the Academy of Dramatic Arts easier:

I did a one person show for my graduating class. And a lot of those things you don’t realize that you take from high school, like, oh, I’m thinking to myself, “I’ve never written anything before.” And I have, I’ve written. We wrote plays, I mean, we did that. You think to yourself, “Can I do a one man show?” Yeah, I’ve done it before. It’s just the fact of getting over fear.

The process of reminiscing led Annie to more and more excited discoveries of how connected various experiences in high school have been to her later successes.

Annie admitted that acting fulfilled a function in her life as a teenager. She was able to escape. Being involved in acting meant she could be someone else. Acting “brings you out of who you are at that moment and you get to be somebody totally different. I think that’s what I ... fell in love with acting about—that I didn’t have to be me.” There was “chaos” in Annie’s home life which was split between divorced parents. She literally lived with one parent one week, and another parent the next. She found personal connection and stability in theatre: “We were there for each other because everybody else had crazy things going on in their lives too.”

Annie responded well to the structure of rehearsals and schedules because of the chaos of

her home life. She recalled, “It was all laid out for us. It was very professional, almost like. It was professional.... It just felt organized. It wasn’t ‘What are we going to do today?’ kind of like, panic! ... I always knew what I was supposed to be doing.” To be able to plan for what was coming, and to rely on the consistency of the expectations was very important to Annie. The organization allowed her the freedom to express herself. It also prepared her for the rigors of managing her own career.

When Annie said that the performing arts at Cavanaugh High School “made me the person I am today” she meant this quite literally. The realities and disappointments she faced during her ten years of working as an actor in Hollywood she attributes more to the system of cronyism there, and not to her relative worth or talent. There is nothing about her attitude that leads me to believe that she thinks she failed because she did not become a star. Her self-identity as an actor is completely intact, even as she relishes in her new role as mother.

All of the participants talked about how being involved in theatre productions in high school helped them to develop as individuals; they all felt as if they grew as a result of the experiences they had. Liz, Dallas, Jeremy, and Annie expanded upon the topic. Dallas appreciated the freedom to explore inherent in rehearsals and in class. Jeremy had to overcome familial and cultural pressures to feel comfortable in the drama department, a place that eventually allowed him to feel safe and at home. Liz became so connected to the theatre department, she thought about becoming a theatre teacher herself. For Annie, acting became her passion and her drive. High school theatre had a dramatic impact on her life.

### ***Emotional Development (Woods)***

*“Having that discipline or control over your emotions...” - Dallas*

*“It was really good because you got to be somebody else.” - Jeremy*

For Woods, emotional development through an artistic endeavor is closely tied to self-expression (111), and therefore also to personal development. He emphasizes the emotional development that comes from being involved in a story on stage wherein students have to cope with the fictional feelings of the character they are playing, summoning them up so that they seem real. The play and the roles offer opportunities for exploration, but also constraints and very clear boundaries (113). Research in adolescent development shows a strong correlation between feelings of competence at doing an activity and the emotional boost to self-confidence such aptitude engenders in its participants. For example, an informant in one study (Fredricks et al 2002) reported about her participation in drama: “I loved it so much, and I think at that point it was just an escape for my life because my life is difficult, just the teasing I got, and I wasn’t secure with myself. And being someone else was very wonderful and just the fact that I could do it well” (78). Note how important the “escape for my life” and “being someone else” was to this student, details overlooked by the original researchers. Each of the former student actors in the present study related to these aspects of performance—escaping day to day realities and the importance of role playing. They all talked about playing roles and their identification with roles they played. Liz and Dallas talked about how playing roles in high school plays prepared them for role-playing in other aspects of their lives. Tim, Rosie, Annie, and Jeremy discussed how playing a role was part of what attracted them to being involved in theatre. It gave them an opportunity to escape their everyday life.

Although Liz planned to make working in a bank’s customer service center her career, there were aspects of it she did not like. The bank provided scripts and rehearsal opportunities for its phone bank employees. Sometimes Liz found this annoying. “It really was almost another role and I used to call on that sometimes. I’m like, I’ve done this before.... So, yeah, it’s really kind of funny that drama class really helped me do a job I really disliked having to do because I

could just pass it off as ‘this isn’t me, this is my role.’” She summarized this feeling as follows:

That would be the biggest thing, is like the whole playing a role. It’s not just always on stage. A lot of times you have to play a role in real life and it- it helps when you have a little bit, you know, routine and experience and exercises to draw from to, you know, to get into character so to speak. Sometimes I feel just like I play different characters throughout my life.

Liz was figuring out this concept as she spoke. She articulated this as a thought she may have had privately for some time, but it was the first time she had really put it together and said it out loud. She had developed a sophisticated understanding of the different roles she played in life, and related the ability to negotiate those roles to skills and experiences she had in high school theatre.

Dallas shared a sentiment similar to Liz’s. He prefaced it by thinking that the idea was “shallow.” I took that to mean that he thought the idea was almost too obvious to mention. He went on to say, “I think that ... practicing—pretending to be other people, you know, acting, I think has served me well socially.” He continued, “I can put on my ‘happy face’ and pretend to like people that I really despise and can’t stand.” He related the ability to role-play and knowing how to behave appropriately in different social situations as “having that discipline or that control over your emotions... and to be able to pull them out when you need them—whichever one is appropriate for the situation—is, I think, a skill ... that I developed in drama, that I still use today.” Dallas’ ability to exert situational control over his emotions is exactly the kind of emotional control the studies by Woods (1993), and Larson and Brown (2007) would predict can happen for young adults involved in a structured activity such as high school theatre. But for Dallas this was not a personal response that he attributed to a particular production, but rather a summation of how being involved in acting transferred into a practical emotional and social skill that he uses frequently.

Jeremy, Tim, Rosie, and Annie look to their experiences in high school plays as times

when they were able to escape their everyday lives, but in doing so they also found the freedom to explore people, situations, and emotions. They intimate that they were somewhat aware of what they were doing at the time. But the escape they said they desired was not necessarily into something exotic. The situations of the characters in the plays in which they performed often included ones that they said they learned from. The former student actors suggested that the characters they played helped them to develop their personalities, physical selves, and emotional well-being.

Annie remembered a particular ritual of the drama department at Cavanaugh. During the school day before the opening night performance, students would wear their costumes all day during their classes as a sort of advertisement for the show. We would also have students go around to homeroom classes and advertise the shows in costume. Annie really enjoyed these dress up opportunities. When she was a freshman she played Peter in *Peter and the Wolf*, a pantomime performance we produced with a music department concert. Annie had developed very quickly a real enthusiasm for the department. Enthusiasm and pride, two of the qualities she loved to express:

I mean I always had everybody come. I was proud of what we did and I wanted to tell everybody. “Come see it, come on!” ... Wow, you know what else I remember? I remember we did *Peter and the Wolf*! And I remember I dressed up like Peter that whole day and I had those god awful overalls, those bright colored overalls, and they’re like, “You’re gonna wear that all day?” I don’t even care, “Come see it!” Oh that was, that was a fun...we didn’t have any words or anything. I remember there was one little mishap...[Sebastian played my grandfather.] And he had this metal stick. And he would bam it, bam it, bam it. And there was this one little metal outlet on the stage. Do you remember? And he bammed into it and like sparks went flying. That was pretty funny. I mean you have to go with it—you’re like, “Hey!”

This particular memory sequence is representative of how the participants discovered and shared their reminiscences. Memories tumbled out, one on top of another. As Annie talked about her enthusiasm for the productions, she recalled a specific performance wherein she acted as a proud

ambassador to the school. She thoroughly enjoyed dressing up and did not mind that others thought she was a little odd. And then she tacked on to it another memory of a small mishap that occurred during the performance of the piece. Annie's identification with the role she was playing, that of Peter, led her to step outside conventional behavior. She was proud of being a maverick, and she was also proud of the improvisational nature of what she and other student actors could accomplish. Sometimes you just "have to go with it."

Jeremy articulated a desire to escape into what he called the "fantasy" of theatre. This concept for Jeremy was a recurring theme throughout his interview. Much like Annie, playing roles on stage allowed him to escape. He said, "I just needed the break away, the release, the fantasy of it." But unlike Annie, Jeremy was very explicit as to how his identification with a role aided him in emotional maturation. Jeremy had very personal connections to two of the characters he played at Cavanaugh. The connections to these two roles cropped up again and again throughout the two hour interview. Of all the participants, he was the most expansive about his connections to roles he played.

In general, Jeremy loved the escape that was possible through playing characters: "It was nice to be not me. It was really nice to just break away." He appreciated that the characters were scripted. There was "something in front of you—you have someone else's life that is totally scripted. You get the parameters of their life." When he played Albert Peterson in *Bye Bye Birdie*, it was his first role. He marveled at it: "First time I'd ever experienced anything like that before in my entire life... and there's a reason why I can remember the whole cast. Because that part was the best thing in the entire world for me—was: Here's a script. Read it. Do it!" The logic of acting with a script was so enjoyable for Jeremy. He related to Albert Peterson having a domineering mother, and as he talked, Jeremy pointed to a picture of his actual mother on the wall and laughed. He recounted a moment during a rehearsal in *Bye Bye Birdie* when he really



felt connected to the whole enterprise of acting in a play:

[Albert Peterson]'s sitting in the office. I'm supposed to be ... I'm supposed to have a headache ... I have an overbearing mother, this girl just wants to get married and have like a simple life, and I'm sitting there torn between two worlds and it makes sense. That character in that respect ... made sense ... because I understood what it was like to be torn between two things, and how come I can't be happy? How come I really can't be happy? That role, as far as representing, I mean, the different facets, the different things that were going on in my life.... There's the overbearing mother, the outside of school life, where there was so much constantly ripping at you ... and it was nice when I started reading through that script. I'm like, "This poor guy.... I connect with this guy." That's how I knew it was right. I was like, "This is cool."

Woods (1993) argues that the importance of the arts in educational settings is largely due to the development of our emotional life, and the ability to make sense out of the conflicting emotions we feel on an everyday basis (111). Woods suggests that coming to terms with a role can help students come to terms with aspects of their personal life (113). Jeremy believed that playing Albert Peterson, a man caught between various forces in his life, had lessons for him. It is significant in the above story that Jeremy switched from an objective telling of the story of the scene using the third person, to a subjective telling of the story, using the first person. Quite suddenly, Jeremy was back inside the story of the play, reliving it through the subjective "I".

Evoking Dorothy Heathcote, James Catterall (2002) writes, "Dramatic conventions offer a safe harbor for trying out the situations of life; for experimenting with expression and communication; and for deepening human understanding developments" (58). He points out that Dorothy Heathcote, and others who advocate for process drama and creative dramatics, argue that these improvisational theatre techniques are rehearsals for life. Jeremy strongly testifies to the power of scripted drama to do the same.

Jeremy related even more strongly to Cornelius Hackle in *Hello, Dolly!*. The emotional highlight of the play and of the role was singing "It Only Takes a Moment," a song that expressed eloquently how quickly one can fall in love. Jeremy remembered that the music

director, Mrs. K., warned him that he might cry when singing it on stage. Jeremy initially scoffed at the idea: “Please, I don’t cry.” Jeremy recalled that Cornelius Hackle is “wishing on a star that love is just gonna happen.” And eventually, Jeremy understood “it’s ok for a guy to wish for that kind of thing.” He was grateful that his friend Caitlin was the woman he got to be in love with on stage, because in performance, the reality of the emotional release really hit him:

This one though ... it forced me to be emotional which—vulnerability. It forced me to be vulnerable for that entire period, for that entire three runs, and however long it was and then just when I got comfortable with the emotion it was now I gotta do it in front of people ‘cause even rehearsals got hard to where, you know, you go and sing the last song and everyone’s joking around until opening night and Caitlin says, “Come on let’s go. We gotta do this. Practice, don’t cry. Practice, don’t cry. Got it? Practice, don’t cry.” We’re doing dinners before hand and all this other stuff: “practice, don’t cry, practice don’t cry.” No problem and we when get out there and we had like our little signals of—“If you start to cry squeeze my hand, ‘cause I will squeeze it right back and we’ll both have broken fingers and everything will be good.” And then it hit, that this wasn’t so much the good-bye, ‘cause I hated—not saying goodbye to the class, or the school—I hated saying good-bye to that character in particular. ‘Cause that one I wanted to know, ok, now what happens? ‘Cause it can’t just be happily ever after kind of thing. And it was ok for me to be emotional with that one because it was a grown—it was the most grown role you ever gave me.

Caitlin and Jeremy understood that they could not let the emotions the characters were feeling overwhelm them too much, or the scene on stage would stop. They developed a way to allow them to get through the scene, by clutching at each other and squeezing hands. The two performers practiced “not crying” while acknowledging that they were likely to do so anyway. Jeremy’s memory of this performance is also intertwined with his memories of being a senior about to do his last role, often an intensely emotional experience for student actors. He turns that emotional cliché on its head, saying that it was not saying good-bye to the school, his graduating class, or the cast that upset him, but bidding farewell to the character in whom he had discovered so much about himself.

Jeremy continued, “Would I be myself back then? No, I would not relive that, the real

me... I would not do it. Would I dive into each one of the characters I portrayed? Yes I would, to find out more about them. ‘Cause they were interesting—they were interesting people. And these were people that someone made up, was exactly like me.” Jeremy believes that he grew towards emotional maturity through the roles he played in high school theatre. Albert Peterson and Cornelius Hackle taught him about aspects of himself, and he let himself feel safe enough to explore the feelings each character had, feelings he realized that he wanted to understand not just as an actor, but as a person.

Tim had a vivid memory of putting together the role of Oberon in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He remembered, “Oberon would be the role I invested myself in the most. I mean that show was a huge investment. Getting a seventeen year to memorize that much Shakespeare.” He was conscious of how much like himself his earlier roles were:

Yeah, some I mean physically I think I played all of my roles, physically, just like Tim, except for Oberon. I tried to find a different physicality for Oberon which was like a new thing for me. ‘Cause yeah Peter was just Tim with a hat on. I think that maybe I tried to be a little more suave for Teen Angel. You kind of have to be, you can’t be a mumbling little grunge kid for that.

But Oberon—it was the physicalization of Oberon that provided Tim with the biggest challenge.

I mean I tried my hardest with Oberon. You know, because I was still, kind of hunchbacked, slouchy, you know, what’s the term? Just slouchy, you know? And I remember you trying to give me some directions like ... “You’re a king, so you keep your chin up high, keep your back straight.” I remember trying to do that, like catching myself slouching all the time. I’d be like driving in my car or something like and I remember, oh ok (straightens up) ‘cause I always had my rear view mirror set to a certain height, and I was like, so I need to—I get my back straight if I actually adjust my mirror to the height where my back is straightened; if I slouch I’ll be able to see that. “Oh I can’t see out my back,” so I need to straighten my back, so yeah. So, what a little, what a little method. Trying to remind myself.

For Tim, Oberon presented a unique challenge that fascinated him. Like Jeremy and Caitlin, he developed a ritual to help him develop the character. In this instance, the ritual—the placement of his rear view mirror—was a physical one designed to remind him to change his body. He had

developed a “little method” that constantly reminded him to be different, to find a way into his character through his body.

