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Senior Synthesis Paper

I can remember the very day that I began my love affair with performing. I was at a tennis camp in the summer at a country club before third grade. I had grown up seeing the Tuscaloosa Children's Theatre performances and knew from the first one I saw that I wanted to be up there. My parents didn't believe that I would go through with the auditions, so they made me a deal. If I sang the song I had created to memorize the parts of the tennis racket in front of everyone at tennis camp – they would let me audition. Always eager to prove people wrong, I got up there and sang my heart out. It seems so small now, but the thrill of having everyone's attention and being in front of a crowd is an adrenal rush I will never stop chasing.

I can also remember the very first time I decided that I was interested in social justice. I was 11. My three younger sisters and older adopted African-American brother have always been best friends. We all shared friends and were always together. I had three neighbors that were my age that came over almost every day. The girls would come over and swim, have a slumber party or just hangout at the house. Eventually, one of the father's of those girls called my mother. He told her that his daughter was not going to be coming over anymore. His reasoning was that he did not want his daughters "sleeping around with niggers." My mother, never one to believe in censoring children, really struggled with how to share that information with my sisters and me. Ultimately, we got the picture, even as kids. Since that time, I have had many more experiences in my hometown and elsewhere that called race relations and injustice to my attention.

How do these two things relate? Performing has given me an avenue to pursue understanding empathy and teaching others. It has taken me many years to have patience with those that see in terms of black and white, but theatre has shown me a way to change people's minds and make them think outside of their privilege. I remember seeing my first production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Alabama with some of my middle school classmates. I remember watching that production and thinking about what a beautiful way that story was brought to life. I remember thinking how amazing it was that my classmates could watch this and sympathize with this black man and see from his perspective – understand the fear that came with something that is not a choice – one's skin. And, I realize that maybe theatre doesn't ultimately stop people from making a choice any different than they would before, but I absolutely believe that theatre has the power to make people think and that is the first step towards change.

Seeing the way that theatre can be a tool for teaching empathy has influenced the way that I argue and discuss. I once shared opinions in a way that was wholly factual; I now know that telling a story and sharing an experience means a world of difference. Furman is the epitome of white privilege. Rich white people rule the campus, with those of color mostly comprising the athletic community here. I cannot even begin to explain how many classes have been utterly hindered by the lack of diversity here. If experience is what teaches, but we have no experiences and hear no experiences from people of color, how will we ever move forward with any kind of dialogue?

Believe it or not, much of my time as a college student has been comprised of convincing people that racism still exists. It's astounding. I have spoken with at least 7 (too many) white men on this campus and had them complain about affirmative action

and describe how difficult their plight was that they would be looked over for medical school because of the color of their skin. They generally expressed that they didn't believe racism was a real issue anymore so they didn't understand why programs of that sort were "picking on them." I combat this type of discussion with experiences that I've had in my own life or from things I have learned from others - specific stories that show how misguided their ideas are. Theatre taught me to use stories, and I have never found a more useful tool.

Being a part of community theatre and theatre at Furman also exposed me to other types of people that are 'different' (I mean this based on our understanding of a hetero-normative society). Before I even knew what it meant to be homosexual, I had made plenty of friends and had mentors and heroes that described themselves that way. So, when in fourth grade, my teacher told me that all gay people were going to hell, I was able to question that. I could pull my own experiences; I had stories to share. In my experience, theatre is usually the most random assortment of individuals. You have people from all different walks of life, whether that mean they have different skin, disabilities, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, family situations, gender, and so on. It's an accepting community of all people, and that has framed how I live my life.

I think that theatre is the type of art that enhances everything you do, so I never questioned pursuing a theatre education. I can prove this because I have somehow talked about theatre in every interview I have ever done. I was once asked to describe my most poignant leadership experience. I racked my brain, and the toughest thing I could think of was stage managing. I described how intense the responsibility is. You have to multi-task to the extreme. You're running production meetings, making sure everyone's ideas have

a sense of unity, making sure everyone is at rehearsal and prepared, delegating tasks without letting things fall through the cracks, running a crew, keeping everyone on task, keeping everyone encouraged and motivated all while getting almost no recognition from anyone. You are the silent super star – the unsung hero. It is a tough job to have, but when I explain what all it entails, people are always impressed and astounded.

