

Theater? I Barely Know Her!

Barton Christmas, Peabody College

It started with a tour, as many things do. A tour of the future, wherein an eighth-grade class, in the midst of their impending matriculation from woeful middle school, takes a look around the brand-spanking-new facility that will contain their high school experiences.

The boy who we will be following through this tale is gawking at the cavernous theater in the school's center. This is not the cafegymatorium he has seen in every other educational institution. This, ladies and gentlemen, is a place for stories to be told. But he won't begin storytelling for quite some time. He will walk the halls of the school for almost two years, mere meters from the storytellers' workshop, without finding his way in. As the playwright Edward Albee once put it, "Sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly."

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When the boy arrives to the stage, his introductory theatre class's "Day One: Improvisation" provides the means of transportation. This part of the tale is a tour of red, the shade of embarrassment. Let's see how many shades we can tour through as we watch the boy embarrass himself.

He turns to his friend with a wink and a nod, volunteers the pair of them, and starts the scene with a line from one of their favorite comedy routines (because, at that age, improv is another word for stealing): "Okay son, you're six now, it's time to talk about sex!" Now, it's worth noting that the boy delivers this note in his most hopeful, most desperate attempt at an approximation of a Scottish accent. It's also worth noting that the comedian who actually originated the material in question was both actually Scottish and actually capable of yielding a laugh with it.

Shade 1 of red, a mild pink.

Then, if the falling-flat nature of the line's delivery isn't crushing enough, the boy's partner stays tight-lipped at his cue.

Shade 2 of red, a definite scarlet.

Finally, after the boy's attempt to turn the scene to monologue, the director calls them off and tells the class how this escapade exemplifies the natural urge to pander to the audience that we must all fight.

Shade 3, blood red, shamefaced, resolved to never again set foot on a stage.

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He's standing at the back of the theater, waiting to volunteer as an usher for this season's musical. She walks onstage, waltzes into the proscenium with a swagger and a chorus line costume. This is a tour of the cast. Also included are future best friend, future sworn nemesis, and her, an inclusion that cannot be overstated. Maybe he can try to walk back onstage.

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He's in the read through of his first play. She agreed to date him, he agreed to audition, he's the lead of the play, she's Puritan girl #2. Is any of that fair? No, of course not. She's the veteran here.

But this is a tour of the justice system. He is learning just how much the "justice theater" can be everywhere. If a story takes place in Salem, those curtains must be the shadows growing on the troubled, fearful town. He must be the visage of a weary and wary common man, waging peace against the courts. And if he shouts his first cuss word in that thespian cavern, what harm could that do?

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He's sitting on the planks of the stage, no script in mind today, just praying. If this den of drama is designed to let us all be other people, it has its moments for us to be incredibly ourselves.

This is a tour with God. This tour takes us criss-crossing through the curtains, those curtains that once held Salem and Anatevka and Athens. Now they hold him, crying out to the world and its caretaker. He wants an education. He can't afford an education. So what's the path ahead?

Then, as he taps the phone to switch songs, he sees the email. This is it. This is the last hope. Third try of three, last chance for scholarship, will they or won't they, is the price right? He opens it. Then he emerges from the curtains. Then, with a squeal, his pounding legs race him out of the backstage, out of the theater, out of the school. The class he was in wasn't that crucial. Not when he knows about the multitude of classes that lie before him. And how they are right down there in Music City, U.S.A.

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He walks into the theater. He is a stranger here now.

This is a tour down memory lane. Some may call it a stroll, but it's a damn sight harder than that, my friends. To walk into that theater now, that's an invitation for a flood. Residents of that flood? Well, there she is, the chorus line dancer who has come to hate him in the standoffish way that only a poorly-executed breakup can yield. He's a natural at that.

Other residents? There's her, part 2, I suppose. She was the part of the chorus line he didn't pick up on until their troupe arrived at Anatevka. They traveled side by side to Athens, and then he did it all over again. Makes you wonder why they let him keep trying. There's the rest of the boys. As camaraderie goes, you'd be hard-pressed to see any greater. If your friends point out you're an ass sometimes, and you deliver a similar package unto them? Well, we could all use that.

But the most haunting resident is the hand on the wall. His print hangs there in the paint, right alongside everyone else's. He wonders what his hand means to the theater now. Do they high-five it? Is that any small part of what "showtime" means for them? Or does it get left hanging, in that perverse eternal sense? This tour has taken too long. It's time for the Q&A, yes?

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I have lived very little of the life I intend to eventually live, and so the process is really only just begun. My time in that theater, however, was wondrous, laden with the terrible and beautiful power that permeates all things theatrical.

I am the boy, and this story is mine. I hope that you find the way to tell your stories. To speak your truth. To set your hair on fire. There are so many stories about you that you don't own up to, that you don't wish to tell. And I can only say, this journey we're on, this road upon which we tramp, it's a tour. And you need to guide it. Because if you don't, someone else will. And I like the way you tell it much, much better.