Without hesitation, Rosie commented that she was able to immerse herself within the worlds of the different plays “every time,” especially the musicals. She looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and went on to explain, “I think the world should be a musical, oh come on now.” She loved the ability to become lost in a role:

It was great, it was freeing. I hated—I hated, you know, a lot of things about school. I didn’t really like studying. I didn’t really like school. Getting to escape myself and put myself in someone else’s shoes and have a different outcome and being able to control that outcome and not have to think about my own world problems. It was really a nice change. What would this person do? What would happen here? Anything on the big stage I felt that way about. I felt really at home there.

Rosie shared with Jeremy and Annie the desire as a teenager to escape from her day-to-day world, an escape she found through being in school productions. Like Annie and Jeremy she also shared a self-conscious and accepting attitude about this. They are not the least bit embarrassed or worried about this. All of these participants have a thoroughly grounded sense of self. I suppose I noticed this because of the embarrassment I experienced when conducting the heuristic inquiry—I was reluctant to admit that I loved being in school plays because it allowed me an opportunity to escape my day-to-day realities.

James Catterall (2002) suggests that “any learning that results from the interpersonal and intra-personal qualities of assuming characters and interacting to perform narrative scenes” would be an important and untapped area of research in the effects of theatre education (61). He further believes, somewhat intuitively, that “learning about characters with world views, beliefs, and assumptions different from one's own would be expected to lead to skills or traits valuable generally such as increased empathy and understanding of others' views- a student's personal character affected by studying dramatic characters” (61). Because of the intensely personal

relationships that the former student actors had with the characters they played, the participants seem to suggest that the development of their personalities and identities was influenced in many subtle ways by their encounters with these characters.

### ***Emotional Development (Larson and Brown)***

*“I remember thinking I was going to screw it up.” - Rosie*

Emotional development is a complex topic. For Larson and Brown (2007) it is about developing the capacity for emotional maturity. They point out that the emotional development of adolescents in real world situations, as opposed to in clinical settings, has largely been a matter of conjecture (1083). One of the stated reasons for their study was to research emotional development in an actual setting that teenagers might find themselves in. Larson and Brown found that a structured setting such as the production of school play aided teenagers in an active development process—“they learned from the affectively charged experiences that were frequent in the setting: from exhilaration, anger, anxiety, and disappointment and observing how these emotions unfolded under different contingencies” (1095). The jostling of peer against peer, and peer against teachers and other adults in the production of a play, gave students an authentic testing ground to observe how others reacted and behaved. Play production also provided an opportunity to test a wide variety of individual strategies for coping.

I expand upon this topic because it is one of the areas of research that is underdeveloped. I believe that some of the experiences the former student actors describe in the following section are why progressive theatre educators imply that there are issues worth addressing with the traditional competitive casting model used in school productions (Smith 1988, Gonzalez 2006, Lazarus 2012). Theatre educators get around this sometimes by double and even triple casting a role, giving more students a chance to be challenged by a larger role. The limited amount of

research available such as Barnett's (2006) study of the effects of cheerleading tryouts on students suggests that the results of competitive auditions can be far more devastating than educators may have realized. However much adults who structure these kinds of activities may wish to ameliorate the potential negative effects of competition and jealousy, I am not certain that they can be. It is one of the great dilemmas in education—does competition spur innovation and improvement, or does it lead to giving up and feelings of failure? Can inclusion and competition co-exist?

The question is difficult because participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is voluntary. Research into participation in these activities, which include athletics as well as the arts, shows a high correlation with desirable social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Holland and André 1987). Holland and André (1987) point out that because students self-select into and out of these activities, it is difficult to know for certain if participation in the activity causes the desirable outcomes, or if students who participate already come in with the dispositions that become these desirable outcomes (447). Students should be aware of the competitive nature of certain activities when they decide to participate, such as auditions for school plays. However, as some of the following stories demonstrate, knowing that you might not get the role you desire is not quite the same thing as the experience of the failure to do so. The following stories reveal that these students experienced a complicated set of emotions when confronted with the reality of working closely with their peers—sometimes cooperating together, and sometimes competing against each other. Of course theatre educators would like to believe that the communal spirit of putting on a good show eventually heals everyone's wounded pride, and I am sure that for most participants, this is probably true. But for the highly involved, such as the former student actors in this study, there may perhaps be more on the line when they participate. Because they care so much about the endeavor their feelings about it are strong, even

after the passage of time.

### **Teen Drama: The Angst of Youth**

Some of the students shared stories about times when their emotions seemed to get in the way of what they wanted to do. Tim told a story about acting childish, and Rosie shared a story about being extremely nervous.

Tim is still visibly embarrassed by what he termed his “quirky ways” of dealing with his emotions as a teenager. He was dating another drama student for a time during the rehearsals and performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1994. He recalled vividly one memorable rehearsal and was shocked when I could not quite remember it:

One time when, you know, Emily and I had been fighting or something like that, I went catatonic for a rehearsal. Do you remember that one? You were scared out of your mind! I can’t believe you can’t remember that. I was completely unresponsive. And that was rehearsing for, that had to be rehearsing *Midsummer*. Yeah, so, we’d been fighting and I was just lying unresponsive in the lobby until it was my time to rehearse, and I just went up delivered my lines and just went back to being catatonic. Yeah, high school—high school drama. And I was a weird kid. So, I had my weird ways of acting out, you know? I didn’t storm out. I just kind of introverted to the “nth” degree.

Larson and Brown (2007) found that adolescents often demonstrated emotional maturity by acknowledging their part in an emotional episode—essentially claiming their own agency (1094). Tim admitted, “I was being childish, you know, kind of punishing the show for something that the show was not involved at all.” Today, Tim’s memory of this set of circumstances is particularly painful to him.

I am reminded of my outburst at my drama teacher, Ruben, during a rehearsal of *L’il Abner* that I described in chapter 3. I remember being aware that I was somehow stepping outside my usual role as willing student, and into some other unfamiliar emotional place wherein I lashed out because of personal frustration. I remember the event because even as I was going

through it, I knew it was somewhat out of character for me. For Tim and myself, these unusual behaviors stand out for us, even apart from the usual angst of adolescence, perhaps because they were so public and they happened in venues about which we cared very deeply. We were testing the boundaries of what was acceptable behavior, and perhaps somewhat chagrined that we could be rattled enough to have a break down in front of others.

Rosie remembered that she had a nightmare the evening before her first performance at Cavanaugh that she associated with a favorite line from the play:

Oh yeah, my favorite line, which the night before, ‘cause you know it was with Sebastian and I was really intimidated by him ‘cause everybody thought he was the hottest thing, and I was like, “Whatever, ok fine!” ... He was like so tall and lanky and the—one of the lines that we had before the whole *Hello, Dolly!* restaurant scene was, um, “I don’t want to be on stage, I just want to get married!” And the whole night before opening I kept dreaming, “I don’t want to be married, I just want to be on stage. I don’t want to get married, I just want to be on stage.” And, like that dream, I remember that very vividly. I remember thinking I was going to screw it up.

Rosie was one of the few participants who shared a story about being nervous, although Tim and Liz both mentioned the burden of memorizing lines for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Dallas discussed stage fright saying, “That initial fear of being on stage—eventually I just learned to deal with it.” In contrast, Larson and Brown found ample evidence of stage fright among their research subjects: “anxiety mounted as the performances approached and was reported most often in the hours before students went on stage” (1090). It is likely that the intervening years have taken the immediacy of stage fright away from the former student actors, anxiety having slipped away into recesses of the past. Among these participants, stage fright did not feature prominently in their memories or stories.

Jeremy was particularly attuned to the emotional issues that came with being involved with large groups of teenagers all working together towards the same goal, but sometimes getting caught up in interpersonal conflicts. Jeremy relished in recalling these moments. Among the



most powerful for him were all the moments of backstage bickering during *Hello, Dolly!* a production we have already seen was very important to him. He shook his head as he remembered and said, “All the girls, there was so much drama! I mean it was—the cast was real seedy too, to each other. Horrible! Oh, my God: *Days of our Lives, Days of Our Lives!* Horrible! People talking about people.” As he went on, the memories fairly tripped over each other as he laid them out—a litany of small things that had gone wrong as we were preparing to bring the musical to performance:

[A student] crawled across where the light switches were. Back over there by the back wall. Over there. He crawled through, like one of the holes, like one of the little window things and screwed up one of the light things. And we had just finally got it right. He messed something up, broke, like I don’t know, did something. And I lost it, ‘cause that was, that was a horrible week. [Another student] had fallen, [he] fell off a ladder, almost ripped his finger off. Let me see, we couldn’t get the tables. We were all trying to make these tables. Some tables too big, some tables too small. And I’m like, “Really? It’s just a table!” Someone spilling something all over fabric. ‘Cause I had to make petticoats and they just, someone spilled, some kind of Kool-aid all over it. Horrible, oh horrible!

The list is revealing in its specificity; Jeremy remembers all of these little incidents. But they pale in comparison to some backstage mischief during a performance. He prefaced this memory with the following observation on human behavior: “Catfights! They go on. High school kids can be vicious towards each other. And girls! Girls can be more physically vicious; boys can gossip way worse than women. That’s where I learned that from is—from your drama class. Boys can be—boys can be way worse!”

Jeremy recalled that his friend Caitlin had somehow angered a fellow cast member, Molly. He said, “Molly with Caitlin, there was this whole thing with hanging out, who was feeling like they’re left out of whatever social situations.” Jeremy got more incensed as the memory progressed. “This is just school for you.... I mean the little bickering: ‘Oh let’s go to [the park] but you can’t come.’ I was like, ‘Why don’t we just totally go back to preschool and

kindergarten and say well, you know—you can't go to my birthday party?" He continued:

Caitlin did this thing, she did this which kills me every time we used to watch the video of *Hello Dolly!* It was "I'll Be Wearing Ribbons Down My Back This Summer." ... Oh yeah, no, Molly had to prove something. 'Cause Caitlin had this rack of hats that she had to place on this ledge. And Molly had unscrewed it so that thing would fall, the thing wouldn't sit right. And I'm still angry about that.... But Caitlin covered, 'cause she was sitting there, like, talking and she's like trying put this thing on the ledge and she just threw it on the ground and she was like, "You know what? I hate hats." And it got a big laugh. And, but, being backstage, though, seeing that person, Molly's face, turn bright purple, just red, purple because she covered so well I cannot believe it. I went up to her and said, "I cannot believe how fucking evil you are." I said, "I hope you fall into hole and someone kicks dirt over it." I just—that threw me, that threw me for a loop. I'm like this is a high school play! Really? It's that important to you?

I was perplexed by the vehemence of Jeremy's emotional reaction, especially as these events were so long in the past. I was more perplexed by combining these memories of back stage bickering and rivalries with Jeremy's overall statement of how much he loved the performance of this play, *Hello, Dolly!*, and his character Cornelius Hackle. So I asked him about it: "At the end, when we're gathered in the circle and everybody's there. I mean how do you put those two things together in your mind? This sort of tension between the feeling good part of it and the part that's sort of the irritating part of it?" Jeremy paused. Then he said:

Because you couldn't do it without the other person.... The thing that I guess is the saving grace is that eventually those people apologize. Because as time passes when the curtain closes you're not the only one who feels it. When it's the last night and everyone's going through three shows.... And that last night everyone has it and then the apologies come and then you hug your worst enemy.

Jeremy was surprised by the question, a little shocked by the disjunction in his own remembering. He then brought together disparate parts of his emotional and social experience of being in a production to find a suitable answer. He clearly felt very strong emotions at the time, and in recounting the experience of both the backstage shenanigans and the heartfelt warmth of the closing moments of the production, suddenly found himself feeling them again. Jeremy's summation speaks to the complex intricacies of both the experience as it happened and in

recalling it years later. The emotions of the former student actors were a complicated mix of immediacy and distance, of present-ness and past-ness, of being here and now, and there and then. So, for Jeremy, all of the competing feelings about this experience are true at once—he can feel the “horrible” aggravation of petty jealousies and the exhilaration among the cast of adolescents celebrating their success after the last show of a particular play. The solution to his own dilemma is clear: when the curtain closes, and the production is over, forgiveness for the extreme feelings of the moment accompanies a general feeling of a job well done. It is good, according to Jeremy, to “hug your worst enemy” and may be an essential component as to why he is so fond of the memory.

### **Auditions and Casting**

*“If I had gotten the chorus part, I’d still be here every day. I’d still be giving it my all.” - Liz*

Larson and Brown (2007) suggest that adolescents in such a structured learning environment come to understand the emotional ups and downs associated with putting together a large complex endeavor such as a play as normal. They state that teenagers come “to see that these different types of emotional episodes” as “a predictable part of the work of creating a successful production” (1091). One of the predictable parts of being involved in a school production is the emotional tension caused by auditions and casting. Larson and Brown imply that once a few weeks have passed, the excitement and disappointment associated with casting have been subsumed into the communal spirit of the ensemble (1089). This present study suggests that student actors can certainly find ways to get on board and ameliorate their disappointment if they did not get a role they desired. However, they do not forget these experiences of rivalry, jealousy, and disappointment. Auditions and casting are among the most stressful issues mentioned by the former student actors. Although it is difficult to speculate much

more beyond just noting this among this small sample, the female participants had more to say about this particular issue than the male participants.

Liz still remembers her first audition and the disappointment she felt when she was cast in *Night Watch* in 1993:

I don't remember the monologue I auditioned with ... I don't know which one I did for that but I remember I knew I wasn't going to get the lead role, 'cause this is like, you know, this is my first play and all this, but I was hoping for something ... I think I was hoping for ah, Helga [the maid]. I think I wanted Helga. And I think at the time when I looked at the cast list I saw that I was Vanelli [the police officer], and I was ok with that. And I saw that I was only one of two roles that was split because, and, and I wasn't- you put the reason when you posted the cast list: two roles split because more people auditioned than you had parts.... I recall feeling down. Not, not anything about your choices but about myself as like, "Man, I must suck worse than I thought," because ... if there's more people than there are roles and there's two roles that are split it's like we're the cast offs that you didn't know where to put us so we'll just stick them ... that's- that's what I thought: "Man I'm in the bottom four of everybody that auditioned." How good they are? I didn't really consider it as fitting to particular parts necessarily it was just like: I must be one of the worst four that auditioned so I was really kind of self-conscious about it ... for quite awhile about it. But then- then things got better with the spring play and I got exactly the role I wanted so from there, I recall thinking maybe, like, "Man, maybe I shouldn't be doing this theatre thing after all 'cause apparently I'm not real good at it."

Liz's first experience with auditions and casting is a vivid memory for her, despite her successes later on. Despite anything I might have said about trying to include as many people as possible, the fact that she had to share a part, and one of the smallest parts in the play, led her to question her talents. She viewed this not as an attempt on my part to be inclusive, but as a reflection on her ability. The disappointment still smarts.

This speaks to a phenomenon I noticed frequently while conducting the interviews. Processing emotions when they occurred in the past appears to be sequential. For example, a student has a feeling about casting and then may feel slighted, angry, or mystified by why he or she did not do better. Then the student may harbor resentments, even for a long time. Larson and Brown (2007) suggest that the communal spirit of a well-managed activity will eventually help

students get past their feelings of disappointment as they channel their energies into becoming a part of the whole group (1089). However, there is some research that refutes this finding. Barnett (2006) suggests at the end of her study of the effects of cheerleading tryouts on those who are admitted and those who are not, that “the devastation that can be wrought from unsuccessfully competing for such opportunities might well be more strongly negative than the positives of winning entry” (537). When the former student actors recounted the events and feelings of the past, they re-experienced the feelings they had, but not necessarily in a sequential manner, allowing the devastation of unsuccessful audition attempts to sometimes overwhelm them, even as they remembered the positive aspects of the final performances. Liz’s second story about casting attests to the more devastating aspects of the audition process.

