

**A STUDY OF CHILDREN IN MUSICAL THEATRE: HOW
WE REALLY ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER**

Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT:

I never thought that I would be directing a full children's theatre production while still being a full-time college student. When I was hired at the YMCA of the Northshore three and a half years ago, I never thought that I would be directing at all. At the time, I was very content with teaching my classes, and being a theatre camp counselor in the summer. I had no idea that just a few years later, I'd be not only directing at one of our seven locations, but finding my real passion. Now, I aspire to work full-time as a Creative Arts Director upon graduation, so I can continue this wonderful journey of theatre education across the Northshore. However, that is not what this is about.

This past summer 2017, when Senior Creative Arts Director Nicole Heena asked if my schedule would allow me to be able to direct the fall show in the Haverhill location, I knew I had to figure out a way to do it. I've worked with the Haverhill students multiple times in the years that I've worked for the Y, and they have always been some of the kindest, most fun, caring children that I've gotten to work with. When I realized that I would be able to direct them, I did not even hesitate to say 'yes.' I knew that it would be difficult being in school full time and also directing, but I definitely wanted to make it work.

Going into my thesis, I anticipated that I would be teaching these young actors about what it means to be an ensemble. That regardless of lead roles or how many lines their character has, that the work that they all did together to make the show was what was important, was what *mattered*. I had no idea the lessons that they instead would teach me, and how much I would learn about teaching in the process. I never had to "teach" these kids how to be an ensemble. The love these kids and the staff have for this program,

its values, and each other brought this team together in ways I never could have imagined. Ensemble comes together as a result of great leadership, not only from staff, but from other actors, and those skills are ingrained in these particular actors from the smallest six year old to the oldest 15 year old. The Y Core Values of Respect, Caring, Honesty, and Responsibility taught these kids how to be an ensemble. I was just a guiding hand in that process.

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PREPARATION:

Preparing for this position was slightly more complicated for me due to the timing of it all. I had just finished the run of a show I was performing in down in Plymouth, MA, was only back home in Salem to assistant direct/choreograph the Haverhill summer camp show for a couple of weeks, and then I was heading off on tour around the country to do a show about consent education and sexual assault prevention with a company called Speak About It. Needless to say, I was very busy, and actually unexpectedly, had very little access to the internet in order to email parents notifying them about the audition specifications for this show while touring.

“Vacation Responder” in my email became my best friend, and my only logical answer. While I was traveling, parents would email me, and my email would automatically update them on whatever my situation was at the time, whether it be that I was in the middle of a flight across the country, in the middle of a ten hour drive across three states, or that I was simply doing shows and had no access to the internet. Vacation responder kept all of the children’s parents updated on my whereabouts, and about why it might take me anywhere from a few days to a week to respond to their emails. I always made sure to set aside one night in every location where I made sure to absolutely find wifi (no matter how surprisingly difficult it may be), and completely answered any and all questions they had, as well as assigned audition slots to families that requested them. This was surprisingly difficult because many parents would simultaneously email myself and Nicole, or not know my email yet and only email my boss, so I had a huge slew of parents to respond to, sometimes multiple times. If I were not on the road, it definitely

would have been much simpler, but I made it work. And I am still, to this day, incredibly grateful for the family's patience in waiting for my responses.

In the many times that I did not have internet access, I got all of the paperwork done for the show. I read the show as many times as I could in those many hours at the airport, and spent many a flight preparing blocking and choreography for the production. My time on planes actually became very productive, and new best friends, Dramamine and ginger ale, kept me from getting plane sick in the process (usually).

In those times that reading and writing became too much for me due to motion sickness, I instead used the time to make a French Scene Breakdown of the show, marking up my script, and then eventually making it into a color-coded digital copy for my staff. All of this took an extremely long amount of time, and eventually lead to my doing research in the form of a Pinterest board (see attached link*)¹, as well as re-listening to the Junior score and watching the old movies whenever the other preparation wasn't underway.