I've used theatre in the job world in more ways than describing responsibilities in an interview. For example, theatre has taught me to have a tough skin and take constructive criticism. People underestimate how much vulnerability is involved in performing as an actor. You're on stage, and you're doing your best to embody this character and make it real and sometimes directors will tell you plainly that you aren't doing good enough. It's hard because there's only so much you can do once you're in full swing of a rehearsal process to make it better. It's also hard because it feels personal. I was once in a rehearsal, and we were rehearsing a scene where was fantasizing about being Indiana Jones-esque. I had done my research and was prepared, but I just wasn't giving the director what he wanted. I was on the verge of tears out of frustration when the director took his water bottle (after asking permission, of course) and started throwing water on all of us. He made us have organic reactions and stop trying so hard. He gave us a tangible obstacle. But, not all directors are willing to give you that kind of attention and help. There have been shows when I have worked tirelessly inside and outside of rehearsal, and the director was never really pleased. There have been times when I had an amazing audition and then it's clear the director expected more once we got into things. These experiences are hard and discouraging, but you learn to shake it off. You learn to

accept that sometimes, oftentimes, you aren't perfect. It never stopped me from trying, though.

I have also learned about rejection. Rejection and I are very close, intimate friends. I don't feel superior about much, but I do feel that I have a better handle on rejection than any of my friends that don't participate in theatre. I cannot count how many shows I have not been cast in. Fully prepared and dying to get the part, sometimes I just wasn't the right fit. Again, it feels personal. But, you learn that it isn't. This is, oddly enough, one of the most valuable things I have gained from my theatre experience. In high-school, I was rejected from some of my favorite colleges and wasn't picked for scholarships I thought were designed for someone just like me. But, because I had experience with rejection and knew that there was always a new opportunity I never let it get to me.

Similarly, I have been cast in shows with the smallest part and watched others play my dream roles while I sang unheard in the background. I learned how to smile and work hard and prove myself even in the smallest tasks because those small things still get recognized. There is a theatre mantra that "there are no small parts, only small actors." I think that applies to the outside world too. I have worked in a couple of internships where I was a very small, seemingly insignificant and dispensable pea in what appeared like a very large pod. But, because of my experience in theatre, I knew that if you just do the best work you can do at what you're given – you will find merit in your work – and oftentimes, people will notice. For some reason, people really love it when you don't act like you're better than small responsibilities. I think it shows a humility and humbleness that is refreshing.

As a theatre artist, I have honed the ability to be the most competitive person and simultaneously a gracious competitor. Auditions are times when you compete with your very best friends for the same parts. One of you will get the part and the other won't. Sometimes you can tell yourself that they got the part for objective reasons out of your control – their look, vocal register, experience. But, sometimes, you feel as though you were equally as capable, and they were just chosen over you. It's a very hard pill to swallow. If I got down and discouraged every time a friend of mine was cast over me, I would never audition again. So, I learned to compete with myself only. I set goals for myself that aren't "get this part" or "be better than this girl." Instead, I make goals like trying something outside the box in a cold read or coming prepared with an extra piece. I have learned to accept when I've done my best and not feel diminished by not receiving the ultimate reward of getting the part that I want.

Learning how to manage that competitive nature with some sense of grace truly affects everything I do. I have many friends who don't apply for jobs because they are scared of rejection, or they get devastated because someone else wins an award or receives an internship over them. It is exhausting to live life like that. I apply for every internship I feel interested in, regardless the qualifications, and I don't think twice because if I don't get them, it is okay. At Furman, people get really tied down by the idea of what it means to be successful. In my opinion, the environment is toxic and isn't mentally healthy at all. Everyone is comparable no matter what the ultimate goal. By being immersed in the theatre community, I've learned to be completely and utterly pleased by doing the best with whatever situation I'm given. If I am cast as Girl #4 near

tree, I am going to be the best version of that I can be, and I am not going to compare myself to the lead actress because that isn't useful.

Another incredibly valuable skill I learned from my time in Furman's theatre classes is that sometimes you will know absolutely nothing about a topic, and you will feel absolutely terrified and overwhelmed and as though there's no possible way that you can complete the task, but somehow you will. I have never felt this more than in my Scene Design class with Will Lowry. I knew absolutely nothing about scene design. I knew very little about sets at all. I knew next to nothing about drawing, sketching, and researching this type of task. It seemed absolutely unrealistic that I could ever really accomplish any of the assignments for the semester. But, I took it one day and one assignment at a time. No, my designs are not going to ever win me a Tony Award. But, I gained such a valuable skill by being able to tackle a class and projects that seemed way out of reach.