Liz recalled that she and her friend Becky were both interested in playing the domineering mother, Mae Peterson, in *Bye Bye Birdie*. Liz was particularly interested because she had helped direct the fall play that year, and so had not had a chance to be on stage since *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the year before. She also wanted to play the funny domineering mother. Liz recalled, “I’ve never been leading lady type material. You know, I’m short and stocky, you know? I’m sarcastic, I’m, you know, I don’t do those, you know, leading lady type things. So, I really wanted that part! I wanted to be the loud obnoxious mama. So did Becky.”

This was the first year that Mrs. K. and I taught together and produced a spring musical out of a class during the school day rather than as an after school activity. Liz remembered that I had warned some of the drama students during the Fall Advanced Drama class, right before auditions for the musical, to expect the process of auditions to be somewhat different than before: “I remember you telling the class that there were so many people that a lot of us were going to get chorus parts and you had us all repeat as a class ‘I will be fine with a chorus part, I will be fine with a chorus part.’ Yes, you made us chant that.” Liz went on to describe Becky’s

response to my somewhat light-hearted attempt to prepare students for stiff competition for roles: “And Becky is sitting next to me going ‘I will *not* be fine with a chorus part, I will *not* be fine with a chorus part.’ She had this attitude—she was like, ‘There’s no way he’d put me in a chorus part; I starred in the Fall play!’”

It was clear that Liz began to relive some of the frustration she had with Becky as she told the story. It is an old wound, but one that Liz still feels. She tried to reason with Becky as auditions approached, saying Becky “walked around like she was- she was- she was hot shit ‘cause, you know, she had the starring role and so there was no way you would even consider giving her a chorus part because she was *the* star. You needed her. And I was just like, ‘Becky, they have so many good people either one of us could be in the chorus, we could both be in the chorus.’”

When I cast Liz in the role both of them had wanted, Liz remembered feeling slighted by her best friend, who did not, at the very least, express some happiness at Liz’s success:

I wasn’t really sympathetic to her anger and not just because I got the role but because she was really being ungracious about it, you know? And like she deserved it more than other people because of what’s she’s done in the past and this—and I’m just like, you know, and I’m thinking to myself, “You know, I-I worked with you! I directed you last semester and...” You know, thinking all of this to myself and I’m like, “You’ve—you’ve got an ego that won’t quit!” And part of me was like, “Ha, ha ha! You know, that’s maybe kind of what you get when you have a big mouth and tell everybody that there’s no way because you’re too important” and it’s like nobody else acted like that.

According to Liz, their relationship quickly began to sour after that. Becky started not including Liz in their usual late night jaunts. Liz also believed that Becky got involved in other self-destructive behaviors around this time, and she was incensed whenever Liz would criticize her. Liz is somewhat circumspect about the results. Whatever was going on with Becky ultimately had little to do with getting cast in the musical. Nonetheless, Liz summarized, “We were super close and it still- and it still really hurts to see that it went that way. But honestly it-it started with

her getting a chorus part and being bitter about and just deciding to ‘If I can’t have the part I want, I’m going to self-destruct and take it out on my friend.’” Liz’s story is in contradiction to Larson and Brown’s (2007) findings. Not every student responds the same way to a competitive environment. Some students do not really recover from the shock of disappointment, or from the reality of not getting something they have convinced themselves they deserve.

When my best friend and I tried out to be yell leaders when I was in high school (we called male cheerleaders, yell leaders) Doug was selected and I was not. As I wrote in chapter 3, it was something of a humiliating experience for me. I remember that we had conversations about it at the time. When I got the lead in the musical the following year and he got a chorus part, we had to have a similar conversation but with the roles reversed. Negotiating these experiences in high school perhaps prepared us for a lifetime of such negotiations.

When remembering these events, the participants seemed to be taking their original sequential emotions and feeling them in a very different way. They seemed to be no longer sequential, that is to say, they felt a particular emotion which gave way to this other particular emotion. The emotions the former student actors were recounting seemed rather simultaneous, as if they were stacked on top of each other or even more complex, intermingled with each other. They could feel the disappointment, resentment, and jealousy while at the same time remembering that the experience of the whole project was a positive one. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) offer a potential explanation for this phenomenon. When people are involved in interview situations they are “both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others” (4). The participants are “at once engaged in living, telling, retelling and reliving stories” (4). The simultaneity of feelings, both recalled and re-experienced, are an integral part of reminiscing and they are part of what remains after an experience. Feelings that we might normally associate as

unpleasant ones remain along with the positives.

Like Liz, Rosie and Annie both remembered their first casting experiences at Cavanaugh. And like Liz, they have lots of strong emotions attached to these memories. When they were both freshman in 1997 they auditioned for *Hello, Dolly!* Annie was certain that as a freshman she would not get cast in a major role. She said, “I was sad because I didn’t get a name part.... I mean I knew I wasn’t going to get the main ... part ... I was a freshman. But then a freshman got a main part. I was like, ‘I don’t know about this.’” The freshman who got a main part was Rosie.

Annie goes on to explain to me how she dealt with the disappointment: “And then you asked me ‘How about you join the waiters?’ Man we ruled those waiter scenes.... That was so fun. We had a blast. And I was just, I don’t know, changed my whole mind. I mean I didn’t even care about that little part because ... the waiters, I think, stole most of that show.” In Annie’s case she was able to adjust to the reality of getting a part other than the one she desired. Larson and Brown (2007) suggest that “positive emotions occur when people make progress toward desired goals” (1090). Annie replaced her goal of a “name part” with making the part she got as memorable as possible. She ended up giving the waiters, who have a lot of complicated choreography in Act Two of *Hello, Dolly!*, all of her energy. I recall that after I realized what a skilled dancer she was, I made her dance captain of the waiters. She whipped them into shape.

Rosie, however, had to cope with the pressure of being a freshman with a role, even the somewhat minor role of Ermengarde Vandergelder. To top off the pressure for Rosie, her mother became very involved in helping out. Rosie had to deal with rumors that she got the role because of her mother’s influence. She recalled that she had to make a big entrance as Ermengarde: “I remember wailing as my entrance for *Hello, Dolly!* to go pick up the drum and I couldn’t pick it up from Dallas [playing her uncle, Horace] and I had to put it back down and continue crying and make him come and pick it back up!” She was pleased with the response she got from the



audience. Rosie remembers that another cast member's parent came up and told her that "until I made that entrance they didn't believe I was worthy of the part." It was a comment that stuck with her.

Backstage jealousies and the potential of meddling parents in the casting process was a constant threat at Cavanaugh. I dealt with it by making the audition process as transparent as possible. In the case of Rosie's mother, I set some very clear boundaries, ones she thankfully never crossed. I believe that this was an unresolved concern of Rosie's, as she tactfully brought it up at the end of our interview. Rosie felt that she had to prove herself even more because of her mother's presence. I told her that she earned every role and that I set good boundaries with her mother. Her mother never tried to influence me in casting decisions. She responded, "The end was all that mattered in the long run so I felt it was worth it every time!"

The following year, Rosie was a member of the chorus. "I didn't always get the center stage and I was actually a lot happier a lot of the time not getting the center because I liked playing in the ensemble. I liked being on the stage and I got to do a lot of really fun things that I wouldn't have been able to do if I was on center stage." The ability to make adjustments, as Rosie demonstrated here, is one of the hallmarks of emotional maturity (Larson and Brown 2007). She also confirmed the indomitable pragmatism I found so characteristic of Rosie's responses—she can adjust to life's realities.

As in Liz's story about her friend Becky, Rosie and Annie's relationship was fraught with challenges. Although they were different types of performers, they often found themselves competing for the same roles. Rosie was a stronger singer, and Annie was a stronger dancer. When the two were juniors, I cast them as sisters in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and a growing friendship blossomed. However, Rosie remembered that they travelled in different social groups.

I always thought we were pretty equal. I never thought anything other than that. I

loved being on stage with her and I liked when she got to take the upper role, and I liked supporting her in it, and I liked it when I got to take the upper role and she supported me in it. That was really cool, but here we were in separate cliques, like really separate cliques in our senior class. Drama was one thing that kind of pulled us together or I don't think she would have ever talked to me.

Annie remembered their rivalry as a friendly one: "Rosie always did a good job. I mean we're friends now. I think we were more rivals; we always wanted to go after the same part. But we were totally different, that was the whole thing ... I would always play the brassy character and she would play the innocent girl." Annie saw the competition as part of their desire to play the interesting leading parts and both having talents that allowed them to have parity when it came to getting cast.

Both Annie and Rosie discussed their experiences in the musical their senior year. Annie was devastated when she did not get a leading role. She had a featured dance as a minor character.

I was so bummed cause I didn't get a main role at all and I think I waited till my senior year, "I'm gonna get this main role! I'm gonna" and I didn't get it. And I got [a small role] and I called you and I was crying hysterically. I mean I was so sad. And you're like, take it and run with it. Do the best you can with it. And I just remember leaving the stage and the last thing Rosie said to me, she was so mad, "You got more applause than I did." So I was like, well, I did what I had to do. I had to, you know?

Annie learned a huge lesson from this experience. She explains:

I was just like, how am I going to go out my senior year with not a lead role? I mean I'd been working hard for so long. And there was this one guy after all the plays were over, one guy in the orchestra pit and he came up to me and he goes, "I just want to let you know I've been watching you the last four years and you out shine everyone." And I was like, "Oh wow I did this little dinky role and ..." a small role like this, a small role can play a major part. I mean, there's no small role. And I think that kinda clicked with me finally in my last—there is no small role, like, even if you're in the chorus like that makes a huge difference.

Annie was absolutely sincere as she spoke these words, even as the hurt from not getting a leading role was clearly audible in her voice and visible on her face. She had internalized a

lesson so similar to the one I experienced when I lost the DramaFest competitions. I recall the feeling of entitlement—that I had deserved to win the competition, much as Annie feels the sense of loss after working up to getting the big role her senior year. I also remember that I had to swallow my pride and adjust my thinking. Annie and I both learned how to behave in a manner more gracious than our egos really wanted us to.

Rosie was cast in the leading role. She was disappointed that Annie did not get a major role. She wanted to share the stage with her friend one last time their senior year. Rosie believed it caused a strain in their friendship.

For Rosie, Annie, and Liz, friendships were tested, sometimes to the breaking point, while being involved in the school plays at Cavanaugh. These are very real sorrows that these former student actors carry with them. But the amazing thing about being human is our resilience, even in the face of the disappointments in life. Were these necessary disappointments, ones that made the successes sweeter and later disappointments more palatable? Should theatre in schools be more democratic as Joan Lazarus (2012) and Jo Beth Gonzalez (2006) suggest in their work? Is the competition destructive or instructive? And yet emotional maturity is a lifelong process. We are not done after we walk across a stage and receive our diplomas. Shortly after my interviews with Annie and Rosie the two of them got together after nearly fifteen years. According to Rosie, it was like no time had passed.

### **Lessons Learned**

The centerpiece of Liz's interview was the story of the night she and two of her friends did not show up for one of the performances of *Night Watch*. You can read my version of this event in the introduction to chapter 5, "A Story of Drama." This is clearly a favorite anecdote of hers and has all the hallmarks of fixity that Conle (1999) says sometimes happens to cherished

memories. In the retelling and retelling, the stories we love to recount about ourselves can accrue a mythic quality about them. It is a set piece of Liz's biography. Liz relishes the story's shock value. It has got a little bit of everything in it. She smokes but her parents do not know about it. It takes place at dusk. There's a mysterious stranger shooting off a rifle. Her boyfriend decides to set toilet paper on fire in a public restroom. Liz and her friends are detained by the police and spend a long night at the offices of the local precinct where they are often humiliated by the police officers. Although they are never formally arrested for the fire in the public restroom, they spent the night in jail, and *Night Watch* was short a leading man and two crew members. The tale is unique among the participants in that the story goes on for fifteen minutes. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There are moments of suspense and real danger. At one point Liz's head is being held to the corner of a men's restroom floor by the boot of a police officer who is also pointing a loaded gun at her. In her telling of the story, she gives different voices to the characters she encountered that evening.

The story resists closure and even a real moral because Liz is who she is. The story is a triumph of teenage resistance, of adults overplaying their desire for control. Twenty years later I can share Liz's father's frustration. As Liz said, "I wasn't as contrite as I should have been with my father. He's like, 'This is serious, Liz!' ... Every once in a while I will say something about matches and he'll joke about 'What are you gonna light with those?' 'Nothing! Nothing!'" I admit that like Liz's father, I was looking for a more contrite Liz. I was looking for 'a lesson learned' from her. She did not provide the one I was expecting.

Although I will not recall the whole tale here because the actual events are only tangentially related to the topic of the school play, I feel I must honor Liz and her voice. It is a story that she connects to theatre, to me, and to her friends that she acted with in school plays. She also felt safe in telling me the whole story because she knows I forgave the transgression a

long time ago. As I said in the interview, she “made up for it in spades” later on.

Her story is also a glimpse into the disjointed, exhilarating, and yet frightening milieu of life just outside the doors of Cavanaugh High School. It was a world I was only vaguely aware of while teaching there. It is a chaotic world of working parents with a tenuous grasp of what their children were really up to. It’s a world of walks in the parks, woods, and streets at night and the sudden presence of violence both threatened and real. It is a world where adolescents are convinced that they know more and have no apparent awareness of how precarious their own lives are. As Liz summarized at the end of the interview, “I thought I was so grown up then.”

While the actual details of the story will remain just the tantalizing details mentioned above, I believe the follow up questions that I asked Liz are germane to the research topic. I titled this section *Lessons Learned* because I wanted there to have been a lesson learned. I fell prey to a fairly routine teacher fantasy—I mistook what I needed from this experience for what Liz needed from it. Britzman (2003) discusses this displacement, commenting that teachers eventually must learn to separate out their own desires, regrets, and wishes from those of their students. The goal is so that teachers can eventually see “how others learn, what learning means for them, and what one’s efforts as a teacher have to do with that” (2). Apparently separating out my own desires can sometimes be a long process. What Liz actually took away from this experience is far more interesting than a neat and tidy little lesson about showing up on time to the school play and doing due penance after making the mistake. I quote the interview transcripts almost verbatim:

PI: The question that I have is ‘cause this is the part of the story that doesn’t get told, like what happened? I mean I don’t ... what happened afterwards? Especially around the play, I mean around the play? What did I do? What did the other cast members do, what was your response?

LIZ: I recall that a lot of people were really upset and I felt really bad about that. Um. I don’t-I don’t really recall if we had any, I mean, I knew—I knew that we had disappointed the heck out of you. I felt absolutely miserable about that. It was

like, if I could have gone back and just not had that cigarette I could have gone right back home. And gone to the bathroom at home. Or if I could have ... but I couldn't wait a half hour. It was just one of those things. I'd been drinking Mountain Dew or something before it hit me and it was like, "Gotta go now." But I recall—I recall people being really disappointed and really mad. I recall that Rita wouldn't speak to any of us for some time because somebody important to her was in the audience that night and it was Brian doing it and she was, you know, opposite Jon and she was sitting there reading lines to Brian- who was reading from a script and she was really upset because she thought it reflected upon her performance and she had important people in the audience. Uh, so I remember that. So I remember that.