I also had to deal with a very unexpected situation during the preparation for this show, and inevitably through almost its entire process. While touring, I woke up one morning to a broken ankle. I had been having issues with my right ankle since April, but it was never anything bad enough that I felt the need to go see a doctor about it. I danced through two full runs of shows on this ankle with minimal issues, and was finally not dancing on it when I woke up in Portland, Maine spontaneously unable to walk. This was a very terrifying surprise for me, especially with the auditions for this show looming overhead. I started physical therapy as soon as possible, and did everything I could to

¹ *Link to Pinterest board: <https://www.pinterest.com/brittaninapoli/high-school-musical/>

heal it as quickly as possible such as resting it when I could, using my crutches for as long as I was advised to use them, constantly wearing a constraint boot on my right foot, and icing it as much as physically possible. This ankle was a huge buffer for me in regards to physically being able to take on this show and mentally believing that I could do it.

It definitely was a shock to the kids when I came into callbacks to teach them a dance call with the boot still on. I am so proud of myself for overcoming this physical barrier that was thrown on me so last second before this process began, and I am unbelievably and unendingly grateful to the kids as well as their families for still trusting me to teach all of the choreography involved in this process even with a broken ankle. Throughout the process, it healed, and I began to test my ability to teach choreography in my more normal methods. I honestly felt cared for every time I would jump on my ankle (once it was mostly healed and I could do this again), and the kids would freak out that I was going to break it again despite my telling them that I was okay and allowed to do that. There's nothing like a physical injury to act as a nightmare to a children's theatre director whose main specialty is not only choreography but physical theatre, but I'm very proud of myself for making it through this.

AUDITIONS:

Location: Haverhill YMCA

Dates: 9/22, 9/23

Times: 6-8pm

10-2pm

Day One:

Number of children seen: 23

The first night of auditions went very successfully. The students came in one at a time (usually) at their scheduled time slots. We had many people either go earlier than their scheduled time slot, or much later due to a plethora of walk-in auditioners who did not have a scheduled time slot. Eventually, we made the walk-in auditionees wait until those who had scheduled slots had all gone because it was causing a large backup on our audition list. There were 10 kids waiting at one time upstairs because four walk ins came in at the same time that the three actually scheduled at that ten minute time slot showed up, and the three scheduled for the next ten minute time slot showed up early. It was madness for about twenty minutes of trying to get each child seen in a reasonable amount of time, but it definitely showed those walk in parents the importance of scheduling an audition slot ahead of time. However, I did not want this inhibiting the experience of those families who had scheduled slots, so we tried to keep the process as smooth and timely as possible by seeing the scheduled auditioners first, and having the walk ins wait.

Process-wise, my stage manager, Ravenne, would meet the families upstairs, and begin their check-in process. In order to meet program requirements, each child's family member had to fill out an audition form at the door if they had not previously filled one

out online upon scheduling their audition. After that, they were either sent to the front desk of the Y to officially register for the program, or if they had already registered beforehand, were sent downstairs to where they would actually be auditioning. My music director, Lauren, and myself were waiting downstairs for each auditioner.

We had each child enter the room, and would greet them in as friendly a way as possible. The first thing I noticed was how nervous all of them were. Most of these children have known me for almost four years, yet the pressure of having an audition for me added a layer of nerves that would not usually be there. To counter this and make the audition experience more fun, Lauren and I would greet the child as they entered the room, ask them their age, and what they were singing. We also would let the child know that they were free to begin singing their song whenever they felt ready, and whenever they felt comfortable beginning. For some, this was a more trying process than it was for others. Some of the younger children would need us to prompt them to begin singing by reminding them of how their song started (if we knew the song at all). If they needed help remembering the beginning of their song and we did *not* know the song they had prepared for the audition, we would ask if they would like to sing something else such as “Happy Birthday” or “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” instead. Something familiar enough that they could hopefully recognize it, and sing it comfortably. Sometimes, a child would need to cover their eyes or turn around in order to have the confidence to sing their piece. This was always encouraged and met with positive enthusiasm by myself and Lauren. It is easy to discourage a child from performance arts with negative comments or feedback on their auditions at a young age. I like to believe that positive reinforcement, and pride

in whatever bravery the child shows in that moment is extremely important. It encourages them to find more confidence in their future auditions/performances.

