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Greetings NYSTEAs members!

I recently had one of those moments. You know the moment. Where you look around at your students and are astounded by how this current theatrical experience is having an impact on them. When you're reminded of why you do all of this in the first place. When you think "This is what it's all about." When you find yourself smiling about it in the car on your way home. These moments are special and they are what keep my heart pounding for theatre education.

In the fall, I brought my students to a production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* at the Sharon Playhouse (Sharon, CT). Here in the Hudson Valley, I sometimes feel like the only theatre my students are exposed to is the beloved Broadway musical, but there is SO much more theatre in our community: plays, new works, Shakespeare, one woman shows, staged readings, etc. I wanted my students to seek out these experiences and see what they could learn from them.

Act I of *Our Town* came to a close, the lights came up for intermission... and my students were less than enthused. If you don't know the play *Our Town* (Go read it! Fantastic play!), the first act doesn't have much to speak of for plot. It's really just getting to know the town, the characters, and their very ordinary lives. It's quaint, it's sweet, but to my Broadway spectacle loving high school students, it was a bit... dry.

Act II was much more exciting: there was a sweet love story, a wedding, a great scene between the groom and the father of the bride. After a brief pause, Act III began and, well, I don't want to give anything away, but my students were **MOVED**. It was very emotional and they were stunned. The theater organized a talkback for the students and the kids had SO much to say. They asked such high level questions, had personal and vulnerable reflections on the theme, and expressed with such truth how much this play had opened their eyes. I was verklempt.

One of the classes I brought to the play is called Theatre Production. In this course, the students choose a play to produce and we do it. Through the experience, the students learn how to mount a play from concept to curtain and are introduced to the world behind the scenes. The students begged me to do *Our Town*.

So, we did it! This brings me to my "moment." Here's an ode to the power of theatre education, through a class production of *Our Town*.

- The students playing **George, Emily, Mother Gibbs, Mother Webb**, and the **Stage Manager** were all great performers, but they had not yet had the opportunity to play leading roles in our afterschool program. This production gave them the opportunity to sink their teeth into some challenging acting roles and grow as performers. The performance drew the biggest audience we've ever had for a class production. Their smiles during curtain call were electric! I think they felt like superstars.
- **Doc Gibbs** had never been onstage before, except for an informal class showing at the end of last year. Line memorization had always been tough for him and he had a large role. At the beginning of rehearsals, he exclaimed "How will I ever memorize all these lines?? Can't someone else play this part?" Before the show, he said "What if I forget all of my lines?" and after the show he said "I can't believe I did that!!"
- **Editor Webb** often remained distant from other students. He participated in activities and collaborated with partners when necessary, but once the project was over, he returned to sitting by himself and didn't share much, despite my best efforts. After the show, the cast exited the theater and he *shouted* "We just NAILED that! Oh my God, that was awesome!!"
- **Simon Stimson** was only interested in one role: Simon Stimson. This student sometimes has trouble with focus and engagement. Since Simon Stimson didn't have much stage time, I wondered about how he would remain engaged when not onstage. To my surprise, he became enamored with the rehearsal process. He often would come up to me after rehearsal and say "Ms. O'Connor, wouldn't it make more sense for this character to enter from left instead of right? We established earlier that the church was offstage left and that is where he is coming from!" Or "Ms. O'Connor, what if we had the sound effect of a factory whistle here?" Or "Ms. O'Connor, I think we need to rehearse the choir scene more. Some of the singers are struggling with the new song." I asked him if he was interested in directing our next project. He thought about it and said "YES!"
- **Constable Warren** is a student with cognitive disabilities. We had a goal of memorizing the lines for his first scene and using his script for the second scene. The first time he was able to try his scene off-book, he smiled at me after every line. "Evenin' Mr. Webb," HUGE SMILE, "Simon Stimson is rolling around tonight," HUGE SMILE, "just saw his wife out to hunt for him," HUGE SMILE, "so I looked the other way." HUGE SMILE.
- The **costume designer** had relatively little theatre experience but loved to draw. While he performed wild improv scenes last year and was generally witty and gregarious onstage, once offstage he withdrew from others, put in his headphones, and waited for the bell to ring. Other students took a liking to him and sat with him, but he never added much to the conversation. I kept trying to pull him out of his shell, but didn't find much success last year. This year he expressed an interest in designing costumes. At our first production meeting, he presented us with a sketch of every costume that was to appear in the show, with applicable research images and color samples. We were blown away. While his conception of the costumes was strong, he was a little lost in how to actually assemble them. Other students who had done costumes before helped him every day. After the performance, I asked him if he enjoyed designing costumes, to which he replied "I just can't believe how many people helped me. I had no idea what I was doing, I didn't ask for help, and they just showed up. And kept showing up. And I'm just so thankful for them. I never could've done it without them."

There are more examples, but you get the point. Also, these are simply my observations. We can never know the exact ways in which our students are growing through these experiences. Was this production all smiles and warm fuzzies and smooth sailing? Of course not. No production will ever be. But through it all, our students are learning, growing, flourishing, and becoming the best version of themselves. Theatre really does transform students' lives.

Happy Spring,
Carlene O'Connor