PI: Mm-hmm.

Liz: And I remember that Emily ended up doing Brian's part, so ... She kind of did a, you know, eh, a little mini performance for us to show us how she did the role, and, you know, how she, how she played it. But I—but I do recall that Rita was furious. And I—I recall the look of disappointment on your face when you saw us next and it was just like, I felt pretty damn crunchy and to this day, man anybody lights some little thing on fire I'm like, "Put that out, put that out, you never know when they're watching you." [Laugh.] So...

PI: What did you end up doing with that story? I mean every time you were in plays afterwards?

LIZ: I uh, like I say, it doesn't, I usually tell only parts of it, and it's...

PI: Well I recall that you used to... that you became actually, um, kind of champions for responsibility. And, and- and responsibility to the week of performance and dress rehearsals and all the stuff...that you guys became this sudden voice of "Don't! I mean it!" You know: "Have fun but be here because, I mean, everyone's counting on you." Do you remember that at all?

LIZ: I remember that a bit. And I remember that definitely more senior year than I did, you know, with the next play, with *Midsummer*. I remember that much more with senior year and especially with the one I directed. I was like "God don't none of you— don't do that to me!" But you know, I didn't consciously attribute that, really, I don't think to getting into trouble as to ... I mean I did, but it was more like, ah, if you screw up this mess could happen, not so much do this to be responsible, but more of do this so you don't end up in jail or you know...do this ... [Laughing] But by the end of senior, after doing the senior project though I remember—I remember that ... you know getting your side of things a lot better and the stress of "Oh god are they all gonna show up? Are they gonna be sober— 'cause you know it was one of those kind of high schools—are they gonna be sober? Are they gonna know their lines?"

I believe that as a teacher I really wanted Liz to have interpreted the lesson of the story the way I did. I have been telling this story myself for years, and it has become part of *my* mythology. I always ended my recounting of the story with how dedicated Liz and her friends became to the drama department at Cavanaugh. I can no longer tell the story in quite the same way. I was

irritated with Liz at first, especially when I reread the transcripts. I thought that she had rendered the story useless for me by resisting the neat and tidy moral of the story. After a closer look at the interview transcript, I realized how I had basically fed her the moral I was looking for. And she resisted. And rightly so.

I now believe that the real lesson learned is that Liz's resistance to such an ending is absolutely right. Her response is much more nuanced and complex. She feels a certain indignation about the whole experience of that night because of how she was treated by the police officers that arrested her. She apologized at the time, and she did turn that experience into a kind of warning to others, but not because of some lofty sense of responsibility to the play but with a more pragmatic response. As she said above, it was more about keeping other students from being arrested than it was about showing up on time for the production. One of the other motivations spilled out near the end of the interview:

Like I said it [drama] was the thing I looked forward to in school. After that [not showing up for performance] I realized doing that, did kind of realize, like, you know, I'm kinda fucking around here. I need to, you know, take this seriously if I enjoy this or he's never gonna cast me in anything again. I was terrified you weren't going to cast me in anything.

She had found something she had actually enjoyed doing and a group of people she actually enjoyed doing it with. Liz realized that if she was going to get cast again, she needed to demonstrate that she had learned some kind of lesson. I had a set of expectations from encouraging Liz to tell this story, and those expectations were turned on their head.

It seems to me somebody got a lesson out of this story. I am just not certain it was Liz.

### ***Social Development***

*"Everybody had something special they were doing and everyone felt proud to do what they were doing..." -Rosie*

The community spirit of the Cavanaugh Drama Department was present from the beginning. Barnett (2006) summarizes research into adolescent involvement in extracurricular activities by stating that “the daily peer interactions that typically occur within their school activity group are highly significant to teens and contribute to and underlie their definitions of personal identity and social reality” (515). The responses from the participants in this study support Barnett’s general research finding. All of the participants reported their most significant social circle was within the drama department. The participants also supported another of Barnett’s points: “Adolescents may contribute to their personal identity with the sense that they are proficient at an activity, and they come to label themselves with the values and attributes of others within that category” (515). Adolescents develop their own identity, but they do so within the context of a group of people with whom they feel a particular affinity.

Woods (1993) writes that the “group grows together, develops a group identity and culture” (7). The adolescents encourage each other, pass on the rituals to the new members, and develop a spirit of a cohesive unit striving to achieve mutual goals. The resulting *communitas* becomes a place that encourages high levels of learning, affective and cognitive (7).

Tim remembered the group of drama students as “kind of a wild bunch because there were so many different kinds of personalities involved.” But this wild bunch really came together. Tim attributed the cohesiveness of the group to the amount of time they spent together. He believed that rehearsing the plays “really did seem all encompassing at the time.” He went on to explain:

You know it was like, this is my first exposure to theatre so we spent what we thought were long hours and what we thought was a lot of energy and so I don’t know, I mean ... hanging out with people, um, during our breaks or, you know, when we were not needed for a scene necessarily, just kind of chilling in the lobby or out in the hallway.... Even though we only went to, what? 8:00 on a late night? 8:00, 9:00? It just like consumed our days. And, you know, I guess it’s easy to see why it’s so easy to become a theatre geek, you know, just, because it



consumes your entire day. Like I know if I was in to sports, if was in track, I'd feel that way about track, or some of the other clubs that Cavanaugh had.

For Tim, the socializing that happened around producing the plays really led to the communal spirit, the sense of an all-encompassing endeavor. The degree of attachment to the group came with an affectionate slang name—they became “theatre geeks.”

Liz shared Tim's belief in social cohesion, although she associated that cohesion the most with the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She said, “The cast on that one just felt really close knit and ... it seemed like there was a lot more input from all parts of the cast on different aspects...” Echoing Tim's point, Liz attributed the closeness of this cast to the amount of time they spent together. “I remember a lot of camaraderie among those of us who weren't rehearsing at the time because not everybody had to be there for all the rehearsals. I remember them being broke up, but I remember a lot of us would show up for rehearsal even if it wasn't our part, especially for *Midsummer*, but also for the others.” Liz recalled that when she became involved in the plays, she developed a social circle. The group often recruited their friends to become involved, so they added to their social circle with friends they already had.

Annie coined her own word to describe the community of performers at Cavanaugh, and by extension, actors everywhere. “You know what I love about it is that we were all like ‘mischiefs,’ you know? Actors are just ‘mischiefs.’ Get them all together and they all have their weird quirkiness but then we all can come together ... people in drama are so quirky and ‘mischiefs!’ That's how I feel.” She created a word that is a combination of ‘mischievous,’ an adjective, ‘mischief,’ which describes an activity, and a mispronunciation of the word ‘misfits.’ For Annie the word was a compliment, a description of the frenetic energy of performers, and the chaos that lurked just under the surface of every group rehearsal at Cavanaugh High School.

Rosie recalled the feelings she had about the cast of *Fiddler on the Roof*:

I can't think of anybody in that show that didn't feel like they were just the cast or an ensemble member. Everybody had something special they were doing and everyone felt proud to do what they were doing and it wasn't like some plays where you felt like there were people just idle standing in the background the entire time. Everyone was involved. Everyone wanted to make it a great performance and everyone knew they had a part to do. It was really cool. I don't think there was a single person in that who didn't have a line or a character that they portrayed. That was great. That was one of my favorites.

Although Rosie's enthusiasm is clear, she did say that she had some experiences of "people just idle standing in the background the entire time." Other participants occasionally mentioned the dilemma of the chorus actor, as I have mentioned above in the story of Becky and Liz. In Rosie's estimation, the cast of *Fiddler on the Roof* came together in a very special way, one that did not have any divisions among those in the chorus and those with larger parts. Larson and Brown (2007) discuss how some emotions are contagious and easily spread among a cast. For Rosie, the feelings of connectedness and elation spread evenly among the cast for this production, and she held the results in very high regard.

The former student actors recognized that group cohesion and unique elements of cooperation must occur to produce a school play. For many of these participants, the group of student performers at Cavanaugh formed their core social group. Whether "theatre geeks" or "mischiefs," when they came together for a common purpose, the results were special and exhilarating.

However, as evidenced by the stories in the section on emotional development, social cohesion was not always an easy achievement. If there was a "culture of caring," (Woods 1993) it was often an uneasy and inconsistent one among the student performers who could sometimes devolve into pettiness and jealousy. While the angst of adolescence was real, and interpersonal conflicts often still smarted, the participants also revealed an immense capacity for recognizing, celebrating, and praising the talents of others.

### **Awareness of Others and Leveling.**

“...It would be like the one class we’d get to take together...” -Dallas

Woods believes that critical events aid in developing social skills. Students discover the ability to appreciate the input and talent of a wide group of people (120). Although social cliques can form in any group setting, critical events often pull people together from different social groups of a school. Another feature of critical events is that they are often made up of students from different age groups, unlike most of their other schooling experiences.

Several of the participants commented upon aspects of this area of social development.

Tim speaks fondly of the diversity of the people involved:

I liked all the people and ... we were a fairly diverse school and it was really kind of a place where a lot of people kind of intermingled.... We get back to the whole weird thing about how our theatre program wasn’t treated like the outsiders that they might be at other schools. The jocks participated. [Name of student] was the big football star but he starred in our version of *Grease* but he’s an awesome guy. Everybody kind of intermingled. The intercity wrestling champion ... played an awesome role named Nick Bottom, I think, in *Midsummer*. And just all these different people that you wouldn’t really expect to be participating. [Name of student]? He was kind of a, I don’t know what he was, almost a thuggy, little inner city kid, but too much of clown to really commit to it.... It was a community.

The “jocks” were involved, the “thugs” were involved, and the theatre “geeks” were involved.

For Tim that created this “weird” community that was accepted and not shunned at Cavanaugh.

Dallas was quite emphatic about how much he liked that the plays and the production courses had students from different grades:

It seemed like the one class well—it wasn’t separated by grade so everybody from different years were in the same class which was kinda neat. ‘Cause that was like the only time you got to associate with any of the upper or junior classmen depending on where you were.... It would be like the one class we’d get to take together and would still spend time together.... Once graduation happened it was all over. It was just sad and depressing. We didn’t have drama class anymore.

Woods refers to this as “leveling” wherein “pupils of different ages, backgrounds, sexes...were all one in cooperative unity” (120). Dallas echoes what one of the students in Woods’ study says, ““One of the amazing things was that there weren’t any barriers of any sort”” (121). The mixing of grades allowed for students to be effective teachers to each other and expanded the social groups to which they belong.

Leveling also leads to increased awareness of others. The participants were effusive in this regard when asked to discuss the other students they remember. Each participant hardly hesitated to rattle off name after name of students they admired, frequently each other. These responses were often a short list of students and the roles they played, followed by a statement such as “She was really good in that role.” Occasionally a participant would go into greater detail. For example, Liz remembered a particular performer in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the student actor who played Demetrius, one of the lovers who run to the forest in the play. She said,

In particular what stood out was the part where Helena’s crawling after him about the “I’ll be your dog, I’ll be your cur”—she wouldn’t crawl and bark like you wanted her to—I remember that—you wanted her to just try it and she wouldn’t do it—But they were dating at the time and I was really impressed with how he [the actor playing Demetrius] just turned around with all this just hatred and in his face and in his voice and to know that as soon as rehearsal was over they were going to go kiss and make up and you know. And to just see him be able to turn it on and off like that. I was really impressed with the way [he] did his performance in that.

This memory is so specific, about a particular moment in performance, that it includes a section of dialogue, a short critique of the actor giving that dialogue, and a rather sophisticated understanding of how the actor separated his character from his real life, always a struggle with adolescent actors.

Jeremy had a long digression about discovering the talents of Caitlin, who would go on to become a lifelong friend, and the student he acted opposite of in *Hello, Dolly!*:

I don’t know if you remember, when we were auditioning for [*Hello, Dolly!*], she

[Caitlin] sang “Part of that World,” from *The Little Mermaid*. I had that bitch sing it four times because I was walking down the hall and she was up. Granted we didn’t really know each other, we worked on little things. Me and her mom were friends from like the get go. Still are. But heard someone singing “Part of That World,” but they sang it different. There’s the way I would sing in church ‘cause it was like yearning for—answer to all my problems ‘cause there is a great beyond... does God exist? That I would sing in church. I had never sang with this someone at school yearning before. And I heard it in that girl’s voice. And although I’d watched that cartoon a million times, I never ... I never heard the words until [Caitlin] sang that song. “I want to be where people are....” I just—It was like, I then I had to get people. I was like. “Come sing it again. I gotta go get people.” I think I came to get you. “Come and here this, you gotta here this. Shut up, bitch, and sing this song.”

Irreverent and passionate, Jeremy can still remember the moment he discovered this other student’s talents. He was so excited that he had to bring in others to share the experience.

These particular memories were often aided by the photographs I brought. More than anything else, the photographs of the productions tended to elicit a list of names and accompanying praise about their performance. These lists often went on for some time, and later in the interview, another name and another performance would pop up: “Remember so-and-so in this play? She was good.” Often times the memory just stopped there, even after being asked to elaborate. Dallas could remember one student actor had real “stage presence” and seemed unable to not “upstage everyone” because her characters were always so “active and busy.” Although the list of names that each participant would be a somewhat pointless list of pseudonyms here, they represent a very important element of the reminiscing.

### **Audience Awareness**

*“I didn’t want the applause to be hollow.” Jeremy*

In Woods’ study, the students he interviewed were incredibly aware of the audience during their performances of *Godspell*. One of the students remarked, “The reaction of the audience, I could really feel it from the start. They were really willing us on and laughing at the

small stuff and it gives you the confidence” (123). These students were interviewed fairly close to the performance experience itself and so had a very visceral response to questions about audience. Time has tempered the response of the former student actors in this study, and they rarely mentioned specific audience responses. I have included in this section a broader range of responses that include how audiences responded, who the participants thought they were doing a good job for, and how the school treated the drama department in general.

Tim was surprised by the general reception of his fellow students to the activities of the drama department:

I mean I think Cavanaugh liked our theatre program. And I think ... Cavanaugh was kind of a tough school, not like really bad, but it was kind of a mix of middle and working class folks. We always had like kind of tougher contingent in there, but it's not like the theatre geeks were tormented for being theatre geeks. After a production you might walk down the hall and say 'It's that guy, I saw you in the play! Awesome, yeah!' So yeah, I think the school liked it, you know, appreciated it.

Tim followed this remembrance up with a specific story. He and another cast member of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* found themselves at a park one night. Tim explained that his friend hung out with a rougher crowd.

But yeah, there were some of those tougher contingents and it was kind of surprising the way that you get support from them. 'Cause I remember one time hanging out with, you know, [my friend] and we went down to I think the [park] area. There was a parking lot over there that was frequented by like ...gangs or something like that and we were out there for some reason. [My friend] hung out with a harder contingent than I did. And they were all super friendly, "Oh you guys are doing the theatre at Cavanaugh, awesome man." It was like, one of these gigantic intimidating guys was totally encouraging, this sort of thing, it was like, that blew me away, that was, that was a fun time, how happy and friendly they all were. Especially when we're talking about theatre at Cavanaugh.