After some auditioners sang their pieces, depending on what I was interested in seeing them read for, I would either have them read a side for the character I was interested in seeing them play, or have them read a side that corresponded to a character not mentioned in the side that is similar to the actual character from it. Before reading, I would give them some background about what had happened just before that scene so the reader knew the given circumstances of what was going on at that point in the play. I would also give them a description of the personality of the character that they are reading for and what they could possibly want in that moment. For example, in the Kelsi/Sharpay side (see attached form^{1*}), if the child was reading for Sharpay, I would inform the reader that they had just done their audition for the school musical and that she had turned Kelsi's ballad into an upbeat pop song. Sharpay is queen of the school, and queen of specifically the theatre kids at East High, and for Kelsi to have the nerve, so to speak, to stand up to her in regards to her performance is presumably uncalled for. Sharpay is showing how strong of a diva she is, and her power over Kelsi in that moment. For those reading for Kelsi, I would give them the same pretense that Sharpay and Ryan had essentially just butchered her ballad that she had worked so hard to compose at their audition by turning it into a pop song, and for them to think about how this would make them feel. However, at the same time, I wanted them to remember that Sharpay has the power of high status over Kelsi, and Kelsi wants to be more outspoken against Sharpay than she feels like she can be in that moment. After giving them that information, I would ask if they had any questions about the exposition of the scene or the character, and then

tell them they could begin whenever they felt ready. Either myself or Lauren would read opposite the child, and whilst they were reading, I would take notes on their reactions to what was happening in the scene, and on the acting choices that they were making. After having them read once, I either had seen what I had needed to see in regards to casting that child, or I would give them direction of a new choice to make while reading it and have them try it again, but differently.

For some children, there was an additional portion of the audition post-reading where Lauren would teach them a short phrase of a song from the show, and see how they sounded singing it, how quickly they picked up the music, and how well they took musical direction. Not many auditioners were asked to do this portion, but those that we saw potentially being called back for specific lead and supporting roles were usually the ones who were asked to sing.

Those kids who were not asked to read specific sides or sing were usually asked to do a fun movement exercise instead so that I could not only get them to make a fun acting choice with their body, but simultaneously get them to relax and maybe have some fun making a silly choice in an audition! This was very helpful with our younger auditioners who might not have been able to read or at least read well enough to have read a side on the spot in the auditions. I usually only asked them to do one of two movement exercises depending on how behind we were on time, and how quickly we needed to move on to the next auditioner in order to remotely stay on track with our time schedule. They would either be asked to stand on one side of the room and, in the most creative, interesting way they could think of, travel across the room while pretending to dribble a basketball, and then shoot the imaginary ball into the trash can on the other side

as if they were shooting a basket. Or they would be asked to pretend that they were the queen of their school, and to show me their best cool, diva strut across the room. It was very fun seeing our younger actors open up during these exercises, and watch them gain confidence after being told to just have fun with it since there is no incorrect way to do either of these tasks.

By the end of the night, we had seen 23 auditioners. Many sang Disney songs or songs from *High School Musical* that are not featured in the junior MTI script. Lauren and I spent a little over a half hour after the last auditioner seeing who we were interested in possibly calling back for Sunday after seeing these first auditions. We also thought about who we were interested in having read/sing for what characters on Sunday if they did end up getting called back. This was very difficult because we had seen so much talent in that first night of auditions, and knew that we would see much more talent the next day, as well.

Day Two:

Number of children seen: 15

Day two of auditions made our lives *very* difficult in the best way possible. We had so many incredibly talented children come in and audition that casting became

unbelievably difficult for us afterwards. Day two, we saw less children than on day one, but in the four hour span, we did have short breaks where we were able to start planning who we wanted to see at callbacks and how we would like those callbacks to happen.

Similarly to day one, we had the auditioners come in one at a time, and would ask them to identify the song they were singing, followed by welcoming them to sing whenever they felt ready to begin. Most children did bring Disney songs, lots of *Moana*, and one girl brought a song from *Porgy and Bess* by Gershwin entitled “Summertime”. It was a very fun day where we heard lots of beautiful voices singing lots of very fun songs.