When I graduate from Furman University, I will be attending law school. I knew that I wanted to go to law school before I even entered Furman. I can't know for sure, but from my research it really seems like the perfect combination of my theatre and social justice passion because honestly, law is a performance. Whether you're in a courtroom or on legal counsel for a company, you're creating a narrative and telling a story, and that's what my theatre education has taught me to do. If I'm being totally honest, I think that my unique combination of theatre and political science, paired with the generalized education at Furman, has made me more prepared than others for law school.

For one, I am good at communication, and communication is incredibly important in law. Lawyers must be orally articulate, good listeners and astute observers. This is one

of the more obvious ways that my theatre degree comes into play. In the Furman Theatre Department, an emphasis in all of our classes whether it be acting, design, or directing, is on communicating the story well. In a conventional court case in a courtroom, that is the same agenda. The lawyer needs the judge and jury to believe the narrative that they are telling beyond a shadow of a doubt. This is even relevant if working in a different atmosphere. Even if it is two businesses trying to mediate and come to a resolution, the lawyer needs to craft a story that makes it seem like the other is getting a deal, even if they aren't. Crafting a case in an articulate way that is concise and relatable to a jury or opposition is the difference between a positive outcome and a negative one.

Listening and observing are also important for lawyers to be able to analyze what clients tell them. Being able to read between the lines of spoken and body language is something that theatre helps with a lot. By having those skills, a theatre student is able to know what questions to ask a client, where to pry and what to leave out. A theatre student also knows how to read the jury based on body language, which can be really influential when deciding what to emphasize in a closing statement or in an examination of a witness.

People skills are also critical. Law is not an abstract practice. No matter how smart someone is, if that person cannot communicate or if that person gives off the wrong 'vibe,' it can greatly influence the outcome of a case. A lawyer must be personable, persuasive and able to read others. This allows them to decide upon the best approach to take in order to achieve the desired outcome. One thing that is unique to theatre, as I mentioned earlier, is its ability to teach empathy. As an actor you have to delve into this character's mind, feel their feelings, know their heart. As a lawyer, it is important to be

able to understand the feelings of your client. It is also important to be able to understand the feelings of your opposition.

Research is another important aspect of law. Being able to research quickly, effectively and in depth is important for creating legal strategies. Along with that, being able to absorb and comprehend large amounts of information is also important. Theatre helps in this regard because there is a lot of research that needs to be done no matter what your theatrical responsibility is. That being said, the final product will be easy and manageable to understand. Much of the research will only be used to influence the ways that you choose to execute the narrative.

Creativity is a very understated, but important aspect of being a lawyer. Not only do you need to be logical and analytical, but lawyers display a great deal of creativity in their problem solving. The best solution is not always the most obvious and in order to outmaneuver your opponent, you often have to think outside the box. I learned a lot about this in the most unlikely of places – my stagecraft class. Alan Bryson taught me how a problem that seems to have absolutely no solution can turn into an amazing challenge that results in the product being even better than the original would have been. Thinking outside the box is what Furman Theatre department does, and I think that all of these examples more than prove that I am prepared in a unique way for my future in law.

Unlike many people in our society and especially my generation, I don't think that everything should come down to how to have the 'best career' or make the most money. I definitely think that those are realistic parts of our world and that they are important. But, I think theatre is so much more than a career or a hobby. It is an art that stands on its own. It is inclusive of all people: all races, all sexes, genders, backgrounds, struggles, and

lifestyles. It creates a home as an environment for those who work in it and those who view it from the outside. It creates an experience. It makes us feel. And, I truly believe that it makes us better people just by being a part of it.

The most important part of sharing this world with each other is actively participating in being better humans and influencing others to do so as well. Theatre provides such a multi-faceted way of doing this. It offers many different ways to participate. It reaches so many people in so many different ways. We will never be able to literally put ourselves in other people's experiences in a more visceral way than through this live performing art. Whether you're the lead actress or an audience member in the very back of the theatre, theatre is a transformative experience.

I have been completely and utterly privileged to be able to grow up surrounded by such a diverse and supportive group of theatre artists. Theatre has absolutely infiltrated everything I do. It has colored my value system by teaching me how to empathize with others and that there are so many different sides to every story. It has taught me important personal skills like how to be tough and take criticism. It has taught me how to feel for others in ways I never would have been able to discover without it. And the best part about it is that while I don't plan to pursue a career in theatre, I will forever be able to participate in this art form and continue to learn from it.

Works Cited

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