Tim found support in the most unlikely of places and still remembers the shock and pleasure of the encounter with a bunch of "tough kids" who thought participating in drama was "cool."

Liz recalled that she was pretty much in her own little world and that she was simply not

aware of the impact of the drama department on the school while she was in school. She recounted that only after she graduated, when she would come back to performances or to visit me, that she discovered that she had had an impact:

It was only after I came back that I realized I had an effect on people. I thought I was just an outcast, a misfit. But people paid attention to the drama department far more than I thought they did. Strangers would call me by name and tell me that they got involved in drama because of a character I played or something. It made me feel good, gave me a lot more fondness for looking back at high school. I was better liked than I thought. I wish I had capitalized on that when I was in high school!

Liz's gauge for success both with Mae Peterson in *Bye Bye Birdie* and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was audience reaction. For example, in the case of Mae, she wondered if she could get the audience to laugh. For *Midsummer*, she recalled hanging out after the performance and having total strangers come up to her and congratulate her for the performances. She recalled, "That was the first time that had happened and I knew we'd done something special."

Jeremy thrived on the responses from staff and faculty. His parents never understood his passion for performance, saying "You were not raised to chase rainbows, what's the point?" The staff and faculty became a surrogate family in the audience. Jeremy explained, "The staff—my fault—could say a million and one bad things about me until I opened my mouth to sing—until I got on stage and did something." He recalled that one of the counselors essentially told him that he was a "fuck up, but you do really good over there—She didn't say it like that but that was the gist of what she was saying and she gave me like the biggest compliment from that school. She said, 'I can tell you do it with your soul. It always sounds like you are singing from your soul.' Well, I am." Jeremy had in a sense found his ideal audience and he had something to prove to them and something to give them. "I didn't want the applause to be hollow.... There's a difference in the way people applaud. When someone is applauding for you it is in you here, but when they get out of their seat and they just—and you can't—it's like you're cheering at a game

and you love the team!” When Caitlin and Jeremy walked out for their bow in *Hello, Dolly!* they were so stunned they forgot to bow. “I totally forgot to bow ‘cause we were like, ‘Why is everyone standing up?’ And she’s like, ‘Oh, I think we did a good job,’ and then we laughed...” Jeremy’s goal was genuine heartfelt applause and since “no one cheered” them like the staff did, they became Jeremy’s target audience because they “really loved us and believed in us.”

The participants had many reasons to perform, and many people for whom to perform well. Although several mentioned friends and family, for Jeremy it was the staff, and for Dallas it was me. Dallas figured that I was the one the most interested in what they were doing up there on the stage. Tim was very clear that his father was his ideal audience member. While there is no clear pattern of responses, the audience was the primary arbiter of how well they did. I have to admit that I was a little taken back by the responses. Dallas mentioned me as an important indicator of how well they were doing, and Rosie always appreciated the feedback, but it was pretty clear from the answers to this question that the teacher definitely faded into the background as the final arbiter of public success.

### ***Aesthetic Development***

I have replaced Woods’ (1993) category of “magic” with the category of aesthetic development. I was inspired to do so based on Woods’ mention of aesthetic experience as part of his understanding of the inexplicable “magic” that students he interviews discussed. Aesthetics is a complex term that has accrued many connotative and denotative meanings. It is both “the philosophy of the beautiful in art” and “the distinctive underlying principles of a work of art or a genre”<sup>1</sup> The confusion often lies in the conflation of these two definitions, between the search for what makes art beautiful, and how an art form achieves its desired effects. Research in aesthetic

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s. v. “aesthetics,” <http://oxfordreference.com/> (accessed February 27, 2013).



development often uses the two definitions together discussing both what makes art and our experience of it so profound, and analyzing how art forms are put together. I will be using Maxine Greene's (1987) definition of aesthetic development, wherein she is concerned with encouraging a "discriminating presentness" (15) in students.

Greene's definition is complex. She acknowledges the temporal and cultural confines of any definition. "We enter traditions..." she says, "becoming members of a culture changing on many levels throughout history" (2000, 6). She continues, "We learn to make sense, all kinds of sense, but we make the culture's symbol systems our own, including those associated with the arts" (6). Aesthetic education is "an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed..." (6) Pointing students towards "what is there to be noticed" is perhaps the most effective expression of how the participants in this study expressed their mostly unconscious understanding of aesthetics. They rarely talked about what is beautiful, but more often discussed their understanding of how theatre is put together, and how those disparate elements achieved a coherent whole. Their aesthetic experiences are rooted in the pragmatic, often simply a matter of if it worked for the intended audience

The evidence of aesthetic development among the participants occurred in flashes here and there. For example, Liz shared a short reflection about the role of Titania. She explained in personal terms what she experienced while playing the role: "I go through several things, I mean, there was the, you know, being Titania, there's the—there's the anger part of it, between her and Oberon, and then there's the softer side when she falls in love with the Donkey and all that..." Liz remembered two of the major emotional arcs of the character she played, a reflection of the process she went through to create the portrayal. She also switched pronouns as she reflected on the role, changing to the personal "I." Liz remembered other aspects of putting the play together:

The first few days we all met around tables as a whole cast and we went through the play bit by bit. You helped us translate the Shakespeare so that we knew what was going on. I thought it was cool going through the play that way. After that you broke up rehearsals into like the fairies, the rustics, the nobles, rehearsed it in chunks. But we would come and watch rehearsals we weren't in anyway. Memorizing the monologue was difficult, the lines, delivering them correctly not just running through it. I had to push Puck off the stage and I had a hard time really pushing him. Finally he just said to go ahead and shove him, that he could handle it. I did, and it worked out after that every time. It was enjoyable because I loved the play. Titania was an angry and hot headed enough character –it was easy to tap into myself for that role.

Her identification with the role was strong and personal. Liz recognized the places where she and the character overlapped and shared personality traits.

Liz also had an experience that was similar to mine when I was lying dead on the stage as Harry Beaton in *Brigadoon*. Liz said that with Titania she felt these moments when she was really inside the story because it was going on around her as she slept on stage. She was not bothered by being offstage watching the action, waiting to go on, or for cues. She said “I was surrounded by the story, staying still, staying in character as to make it all look real, so it really felt like I was lost in the story.” Like me, she became aware of how she contributed to the picture on stage, how she fit into the story. But the awareness occurred because of moments of extreme stillness, when she was allowed to simply listen.

Evidence of aesthetic development among the participants was often like Liz's brief memories of the process of putting together *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They occurred as short insights about the craft of acting, of the process of creating a production, as the ability to discern excellence, often through the critique of others or through comparison.

Tim remembered his fascination with the whole process. He believed this came from his early desire to be a film director. He said “just the whole production aspect of it, the—the putting together everything, not just the acting, but the directing and the staging and the costumes and the set design and everything.... I really liked all of it.” But he remembered not doing very well

his first time out as a director, trying to put together a videotaped version of an original script he had written, and then a stage version of it. “We tried, but I’m a terrible director because I couldn’t keep my actors on focus.... That fell apart ‘cause I just couldn’t get them to dedicate to the production—an original one-act by a seventeen year old. Yeah, so one of my first experiences with having, you know, the temperamental actor experiences.” Of course Tim’s retelling of this story is tempered and filtered by his subsequent experiences in theatre and stage production, but early on, he was able to evaluate that he loved the intricacies of how the whole production came together, and has carried that fascination into his adult life.

Perhaps because of her decade long work in Hollywood, Annie seemed particularly attuned to self-evaluation. At one point she shared her evaluation of her ability to sing, connecting it to comments I made while she was in high school:

I’m not a very good singer. I mean I’m content with my singing voice, but I’m not a good singer. But I remember one time you telling me, you said, “Annie, you may not have the best voice but you have a really good brassy and character voice. And take that with you.” ‘Cause I used to think how will I ever do musicals? If this is what I want to do, how am I gonna do musicals? I mean I’m not gonna be the lead, I mean that doesn’t bug me.... The character singer I mean that’s always the one that gets the most laughs, I mean people go home and remember that character.

Annie was self-reflective. In the words of Maxine Greene (2001), she was involved in a “situation of noticing” (113), in this instance noticing her own ability. She has had ample opportunity to have confirmation about the strengths and limitations of her singing ability. But rather than wish she had a different kind of voice, she accepts the voice she has and the opportunities it could provide her in her career.

Dallas demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the rehearsal process. He articulated clearly his understanding of the manner in which the discoveries of an actor unfold and begin to affect other actors. He said, “And as far as like when we’d be working on an actual

play or a project, when we were developing characters it was mostly, I just remember it being kind of trial and error where we'd read through the lines first just try and try and get a feel for what's going on in the scene." He recognized the trial and error aspects of rehearsal as necessary elements of putting a performance together. He went on:

I don't think a lot of us understood what was going on in the scenes until we did it. Like, four or five times. And then it was like, like what you said earlier with me and Sebastian, it started clicking. It finally dawns on us like what is actually going on in the play right now. "Oh, yeah, I get it." There's always that moment for somebody new, every time we did a scene it was like, "Oh, yeah I get it!" And then, you know, we'd do it again and then somebody else would be like, "Now I get it too." And that's usually when everybody's characters started coming together cause once they understood the context of the scene then they could react to it better.

It is perhaps tempting to reduce Dallas' memories of rehearsal to a powerful argument for the inclusion of theatre into the curriculum. His understanding of the process of repetition and how the process builds upon a succession of *eureka* moments for those participating can be taken as the *sine qua non* of theatre education. I can point to Dallas' simple and eloquent expression of the rehearsal process and think, "My work here is done. He got it." But I think there is more going on here. Dallas has embedded a way of approaching a task, but also a deep understanding of craftsmanship from within. If you recall, when I introduced Liz, I shared the story of her moment of discovery around the joke of putting her head in the oven in *Bye Bye Birdie*. Apparently this moment occurred in a dress rehearsal in front of the orchestra, because that is the moment that Dallas used as an example of the above process working:

I remember, um, when you were giving directions sometimes you would try to explain to people what's going on in the scene, try to give us context. But it didn't always work so well, but sometimes it worked out really well 'cause I remember you giving Liz a really hard time with her choosing some kind of motherly role where she was frustrated ... and she went and stuck her head in the oven because she got so frustrated, and then you started laughing hysterically and that was part of the play from then on.

Dallas' ability to self-evaluate was fairly simple, he based it on audience response. He said,

“Laughs from the spectators. That was an indication we were putting on a good show. When one person did well it was infectious and spread to the whole cast. The reverse was also true. If someone was effing up, it tended to bring down the whole group. So when we got in the zone everybody got in the zone.”

Dallas learned from within through his participation, and learned by watching others. He took his growing skills in observation to other settings:

DALLAS: You know I went to some other high school productions because I had friends from middle school that went to other high schools. So like [another high school] , I went to a couple of their plays. They did *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it was one of the Shakespearean plays like that and I remember it looked like they had more money and their auditorium was way nicer than ours but I thought their plays sucked. I was like, if you want to see a real play come to Cavanaugh.

PI: What did you see as the difference?

DALLAS: I think it was the acting. You know, I think, maybe, I was probably just biased obviously, but I would see their acting as substandard to ours. I don't believe her, I don't believe him; they're not selling it.

In noticing what's there to be noticed, Dallas developed an ability to assess and evaluate acting. Dallas was careful to qualify his remark as potentially biased, but nonetheless, he had developed a set of internal guidelines for what was believable on stage. He had developed the ability to discern, judge, and reach a sophisticated critical assessment.

Jeremy had an intriguing digression that he termed a discussion of “angry students.” I believe it belongs here because it is actually a discussion of craft and talent. Jeremy remembers a particular argument among various students. Jeremy's memory seems to conflate a lot of different emotions he felt in response to people who were jealous of his ability to sing well. In the real world of the lived experiences of students, an argument about favoritism was also a very powerful struggle within these students to understand the internal workings of the various art forms they were dealing with: music, performance, musical theatre. Jeremy is, as was characteristic of his interview, all over the map, shifting from one memory to another, often

unable to control emotions he has sat on for fifteen years. Jeremy begins by complaining about a particular student, Samantha. According to Jeremy, Samantha complained about favoritism in casting:

[Samantha] sticks out in my brain. ‘Cause she was a person who always claimed that favorites were being picked and I think the... I think the perception of a person who is not so musically inclined is way different than a person who is musically inclined whether it be an instrument, singing, or snapping your fingers, or yodeling ... is totally different. You having to cast these things when six people could sing. Anyone can act. Whether they’re good or not well that’s between the script and Jesus, I don’t know. Um, but she sticks out, anytime I think of anyone who just doesn’t get it.

Jeremy set up the terms of the ensuing argument. Samantha began a complaint about favoritism in casting. Jeremy believed that there were a limited amount of people at Cavanaugh who could just sing, without a lot of extra help. He believed that Samantha did not understand the distinction between those who were still learning to sing, and those who were “musically inclined.” He went on to give more specifics of the discussion:

There was an argument once that happened where she [Samantha] said, “Oh it’s only because of picking favorites and things.” I’m like, “You think it’s easy to sing?” [Another student] and I were talking, ‘cause she was in band, ‘cause a lot of the band people...left band to come over to join musical theatre ‘cause they were both sixth period. “Oh but it’s harder to play an instrument! Oh, it’s harder to sing.” She says, “Oh the only reason you guys are getting these”—Samantha—”the only reason you guys are getting these roles is because you guys can sing, they like you better because you can sing. Even in choir we never get solos because you guys are loud.” Singing is hard. You have no idea. You really have no idea.

Samantha conflated the ability to sing well and the ensuing casting decisions both in the drama department and in choir, with “favoritism” and inserts herself into an discussion among students about which is harder to do, play an instrument or sing. Mixed into the emotional content of the discussion are students working out for themselves aesthetic distinctions that have to do with talent, ability, and difficulty. These students are “noticing what’s there to notice” (Greene, 2000, 6) and doing so on their terms, which are often filtered through a highly emotional lens of

anxiety. Jeremy noted that these discussions often happened before auditions, when students were the most sensitive to how they compared to others.

Jeremy made a distinction between what was called on to be in the chorus and what was called on to be an actor with solo singing.

This is a musical. When the music starts you better sing!... In a chorus you have someone else, you have a safety net. You have the person who is singing along with you. You can breathe. You can. Singing solo you have to ... it's hard for you to find the right place just to breathe; they say breathe where there is a comma in the music, that doesn't always work. In a chorus you can breathe whenever you want to.

Jeremy closed this discussion by detailing how other students would finally arrive at some sort of acknowledgment that everyone was needed in order to create the final production:

All these people, when they finally realized that the little bit part is not really a bit part because without those bit parts we're just be a bunch of people just standing there with nothing going on, in an empty town, with a horse drawn cart being driven by nobody. You know, a whistle is blowing from a train and there's nobody on, no one is driving the train. That's what, they finally [got there.] Oh absolutely, but it was like pulling teeth cause they didn't realize- they didn't realize how hard it was.