After many children sang, I asked them to either perform the same movement exercises that I had auditioners perform on day one of auditions, or read sides and sing an excerpt from the score with Lauren. Many children performed the latter that day, and surprised us with their ability to make effective acting choices in their sides, responding and reacting in interesting ways despite having the side as a cold read (a very difficult skill for adult actors, nevermind children, some of whom are new to reading in general). An abundance of the children who sang excerpts from the score also surprised us with their ability to pick up music so quickly, and perform it so well. For children, some of whom have very little music experience, they did a really wonderful job, and showed us that they truly are there because they love creating art and being artists.

At the end of the day, after seeing the final auditioners, Lauren and I spent about an hour making a final decision about who to call back for the next day so that Ravenne could then contact those families that they were needed for callbacks. It was a very difficult process. After reviewing all of the audition forms, and discussing each child’s individual audition, we narrowed our list down to the children that we definitely wanted

to see the next day, and those few who we were still unsure about. Next, we categorized the children based off of who we definitely wanted to see in specific roles the next day. This definitely helped us narrow down our selection. Originally, we began with 15 children that we were considering for callbacks. After deciding who we definitely wanted to see read for very specific roles, we realized that we did not need to see those children that we were unsure about, and only needed twelve of them the next day. If we weren't completely sold that they should definitely be reading/singing for a specific role, then we probably did not need to see them actually read for it when we were certain that other children definitely fit the role better. By the end of the discussion, we decided the following:

We needed to see the people read/sing for the following roles:

Troy

Gabriella

Sharpay

Ryan

Chad

Zeke

Martha

Taylor

Kelsi

Ms. Darbus

Jack Scott

The rest of the children who auditioned would be fit to minor and ensemble roles following callbacks the next day.

Additionally, I had a child who was unable to attend the auditions due to a foot injury email me explaining her situation, and ask if she could instead send in a video audition due to her inability to walk at that current moment. As someone who was also recovering from a foot injury at the time, I wanted to allow that child to still have the chance to audition. When she sent in her video, she had a very strong, mature read for a difficult monologue from the television show *Grey's Anatomy*. Lauren and I immediately decided that she would be a fabulous fit for Coach Bolton due to the character's maturity and her inability to possibly learn the choreography in the show since Coach Bolton is technically only written into a few scenes of the total show. We figured that character would be a great way to have her still be involved, show off her strong acting skills with a fun character, and also not have to worry about learning choreography if she was unable to dance still by the time of the performances.

CALLBACKS:

Location: Haverhill YMCA

Date: 9/24

Time: 2-4pm

Number of children seen: 12

Callbacks were such an amazing day that gave me a lot of confidence in regards to being able to actually cast this show with children who were fit to play each role. These children blew myself and Lauren away with their commitment to the roles and focus in the callbacks. They learned portions of three different songs in an hour, many of which have complex harmonies, and they also performed in both small groups as well as duets. Watching how quickly they learned this music was incredibly impressive, and I was very excited to see them learn more music come the actual rehearsal process.

The songs that Lauren and I decided would be the most effective in seeing these children's abilities to sing the specifically singing-heavy roles of the show were as follows:

- The first 39 measures of "Start of Something New"
- The first verse and chorus of "Breaking Free"
- The first 29 measures of "What I've Been Looking For"

These songs not only effectively show the vocal types of the various singing characters in the show from the characters actually written into these roles (i.e. Troy and Gabriella, Sharpay and Ryan), but the other singing roles in the show that have similar vocal types (i.e. Kelsi, Taylor, Chad, etc.). Seeing all of the children sing cuts of these songs in different pairings gave us a very good idea of which voices blended well

together (for those who would be singing duets if cast in certain roles), and who would actually have the vocal ability to sing each role.

Following the singing call, I passed out different sides from the script to specific children and had them go up to read them in various pairings to see what kind of acting choices they would make in the moment. I tried having the child I was most interested in casting as Troy be paired with the girl I was most interested in playing Gabriella when they read that side, and followed a similar process for the other characters with the other sides. I wanted to verify that the instincts I was having in regards to possible casting following the original auditions and singing callbacks were valid, and that specific children were best fit for the certain roles that I was beginning to see them in. This definitely helped me in regards to narrowing down my search even further.

By the end of the acting call, I had a *very* good idea of who I wanted in all of the male lead and supporting roles, and for some of the female leads. It felt like the puzzle pieces were falling into place, and so I wanted to end the callbacks on a really fun note for everybody who had taken time out of their busy lives on a Sunday to come to this callback.