Jeremy's subsequent performance experiences in nightclubs has perhaps made him particularly sensitive to how the whole endeavor of production is incumbent on all of the parts coming together. He created such an evocative portrait of an empty town, an empty train, a stage devoid of the crowds needed for a musical. Not for the first time, I can sense the absence of the voices of those who were in these roles to get a sense for what it was like for them to be in the choruses and other small roles in plays at Cavanaugh. Nonetheless, Jeremy has an acute sense of the whole and of the somewhat painful process it took to get to a finished production, with everyone on board supporting each other. Although Woods (1993) and Larson and Brown (2007) provide some recognition of the sometimes rocky path towards a finished production, I do not think they fully account for the intricacy of student reactions to that complexity. The experiences of the six

participants in this study suggest that while they are learning important lessons in evaluation, assessment, and discernment, it is all happening within the intensely emotional, social, and personal worlds in which these teenagers inhabit.

### *Conclusion to Chapter Six*

The six participants, Tim, Liz, Jeremy, Dallas, Annie, and Rosie shared candidly about their experiences in the school plays at Cavanaugh. They represent highly capable student actors from among the 200 or so students that participated in the school plays during the 1990s at this public high school. They had a wide range of responses, sharing stories of their joys and their anguish, their irritations and their appreciation. Their identities were shaped by these experiences, each one expressing that their lives after high school include sometimes profound connections to these adolescent experiences. They had intensely emotional encounters with other students and with the plays they performed. Their social skills were often tested as they dealt with jealousies and squabbles, but nearly always felt that those gave way to a greater sense of accomplishment as performances unfolded, audiences applauded, and they could feel good about their work. The former student actors felt a variety of emotions all over again, as they reminisced, recounting various stories. They developed emotionally and their teenage years are forever bound up in the drama department at Cavanaugh. The participants demonstrated sophisticated understandings of the inner workings of theatre production and their burgeoning abilities to discern and evaluate excellence. While their individual experiences differed they remain convinced that being in school plays, and being involved in the Cavanaugh Drama Department affected their lives in profound and positive ways. Their memories of Thespis, their first sojourns of stepping out from the crowd and making creative and bold choices to embrace performance during their high school years, are ones that they embrace without regret.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE VALUE OF THE SCHOOL PLAY

Since William Malim and the Jesuits first wrote of the educational virtues of play performances in schools (Motter 1929, Coggin 1956, McCabe 1983), these productions have continued to educate, beguile, frustrate, and entertain for last several centuries. School plays occur within settings wherein the principle performers are undergoing intense personal, social, and emotional changes. School plays can be a positive and critical avenue for those changes—for adolescents to explore their identities while they take on roles. As Wallace Smith (1988) remarked, there are very few educational venues wherein students can so quickly come together: theatre “embraced more different kinds of students, *immediately*, than did any other school study” (173). While Heather Cousins (2000) can justifiably complain of the stereotypes and vacuity of the typical high school play, and Jo Beth Gonzalez (2006) can attempt to cope with that reality through deconstructing the content and the process, the traditional high school play has a perennial quality to it. A recent survey published by the Educational Theatre Association suggests that as many as 95% of American schools offer some kind of extracurricular performance (Omasta 2012). The school play is here to stay. The present research study attempted to find answers to what is valuable about school plays for the participants involved.

In this chapter I begin with a discussion of what the former student actors said that they found valuable about what they learned from the school play in their current lives. Then I discuss three major findings of the research, arguing that role-playing, affective learning, and narrative memory are areas that the participant’s stories and comments suggest might be intriguing for future research. I end with reflections on the process of engaging in this research and what it has meant for my practice.

### ***The Value of the School Play***

*“It was a big deal. It was a very big deal to me.” -Liz*

The participants revealed that one of the values of being in school plays was in the stories and memories they shared. Tim said, “I kind of feel that my time at the drama department at Cavanaugh *was* my time in high school.” Liz summarized, “But most of my classroom memories do come from the theatre so when it comes to remembering high school, it’s almost like remembering drama class.” When I asked Jeremy how many of his memories of high school were wrapped in the drama and music courses and projects, he simply responded, “Damn near all of them.” Dallas said, “Of all the stuff I learned in high school, I mean, drama’s what I remember more than anything else. You know, forget math, forget English. I just remember drama class.” Annie said, “It’s probably my fondest memories.” Rosie said, “The plays are one of the more positive things that you can always think back on and draw on. I had a lot of really good life lessons. I kinda feel like school was kinda going on in the background while I was active in the performing arts.” School plays are only a part of their memories. The former student actors remembered the whole experience: rehearsals, auditions, performances, social events, and class projects.

The participants’ answers to the direct question of the value of the school plays to their current lives do not fall into any single pattern. The answers are as idiosyncratic as the participants themselves. While they include echoes of what I might have predicted, the ways in which the participants answered the question surprised me in their variety. They took the question very seriously giving thoughtful, earnest, and heartfelt answers. Taken together the answers point to aspects of theatre education that deserve more research, where more questions need to be asked, and where the school play simply needs to be taken much more seriously as a site of profound and long lasting life lessons, not simply as an amusing pastime.

Confidence and cooperation have long been the hallmark claims for the affective gains of theatre education. For example, Dallas mentioned the development of self-esteem and confidence, talking directly how the skills he learned from being on stage translated into a set of skills he has used regularly in his work:

I feel like for myself and I think for a lot of other people that drama class is where a lot of us developed our self esteem and, um, cause I know that I became more and more comfortable being up in front people like public speaking is not a problem. I give military briefings to hundreds of people at a time, and I don't get nervous. It's pretty easy. I attribute that to me time on stage, you know. 'Cause I know the first couple of times we got out there I was petrified. You get used to it and eventually you get to crave those butterflies in your stomach.

Dallas' comments are in many ways the classic desired response from an exposure to theatre studies. And yet to discover that the skill translates into the ability to give military briefings to "hundreds of people at a time" is startling in its specificity. He attributes his success to the practice of being in public performance and acknowledges that the familiarity with the feelings of nervousness and anxiety have made this activity feel if not exactly ordinary, at least one that is not strange to him.

Tim echoed Dallas' point, equating the idea of comfort with public speaking with maturity. Coming out of his shell was essential to becoming an adult. Tim, also like Dallas, was somewhat self-conscious about the somewhat obvious relationship between being involved in theatre performance and the effect that had on his ability to be comfortable in front of people, saying that he did not want to get "too cheesy" about what he valued about being involved in school plays. Nevertheless he said,

But it really helped me become an adult I think. I mean, just being this nerdy introvert, um, it did help me come out of my shell a bit more. And it helped me, you know, I don't think I would, to this day, I don't think I'd be able to get up in front of an audience to speak, 'cause I mean, when you talk to most people, that's what they say, like people fear public speaking more than death. I mean they actually have conducted studies where people actually fear dying less than public speaking. And I don't really fear public speaking even for an introvert. So I think

so that was a big introduction to that.

For Dallas and Tim, confidence in performing in front of people was an important step towards maturity—a set of skills and experiences they forever associate with the school plays in which they performed in high school.

Rosie mentioned teamwork: “working as a team. I did not realize how much [being in plays] taught me how to work as a team until I had to work independently and you don’t have the support around you of other cast members or the other coworkers all working toward one goal on your own.” On stage everyone was there “for the same purpose.” She appreciated how everyone felt they had a place.

I liked how everybody got a chance to take the spotlight.... I don’t think there was a single person who felt like they were the ‘small actor’—you know, like, ‘there are no small actors.’ I felt like everyone had their place and that they knew what they were doing. Like with [name of student] doing make-up and she really gravitated toward that and really took that on. And Jeremy and costuming.

Rosie believed that the productions were inclusive, accentuating individual strengths to achieve collective goals. She summed up: “In the end though you were all on stage and all there for the same purpose.”

### **Other Lessons**

There were other lessons not easily put into categories that seemed important for the former student actors to articulate. For some, they are lessons about belonging and the creation of identities. Jeremy took away powerful lessons about community. The people involved in the school plays at Cavanaugh gave Jeremy the permission to feel emotions he had previously denied himself. And in the midst of it all, was a group of people that he had argued with, played with, and learned to love in a very particular way. For example, Jeremy described the closing night of *Hello Dolly!*:

It was...like it was ok to cry, it was just, it was like, it was ok. We were all huggie

people. But like everyone hugged. It was—everyone felt good. Everyone! ... We were all toasting and everything and all of us, none of us wanted to leave, and it had never been like that. And it wasn't just seniors. It wasn't. None of us wanted to leave at all. Even that last song, I'm like everybody is effing crying and like looking out into the audience and seeing people pulling out hankies and things and I'm like ... doing the squeezing our hands, and we're squeezing each others' hands like morons, and I'm like, I get it.

John Dewey (1958) writes in *Art as Experience* “Works of art that are not remote from common life, that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. But they are also marvelous aids in the creation of such a life” (81). Jeremy experienced the marvelous collective life, an almost indescribable feeling of a job well done together with a group of people.

In addition to the permission to cry, Jeremy said being in the school plays gave him, and others like him, the permission to laugh. Again he discussed the “thug kids” and was alternately putting himself in that category and distancing himself from it at the same time:

Oh, I'm definitely one of the people who needed it. I say “they” because I know some kids needed it way more than me, and I think if I had not been a part of it I wouldn't have realized that. I would have been like, “Shit I'm the only one who needs this kind of stuff, need the escape the fun and the laugh.” A lot of those kids, a lot of *us* didn't know it was ok to laugh, not necessarily at other people 'cause we knew we could laugh at other folks, but laugh at yourself in a different way than the way that everybody else was laughing at you.

An intense sense of belonging is connected for Jeremy with the discovery that he is not alone in needing an escape and a sense of fantasy. He learned that it was okay to laugh, and it was okay to cry, and it was okay to belong.

When I asked Liz the question of the value of the school play, I phrased the question as follows: “What do you think you got out of being in school plays?” We had been talking for about an hour, just had a bathroom break, and Liz had just shared the funny story about creating the bit of business of Mae Peterson and the electric oven. I sat across from her in the small public meeting room at a public library, the low hum of florescent lights, the air vent, and quiet conversations drifted in and out in the background.

Liz took a sharp intake of breath and paused. Her lower lip quivered, and her voice broke. Her eyes welled up and momentarily she let herself feel an emotion that I think surprised her. “This is making me weepy-eyed,” she stammered, “‘Cause it sounds really cheesy but it’s true.” A tear or two rolled down her face as she grasped for words. “Drama’s probably the reason I graduated from high school.” She finished with a deep sigh and another sharp intake of breath.

Liz went on for another five minutes, weaving the tale of her inner and outer life as a student at Cavanaugh, creating the context for her emotional response. “I used to get crap from teachers all the time, ‘You’re so smart, but you don’t apply yourself.’ It’s ‘cause I’m bored, I’m bored!” She went on to describe some of the elaborate mechanisms she and her friend Becky created to skip classes. These were inventive, if completely hair-raising schemes involving forging teachers’ signatures on hall passes to be excused out of class. At one point Liz and Becky were sneaking out of the school while humming the theme to *Mission Impossible*. “And then I started getting into drama and getting into the plays and I *had* to come to school. I mean, I’m still skipping class and trying to—but it really lessened and it was classes I was interested in. It was something that was fun to do. I actually looked forward to it.” Her grade point started improving her junior and senior years. “I don’t know if I would have pulled that around if I didn’t have the drama classes,” she said. She ended that portion of the interview, after a rather detailed accounting of her tribulations in high school, by saying of drama, “So yeah, no, it was a big deal—it was a very big deal for me.”

At many times during the interviews I had the feeling that I was being asked to be a witness to the participants’ adulthood. The participants shared with me as if they were dropping by my classroom to catch up on old times and to tell me what they have been up to. I was honored by their trust in me as they reflected upon dreams they had, dreams they were living, and dreams they had deferred. It was like these former students of mine had been waiting to tell

me these stories. Liz knew this question was coming, and I believe that she had outlined in her head some of the responses. I do not think she planned to feel so emotional about it.

She followed this up with “why didn’t I do more with that?” She confessed that she had always wondered if I was disappointed in her because she did not “do more with that” and follow through on her proclamations that she would become a drama teacher herself and come and take my job.

Such a moment seems to stand still in time for me. It happened a couple of times during the interviews, these long moments of being with, of trying not to panic, or assuage feelings of loss, but simply be with, experience, console. It was at these times that the researcher gave way to the former teacher. Liz was worried that she had let me down because she did not pursue a career as a theatre educator. Annie was working out her decision to put on hold a ten-year struggle in Hollywood. Dallas needed to tell me how much his career was advanced because of what he learned in theatre. Rosie needed to let me know how sad she was that I left Cavanaugh before she was a senior. The side comments, the stories of failed attempts at further schooling, or failed marriages—the parts of the interviews that were not particularly related to being in a school play—they are part of the subjective reality of these interviews. I was still their teacher, but it was not approval these adults needed, or so it seemed to me, but witness.

The participants had a range of reasons they valued their experiences in school plays. I believe that the rich variety of stories, feelings, observations, and comments reveals that their memories are one of the most intriguing and important aspects of their experiences in school plays. In contrast to what Sally Mackey (2012) found among her former students, these former student actors have not created sites of memory through their objects and mementos; rather their sites of memory are mostly verbal, through the stories they continue to tell.

### ***What Remains: Remembering Thespis***

Robert Stake (1995) discusses that qualitative case studies present a search for the expected and “unanticipated” (41). I expected to find evidence of what Sally Mackey (2012) deems to be the widely accepted affective and cognitive outcomes of theatre education: “increased confidence and self-esteem, a sense of community, a nurturing of pride in achievement, discipline and attention to detail and, of course, performance skills...” (42). Although I think all of these outcomes appear in the stories the former student actors recounted, what I feature in this next section are three of the findings that surprised me and that I think deserve more scrutiny in the future. These are observations about what the former student actors said they valued about being involved in school plays. However, the following discussion also has a broader context of what theatre educators deem as important about different aspects of our teaching practice and the subject we teach.

As outlined in chapter 2, the debate between those theatre educators who prefer to emphasize the processes of drama, and those who feel the processes of drama have been focused on at the expense of the value of learning the skills, techniques, and craft of formal theatre, has gone on for many decades. I was recently asked by a theatre educator whether or not I favored process or product, a testament to how prevalent and current this debate continues to be. That the answer to such a question might be “both” seems only recently to get much currency in the scholarly literature. What is missing from the debate is the strong acknowledgment of processes along the pathway to producing theatre productions and formal elements, skills, and aesthetic concerns in informal dramatic play. Robert Landy (1982) has cogent and precise advice on the matter:

For the most part, undue emphasis upon either extreme of product or process does not lead to the most fully realized educational experience. The product extreme would imply a situation where the adult director has prepared, in detail, all of the



blocking, line-readings, character motivations, and interactions and simply leads the actors through the motions, like so many puppets. The process extreme would imply a structure where the actors are given permission to improvise at will, to “do their own thing,” and to read their lines and move according to their whims at any given moment (79).

The work of Lazarus (2012) and Gonzalez (2006) attempts to capture their experiences and point of view by problematizing the process of production, recognizing the potential gains for students when they are included as co-creators of productions. However, there seems to still exist a tacit understanding that school plays are product driven, truncating process.

My sojourn through the available literature taught me much about the topic. It put me on solid ground, even as it revealed the somewhat shifting sands of how the topic of formal theatre production in schools is represented by researchers and educators. The tension in the literature I am now convinced is due to three factors which deserve much more scrutiny.

First, the research literature favors classroom practice. This is understandable at one level. From a policy and pedagogical point of view, what theatre educators do in the classroom has an immediacy and urgency about it. Classroom practice must be shown to be sufficiently educative, effective, and essential to keep it as a subject during the school day. However, school play production then becomes an afterthought, sometimes disconnected from classroom practice. School plays become a practice seemingly without pedagogy.

Second, the school play is a practice that educators think they already understand. Wallace Smith (1988) reveals some of this belief when he discusses school plays as mere replications of professional practice. For Smith, the trouble is that the scripts produced in an extracurricular environment provide too few students exposure to the dynamic and vital learning available through theatre studies (180). Beyond Woods’ (1993) study of a school production, there is very little research on what this practice looks like, other than the critiques available in the work of JoBeth Gonzalez (2006), Joan Lazarus (2012) and a handful of others. Even these

researchers make assumptions about current practice that are based on their own observations and pedagogical ideology. The short hand that I have used throughout this study is even problematic, the “traditional” approach, when there is not really any indication of what exactly is traditional about it. I believe that this prejudice springs from the uneasy relationship that theatre practitioners have with the aesthetics and virtuosity of school productions. Are we wrapped up in ways of viewing emerging theatre performers that are inappropriate? What constitutes a good theatre production in a school? Lazarus says that good theatre is good theatre: “Theatre is theatre. It is either compelling, entertaining, and meaningful, or it is not....It means that we do not have a different artistic standard just because our company members are kids” (80). However, I have gained a new perspective on this from the former student actors I interviewed, especially Tim, who was in the program at Cavanaugh from the very beginning. Our production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* was not very good from any objective standard beyond the miracle of a first year teacher getting any production off its feet. I cast everyone who auditioned—all eight of them. Yet Tim still had an experience that was valuable to him. His experiences intrigued him enough to stick around for more, and led him to a lifelong fascination with performance. So while Lazarus undoubtedly has a point, I wonder if her statement is actually the experience of those who participate and those in the audience.

Third, the school play provides a uniquely challenging environment to study. When I first conceived of a possible research study around the topic of the school play, I thought that I would go into schools and take a look. When I realized the institutional barriers in the way of such a project I reconceived what was possible. The various levels of permission required, from Institutional Review Boards, to school district boards, to principals, teachers, students, and parents, was an overwhelming prospect for an individual researcher to face. As I read through various studies, I quickly realized that the more ambitious and larger studies, especially the ones

out of educational psychology and adolescent development, had many people involved in them. It often seemed like they had armies of graduate student assistants to aid the researchers in working through the various levels of data. Creating a “right-sized” project is often difficult, and being a lone researcher definitely had me working towards a manageable project with a manageable amount of data. Originally I was going to do eight interviews, and when the last two were going to have to be via internet phone, I decided that I would privilege the face to face interviews. School productions are richly complicated sites of theatre practice, but researchers can face some daunting barriers to access to them.

The research literature put me in contact with a robust critique of traditional high school theatre practice. From Wallace Smith (1988) I learned what it meant to interrogate one’s assumptions about a school theatre program. Privileging productions over classroom practice is every bit as problematic as the reverse. The pedagogical needs of students in all areas of theatre practice are served by the best theatre educators have to offer. My encounter with Smith led directly to the story of Roberto, an unpleasant memory wherein I believe I failed a student because I had lost contact with honest critique. That Roberto rebelled against me was unfortunate, but completely his right to do so. Auditions and the resulting competition have ethical dilemmas built into it in an educational setting. If one were to choose to keep competitive auditions, then the process must be extremely transparent, the results seen as fair, and feedback universally honest. Competition can have some educative value. I got into trouble with Roberto because I was not honest with him, and encouraged him in a way that ended up being somewhat exploitative rather than educationally sound. Roberto’s story prepared me for the complexity of the students’ reactions to casting and auditions. The stories that Liz, Rosie, and Annie told about their anxiety around auditions and casting are testaments that are often not heard.

I admit that I did not like reading the work of Joan Lazarus (2012) and JoBeth Gonzalez

(1999; 2006) at first. I thought their work was mainly advocacy promoting a particular agenda. As I have progressed through my study over the past several years, I have grown ever more appreciative of their difficult and challenging work. Gonzalez and Lazarus have put their progressive ideas into action, and reveal the difficulties they have had with trying to find pedagogical solutions to actually putting students and their needs first. I now have only admiration and respect for their endeavors. Joan Lazarus' (2012) work focuses on best practice and a socially responsible approach to teaching that values students' contributions. A close reading of Lazarus' description of student-centered directing reveals that much of what she discusses would be considered by many to be effective directing techniques for working with actors at any level of proficiency. She considers that when "students and director make decisions collaboratively" they are engaged in a process that can "empower each student" (76). Lazarus does not suggest that students make every decision because they can quickly be overwhelmed. An effective director of adolescents helps "them learn the actor's art and feel comfortable generating choices and making decisions" (76). Perhaps Lazarus' greatest contribution is calling attention to the idea that directing adolescents might have unique aspects to it and that it might be possible to consider there being an actual pedagogical approach to high school theatre directing.

The experiences of the six participants in this study suggest that much of what they valued about participating in school plays is a dynamic blend of both the process of arriving to performance as much as the performances themselves. What they shared punctures the argument of many theatre educators who favor using the tools of drama to teach—teaching *through* theatre—because they tend to bracket off their students' experiences from formal productions. These educators tend to believe that the affective and cognitive gains of students happen best in informal situations, without regard to the aesthetics of the experience and without the need for

audience. The participants in this study suggest that their affective and cognitive gains were similar to what one would expect from more process oriented goals of theatre educators. The former student actors also revealed through their stories that they remember, as Dallas put it, the “trial and error” of moving towards production. They remembered the emotions associated with auditions and casting, both the irritation of the process as well as the occasional moments of *eureka* in rehearsal, such as when Liz found the comic bit around putting her head in the oven as Mae Peterson in *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Perhaps these gains are accounted for by how Woods (1993) describes these kinds of occurrences. As “critical events” they involve a kind of authenticity that propels students into more independent thinking and improvisation than theatre educators have associated with formal production. Perhaps the misgivings that theatre educators have about formal productions, for example, that it can lead to exhibitionism, blinds some of them to the potential of the school play to teach many of the same things that are taught in classrooms or through process drama. The three areas I have identified as being of particular importance among the many aspects of the interviews with the former student actors, role-playing, affective learning, and narrative memory, push at the boundaries of what theatre educators expect from the school play, calling attention to pedagogical opportunities and further research.

### **Role-Playing**

The intensely personal relationships the former student actors said they developed with their characters are so immediate that they can still feel those connections today. Liz’s attachment to the fury of Titania, Tim’s struggle to find a kingly posture for Oberon, Rosie’s familial attachment to *Fiddler on the Roof*, and Jeremy’s connections to Albert Peterson and Cornelius Hackle, testify to the power of these experiences to shape personalities.

James Catterall (2002) suggests that this area has much potential for further investigation.

In his article that accompanies a compendium of empirical research in theatre education, Catterall writes:

An unquestionable omission in the body of work on drama presented here is substantive attention to many potential outcomes beyond reading and language development. The foremost candidates among these would seem to be any learning that results from the interpersonal and intra-personal qualities of assuming characters and interacting to perform narrative scenes. Theater professionals have long concentrated on the importance of character study in order to perform genuinely on stage or in film. Learning about characters with world views, beliefs, and assumptions different from one's own would be expected to lead to skills or traits valuable generally such as increased empathy and understanding of others' views a student's personal character affected by studying dramatic characters (61).

Catterall believes that the effect of preparing and portraying roles deserves much more attention because it is such an integral part of theatre education. The former student actors in this study suggest that they were very much influenced by the roles they played.

Several of the participants took the idea of role-playing into other directions beyond the lessons learned through empathy and identification. These former student actors discussed the value of the skills involved in role-playing. Dallas discussed that being able to recognize different social roles he plays was a skill he developed through theatre. "Pretending to be other people," he said, "You know, acting, I think has served me well socially." He went on to explain, and said that he learned to have control over his emotions "and to be able to pull them out when you need them, whichever one is appropriate for the situation, is, I think, a skill... that I developed in drama, that I still use today."

Liz and Rosie both mentioned the value of role-playing in their jobs. Liz commented that "it's really funny that drama class really helped me do a job I really disliked having to do because I could just pass it off as 'this isn't me, this is my role.'" For her, "that would be the biggest thing is like the whole playing a role, it's not just always on stage."

Rosie's reflections are more in line with what Catterall (2002) believes are the potential benefits of examining more closely the relationship between playing character and empathy. Rosie said that being in school plays helped her in "relating to people." She recalled the dilemmas she sometimes faced while working in a tuxedo rental shop:

I never realized until I started being in customer service and retail and I worked with a lot of brides doing tuxedo rentals, that being able to put myself in their shoes I can empathize with them, and that's one thing that in customer service everybody wants is they want to be heard rather than being seen first, then they want something in exchange. And so by being able to go, "So sorry your husband to be is not going to look like we expected. We can do this and this and this for you, but he's is going to have to stay as it is. We realize how much this means to you," and then letting them sob and cry it out.

The former student actors revealed that their relationships to the characters they played were complex and in many cases, unforgettable. They carry the physical and emotional memories of these characters around in their memories. From empathy, identity, and the role-playing of everyday life and work, there is much more to be understood how student actors incorporate these lessons into lived experiences long after the curtains close and they leave they stage.

### **The Centrality of Affective Learning**

Tim said that being in high school plays "helped me become an adult." Dallas believed that being in school plays was where he and his fellow cast members "developed our self-esteem." There were similar statements made across all the participants. These responses are not surprising given the amount of research literature in theatre education devoted to the emotional, social, and personal development of adolescents. What is surprising is that such gains in development linger for a long time, and, as former student actors look back, may actually intensify. The act of reminiscing creates the opportunity for the participants to pinpoint and articulate where and when they experienced something that they now see as significant. For the

former student actors, much of their adolescence and a growing sense of independence and adulthood associated with that time in their lives are intricately connected to their involvement in high school theatre. Affective learning—emotional, social, and personal—continues to loom large for the participants.

The arts have long been considered ideal vehicles for achieving significant learning in the affective domain, a theme intricately connected to Woods' (1993) research wherein his major categories of personal, emotional, and social development are part of the affective domain. It is Woods' contention that the dispositions taught through critical events lead students to make gains in other areas. Woods believes that critical events such as the production of a school play are "not just a matter of cognition" (10). The highest levels of Benjamin Bloom's cognitive taxonomy, synthesis and analysis, have direct correlations to a student's internalization of learning, and their ability to persist and value what they learn by putting it to practice. The whole person of the student is involved, including "strong motivation, identification and emotional involvement" (10), traits associated with the affective domain.

The participants remember the school plays they were in primarily through the social interactions that were a part of the experience. The stories the participants told reinforce the notion that involvement in such an activity as producing a play creates many opportunities for students to make significant gains in their social, personal, and emotional development. What I did find surprising is the intensity of the emotional memory of the experiences the students had. I was particularly fascinated by how the negative emotions of jealousy, disappointment, sadness, anxiety, and anger remained for the participants. My remembrances of the disappointments I experienced through my involvement in DramaFest are similar. That these former student actors who were successful in the program at Cavanaugh should continue to hold the anxieties around casting, the jealousies around talent, and the anger and frustration around working with other



students, gave me significant pause. When I discovered the research about cheerleading tryouts, I began to understand. These former student actors had much of their adolescent identity connected to their participation in school plays. Their sensitivity to competition and to their own mistakes makes sense. A wise counselor of mine once told me that we rarely have strong feelings about things we do not care about. The participants revealed how much they cared about the experience of being in school plays by how passionately they could re-create and re-experience the feelings they had at the time these occurrences happened.

All of the choices that I made as a high school theatre director had consequences, many that I did not see at the time. For example, Liz's self-consciousness about showing her "backside" and effect of the presence of Rosie's mother on Rosie demonstrate that even among these successful former student actors, the decisions I made continue to resonate long afterwards. Of course, if educators had to consider the ramifications of every small decision, we would likely become hopelessly stuck. What I am suggesting here is that attentiveness to the naturally occurring ebb and flow of emotions, the cycles of intensity associated with a group's artistic production of a school play and alerting adolescents that these cycles are normal, is an important aspect of the overt and transparent pedagogy of high school theatre directing.

### **Narrative Memory**

Maxine Greene suggests in *Releasing the Imagination* (1995) that our encounters with art have the potential to unlock our imaginations. Greene believes the challenge for teachers is "to devise situations in which the young will move from the habitual and the ordinary and consciously undertake a search" (24). That search she defines as one of investigation, curiosity, and imagination. Imagination is the ability to imagine how things could be otherwise. Imagination gives us the ability "not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve." The

imagination “is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (28). Greene frequently uses the example of her encounters with literature to demonstrate how they resonate with and change her and aid in the release of her imagination. Although Greene is discussing her intentional use of the narratives she encountered as a child, I wonder if she helps to explain the potentiality of other kinds of narratives to affect a person. Could the stories of the plays operate in a similar fashion for the former student actors?

In some strange way, by grasping them [the stories of my youth], by making them objects of my experiences, I have imposed my own order, my own context, as I have pursued my own adventures into meaning. The narratives I have encountered in my journey have made it possible for me to conceive patterns of being as my life among others has expanded: to look through others’ eyes more than I would have and to imagine being something more than I have come to be (86).

Of course it is difficult to assess how the former student actors have been affected by their encounters with the stories of the plays they in which they acted, but I was continually struck by how the stories of the plays seemed to live in them still. For example, Dallas discussed his encounter with some of the plays we performed at Cavanaugh:

I don’t know if was the same for everybody else, but I know for me it was—they were plays in which, you know, I could definitely see the social aspects of them. You know, like with *The Lottery* with this whole society based on this superstition that they had to sacrifice somebody in order to have a good harvest, or, you know, to keep their society going... It was kinda like the first time I ever really thought about those kind of sociological behaviors in culture and stuff.

Dallas admits that his understanding of these experiences in high school did not come until later, for example, as he took sociology courses in college. He remembers these encounters with the plays as making him feel more “cultured” and exposing him to ideas that he knew had value in helping him make sense of his world.

Jeremy’s encounter with the stories of Albert Peterson and Cornelius Hackle had a resonance with him. He still wants to know them better –to know what happens to them after the curtain closes. He has imposed his “own order” upon the encounter with these narratives, and it

aided him in understanding his own desires and longings. His isolation was lessened as he played characters whose social and personal dilemmas mirrored his own.

Rosie describes the transformation that occurred as her friends became the town of Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof*:

I looked out on the stage, seeing no longer my fellow actors but seeing for the first time the characters they had become. Along with the strong faces of my family came memories that could have been. The lines fade with our rehearsed steps and the platform below creaked with our unit. Slowly I felt all nerves melt from where they were as they left me alone. A proud grin formed its way up to my face and I turned it to the audience. No longer did I think of everyone around me as friends but now as people in our little town of Anatevka.

In a particularly revealing passage, Rosie wrote of “memories that could have been.” She articulates the process of leaving behind her real self as she imaginatively activates a set of fictional memories, those of herself as Hodel, one of the daughters of Tevye. I will never forget the poignancy of the moment as she read this essay to me and she started to cry. It felt to me as if she were feeling a host of emotions: the wistfulness of the cherished memory, the losses that happen in the play, and the last time she really felt connected to theatrical production.

Liz remembered being inside the story of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as she lay pretending to sleep on the stage as Titania. She also recalled the deep connections she had with this character: “Titania was an angry and hot headed enough character –it was easy to tap into myself for that role.”

While I was in the midst of the interviews I wrote the following:

*There is much to be said for the knowing that comes from an experience deep inside an art form. I have been continually struck by the ownership these former student actors have over the stories they told when they were on stage. It is an ownership nearly beyond words as I can almost palpably see the students viscerally reenact the moments from the plays before me. Bits of*

*dialogue, or relationships on stage are embedded inside them. The ownership of the stories is something I've never seen clearly delineated in any of the literature...*

I continue to believe that this is among the most significant findings of this research. What it means to me is that the stories that theatre educators and their students choose to tell on their stages matter. They do not matter in any particular moral sense, which is what some policy makers tend to suggest (Urice 2004). They matter in the sense that these stories will live inside student actors for the rest of their lives. In a recent presentation I gave where I mentioned this finding, the people in the audience who were not currently involved in theatre, seized upon this concept most readily. They could not help but share their own memories of high school theatre as a result.

### ***Reflective Practice: A Conclusion***

I began this research study by looking for what I call “a way in.” I took quite literally the advice one of my advisors: to discover what was in this project for me. Heuristic inquiry gave me a way in, filled me with a “dream of discovering and describing the inner world” of my first encounters with theatre and school plays while I was in high school (Craig 1978, 417). While engaged in heuristic inquiry I also continued to probe what was available in the research. The discovery of Woods’ (1993) study of critical events in teaching and learning gave me useful frameworks for understanding my own experience and a useful set of categories through which to organize and present my own data, and eventually the data from the interviews with the former student actors.

The heuristic inquiry was essentially a long interview with myself. Bit by bit, I waded through the stories that I have always told, discarding many of them, before discovering ones

that I have not always told. I learned that fragmented memories are normal and that performance and rehearsal memories are odd in that they may include echoes of all the repetitions necessary for producing a play. I was surprised to remember that I learned to hug and show warmth through my experiences in school plays. I was surprised to discover that the student-directed projects I was involved with through DramaFest were among the most important of my memories. This discovery has radically altered my opinion of student-developed projects. I now firmly believe that such projects are essential to a well rounded theatre program, because when students work independently they truly integrate and synthesize their knowledge. Finally, I was reminded that I found a place for myself in the theatre program in high school. In that place I found value because of what I could contribute to it. Within the experience of theatre, I found a call to serve which later manifested itself in my life by becoming a teacher. These are not the findings I expected to come out of my reflective inquiry.

What I learned from the students was accompanied by an ever increasing sense of wonder. They gave me their perspectives from deep within their encounters with school productions. Their observations, comments, and stories were rich, complex, detailed, and sincere. I was less struck by what I accomplished by myself at Cavanaugh than I was by what *we* accomplished together. It was never just me—it was always *we*—and it was the collective endeavor of creativity that had been my initial attraction to theatre. To come back into contact with that, first through the heuristic inquiry, and then through reconnecting with my former students gave me an awareness I never thought to expect from conducting a research study. I wondered if anything we had done together mattered, if something of our experiences together as teacher and students remained. The former student actors revealed that much remained for them of the experience, and more valuably for me, what had stayed with them—what they valued—was often times not what I could have predicted.

I have been trained in educational settings that value cause and effect relationships. My education has thoroughly ingrained in me that in order to make sense of experience I need to say that such-and-such phenomenon led to such-and-such outcome. That such an attitude towards data can be counterproductive had never occurred to me until confronted by the different demands of a qualitative study. The story of Liz's encounter with the police that caused her and her friends to miss a performance is a good example of how such a reduction to mere cause and effect can influence the interpretation of events. I had always assumed that Liz simply learned the value of responsibility from the experience. She never made that mistake again. I have told this story countless times. It was a story about the triumph of connection and transformation, how the wayward student who got into trouble became a stalwart champion of responsibility because of my willingness to forgive and give her a second chance. After all, I saw her counsel other students not to make the same mistake. I had reduced the experience to one with a tidy moral lesson, stripping it of its nuances. Through the interviews, I discovered that Liz had much more complicated motivations. She was afraid I would never cast her again. She was not nearly as contrite as I thought she was because the episode to her was about the injustice of the police, not about her responsibility to a high school play. She told other students to behave so that they would not get into trouble with the police, not because of their loyalty to a particular play or their responsibility to a particular cast. The moral I wanted out of the story is embedded there somewhere but I was caught up in my own need to preserve myths of the heroic teacher rather than being willing to entertain the possibility that the power relations between a student and teacher create a much more textured reality. That more textured reality is what I have come to appreciate about qualitative research, and believe qualitative research captures well.

At the end of his heuristic study, *The Heart of the Teacher*, Peter Erik Craig (1979) writes a sort of eulogy to his research project. He bids a fond farewell to his musings and to his co-

researchers. When I reflect back on the interviews and on the reconnections I made to my former students, I cannot help but be sorry to see them go. I have transformed them into characters for this research project but I hope that I have captured their generous spirits that live and dream in the real world. I am struck by the correspondences. For example, I said that I learned to hug because of my experiences in high school plays. Jeremy echoed my memories when he commented about his fellow students: “We were all huggie people.”

When I left Cavanaugh High School at the end of the 1998-99 school year I was exhausted. I was suffering all of the signs of what I would come to understand as teacher burnout. The atmosphere at the school had changed when a new administrator had come in. All of the careful planning the faculty and staff had accomplished around restructuring was jeopardized. Mrs. K. had made the decision to move on as well. The performing arts team was breaking up. Colleagues of mine told me that the open atmosphere of change at the school slowly dissipated. As one of them said, she shut the door of her classroom and went back into isolation from her colleagues. The collegiality we had built no longer existed. She estimated that within two years, nearly two thirds of the faculty had left. This research study has taken me back into the halls of Cavanaugh, where I learned, made mistakes, and grew as an educator. The stories told here remind me of much of what is challenging and sublime about working with young people.

I have been struck many times in my readings and discussions throughout this study that scholars and researchers often treat adolescence as a foreign land—as a place that somehow exists separately from all of us, rather than a place where we all have been quite intimately. We carry that time in our lives around inside of us. Britzman (2003) points out that our attitudes towards adolescence are intricately entwined with our experience of our compulsory education (2). Each participant negotiated their adolescence in a unique way. Being involved in high school

plays was one way that we coped with the reality of our day to day lives. We enriched ourselves because of the experiences we had. We had something to look forward to and something to make us feel pride, even as we allowed ourselves to be tested.

I took away a lot of love of service. Jeremy discovered he was not alone in his passion for fantasy and pretend. Rosie learned pragmatic lessons in conceiving of and accomplishing large complex tasks. Annie developed a lifelong passion for the craft of acting and a strong identification as a performer. Tim expanded on interests he already had in creating and telling stories which has led to career pursuits in comedy and writing. Liz learned to role-play and has taken those lessons in work and family life. Dallas overcame obstacles, and learned to face his fears of unknown situations. We could have learned those lessons through other endeavors. But we associate these major lessons of our first sojourns into independence with being in school plays. The crucible of production gave us opportunities to try on different lives and to come in contact with wide varieties of people. We carry those lives and connections around with us in very intimate and profound ways.

I hear the echo of Dallas' tap shoes as he tries to slink off stage quietly to no avail. I can hear the catch in Rosie's voice as she sings of being far from the home she loves. I remember Jeremy being overwhelmed by the applause as he forgot to take a bow the first night of *Hello, Dolly!* Liz's shrill "Al-bert!" still rings in my ears as she saunters on stage in her over large mink coat. Tim is still tripping over the words "the Wicked Witch of the West," and Annie is still performing chainé turns across the bow of the S.S. American in *Anything Goes*.

There are no direct correlations here, no claims of transference of skills or learning that I can make with absolute certainty. Qualitative studies raise the questions, suggest tantalizing potential responses, and then back away. We were all highly involved students of theatre in high school, already present with a high level of confidence and verbal acuity.



I still put my hands in my pockets, a character trait from *Baby John*. Liz can still recite the first half of Titania's opening speech from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—the “beached margent of the sea” lives in her still. Tim can make a flower disappear while Jeremy can still feel the longing of searching for something “out there” where there's a “world outside of Yonkers.” Annie is a lifelong actor, and she still wants one of the costumes she had. Rosie still chokes up when she imagines the world she briefly inhabited in *Anatevka*. We all came to theatre with our hands outstretched, wanting something. As Jeremy put it, he loved “entering into a totally different whacko reality with a group of people that you don't know that all want something from it. All different things from it. And it was attractive.” We found that theatre productions shaped our identities, exposed us to memorable stories, and left indelible marks on our memories. We remember triumphs and fears, irritations and jealousy. We were swept along by the energy of our fellow classmates, poured our passions into every endeavor. We found a growing sense of independence, encouraged to make artistic choices and take risks. We looked for escape from our everyday lives and met versions of ourselves on the high school stages where we performed.

Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) discuss the effect that the researcher has on the researched. Sometimes the intrusion of the researcher can seem as an unnecessary intervention that can affect and alter the outcomes of research. When researchers engage in inquiry, those we talk to are changed (44). By reflecting on the past those experiences are transformed into the tales we tell in the present, and by turning them into conversations for a project such as this, the participants are encouraged by the very process to connect their pasts to their present realities. Rather than viewing this as a problem, Clandinin and Rosiek argue that when researchers are collecting stories, we are actually encouraging transformations among the researched: “the fact that inquiry is altering the phenomenon under study is not regarded as a methodological problem to be

overcome. It is the purpose of the research” (45). I could hear this transformation taking place among the participants. One of the clearest examples was when Annie was talking about the solo performance she had to create in her acting studies in Los Angeles. She said, “And a lot of those things you don’t realize that you take from high school, like, oh, I’m thinking to myself, I never written anything before and I have, I’ve written, we wrote plays, I mean, we did that. You think to yourself, ‘Can I do a one man show?’ Yeah, I’ve done it before. It’s just the fact of getting over fear.” In the middle of discussing her initial struggles to create the performance, she affirms for herself that she had indeed learned the basics of such a skill in high school:

My follow up interview with Jeremy pointed towards how much a research project can become an intervention of sorts. Jeremy said that he and his partner had a conversation shortly after our first interview. They discussed the state of their relationship, what they were happy and content about in their lives, and what they wished they could change. Jeremy blamed our interview for what ensued. He told his partner that he missed performing. His partner suggested that Jeremy use karaoke bars to find out if he really did miss it. Jeremy described to me a week of going to one karaoke bar after another to sing. He had a great time and said, “You fall in love with being out there. Entertaining is fun.” He finished by admonishing me, “This is your fault.”

If it is my fault, I will take the blame.

What we are to be, we are *still* becoming.

### APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Demographics- year of graduation, what plays were you in during which years of schooling. College or training since high school? Any plays or performances since high school? What are you doing now?
2. What comes to mind when you think about your participation in the school plays in high school?
 

Prompts: Do you have a favorite play? Tell me more about that...

Do you have a least favorite play? Tell me more about that...

Which character did you enjoy playing the most?
3. Why did you become involved in the after school plays? Or  
Why do you take the production or musical courses?
4. When you think back on your experiences what did you gain by being in the school plays that you still find valuable today? Amended after 2nd Interview to When you think back on your experiences what did your participation in school plays teach you that you still find valuable today?
5. What are your favorite memories of being in the school plays?
6. What are your least favorite memories?
7. What do you remember about rehearsals?
8. What performances stand out to you?
9. What do you still remember about the plays themselves, the characters, situations?
10. Which performances of your fellow students still stand out for you? Why?
11. How many of your high school memories are related to your participation in school plays?
12. Do you have any tangible artifacts from the school plays? What are they? Where are

- they? Why do you keep them?
13. Do you have any tangible artifacts from the school plays? What are they? Where are they? Why do you keep them?
  14. What was your favorite role? Why?
  15. What kind of reaction do you remember getting from family and friends?
  16. Is there anything else about your experiences in school plays that I haven't asked you about that you think it's important for me to know?
  17. Added after 2<sup>nd</sup> interview: What did you think about the play selections?
  18. Added after 2<sup>nd</sup> interview: Did you ever feel as if you "lost yourself" in a part? Describe...
  19. Added after 3<sup>rd</sup> interview: How much did the audience influence how you felt about a performance? Did you feel any responsibility towards the audience?
  20. Added after 3<sup>rd</sup> interview: How did the school plays and drama fit into the life of the school?

#### Follow Up Interviews:

Participants were asked the above questions they were not asked in the regular interview.

Added for follow up interview: How did you know you were doing a good job? How did you evaluate yourself? What made a performance good?

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**ABSTRACT****REMEMBERING THESPIS: HOW FORMER STUDENT ACTORS VALUE THEIR EXPERIENCES IN HIGH SCHOOL PLAYS**

by

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August 2013

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The high school play is an iconic pastime in many schools across the United States. Historically, educators, and scholars often characterize the school play as a performance of a script by an established playwright presented in a school in a manner that replicates the standards of professional theatre. Current scholars and educators discuss the school play as the latter part of a continuum that runs from informal dramatic play to formal presentation in front of an audience. Although scholarship in theatre education regularly discusses the school play as one of the most prevalent forms of theatre education, scholarly studies of the school play are rare. This qualitative research study claims the school play as subject of serious scholarly consideration by asking what is the value of the school play for students and how did being in plays in high school affect their adult live.

There are many assumptions made about the purpose of theatre education in primary and secondary schools. For example, scholars and educators make claims about the efficacy of the theatre arts in teaching cooperation, empathy, and self-confidence. Although many studies focus on the theatre classroom, very few focus on the co-curricular or extra-curricular practice of the school play, its potential educative function, or its impact on student learning. More information



is needed from former student actors reflecting back on their experiences in being in a school play to discover the potential long term impact this activity has for student learners.

This study has two main strands. The first is an intensive self-study by the author of his experiences in high school plays. The second is an analysis of a single case based on interviews conducted with former students of the principal investigator. These students are now adults. The purpose of the interviews was to discover how these former student actors value and make sense of their practical and aesthetic experience of the school play and what kind of effect that experience has had on their lives. This case study of former student actors features their voices and captures the complexity of their involvement in a particular educational theatre practice, the school play.

The study found that the six participants had positive associations with being in the school play, many feeling that their memories of high school are synonymous with their memories of the theatre program and productions. The study found that three features of the former students' comments and stories warrant further attention: role-playing, affective learning, and narrative memory. The stories and memories of the six participants reveal a complex matrix of memory, emotion, and learning, all through their participation in school plays, associations the participants believe they still find valuable and useful in their present lives.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

I am a native of the Pacific Northwest of the United States. I taught in the region for fifteen years as a high school theatre and English teacher. More recently, I earned an MFA in Theatre Directing at the University of Montana in Missoula. My regional theatre credits include The Montana Repertory Theatre, The Montana Actor's Theatre, and Millbrook Playhouse in Pennsylvania. My studies in theatre and directing have continued at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. I have four brothers, four nieces, two nephews, and a wonderful partner, Scott. Someday soon, I will also have a dog.