We ended our time at callbacks with a dance call. It was very quick, only twenty minutes, because I wanted to make sure that I definitely saw everything that I wanted to see in every single possible pairing in the acting callback. In that moment, I decided that I would rather have the strongest actors and singers in each role, and that we would take the time to learn the choreography in rehearsals since the show is so heavily based in

acting and voice work rather than a “heavy dance show”². Resultantly, the dance call became more of a fun ending to the day than an actual deciding factor in these specific auditions. In those twenty minutes, I taught the children a portion of the “We’re All In This Together” dance. They actually picked it up and learned it very quickly. We were able to learn the choreography for the entire first chorus, run it twice as a group, split up into two smaller groups, and then run it twice together again as a full group before it was time to go. It was so much fun, and a very cathartic way to end a long and somewhat serious day of callbacks. It truly showed the kids that this show is not about the individual characters at the end of the day. It is about coming together and the importance of working together as that ensemble.

Post callbacks, Lauren and I had our work cut out for us. We went to a nearby Starbucks and began to cast the show. We started with the boys because we both felt that they had cast themselves through what they showed in callbacks. The girls were much more difficult to cast. We both agreed on the strong singer and actor who we wanted to cast as Sharpay. When it came to Gabriella, however, we were in a little bit of a disagreement. We were debating between two of the girls since they both had wonderful callbacks for the character. However, it truly came down to which roles each actor would inevitably grow the most from not only as an actor, but as an artist. This heavily informed our decision, and made it possible for us to decide between the two girls.

² I would categorize shows such as “West Side Story”, “Cabaret”, and “Anything Goes”, etc. as specifically “heavy dance shows” since very specific genres of dance are inherently important to telling their story, i.e. tap dancing in “Anything Goes”, Fosse in “Cabaret”, and the new genre of jazz dance created for “West Side Story”. You cannot tell any of these stories without these specific styles of dance. This is not the case for *High School Musical, Jr.*

After that, we cast all of our featured and ensemble roles based off of either who was at callbacks that we thought would be great fits and deserved a featured role, and those who had strong auditions but just weren't quite fit for any of our lead or supporting roles in this show. Those filled themselves in pretty quickly. About an hour and a half later, we had a cast list! We sent it over to Ravenne to have her look over it, and send it out to the group the next day.

“There is no one ‘right’ order in which to rehearse. Some people like to spend time making character choices on their own before working with their partners. But if you do so, be careful not to short-circuit your creative process or cut down your range of choices too quickly using the excuse ‘This character wouldn’t do that,’...[improvise] your way through the scene to discover actions and impulses that the character inspires in you...Remember, you are ‘sketching’ the scene, making more and more decisions as you go along.” (Stephen Wangh’s An Acrobat of the Heart, pgs. 278-9).

³ See attached copy of the rehearsal schedule form

WEEK ONE OF REHEARSAL: Jumping over the first bump in the road.

“It’s the start of something new. It feels so right to be here with you. And now looking in your eyes, I feel in my heart the start of something new.” (Troy and Gabriella, “Start of Something New”, *High School Musical, Jr.*)

The night of our read through was very exciting. I could not wait to introduce all of my cast members to each other, and begin to get to know them. However, upon arrival to rehearsal, I was informed by Ravenne that our Zeke's mom had just contacted her declining the role due to conflicts with the schedule. I also received an email from a guardian declining another child's role who would have been a featured ensemble member and a cheerleader. I additionally found out that our Sharpay would be absent for a majority of Tuesday rehearsals (our only music rehearsal day) due to having rehearsals for another show. It very quickly became apparent to Lauren and myself that we had completely neglected to take conflicts into our decision when casting this show. However, we were still happy that we had cast who we saw as the best fit child for the role, so I was willing to adjust the rehearsal schedule in order to work around conflicts. Lauren and I quickly decided that we would read for the missing characters that night, and recast Zeke in the next 24 hours before Thursday's rehearsals.

Before that could happen though, we needed to complete our first rehearsal. I had the entire cast stand in a circle, and introduce themselves by saying their name, how old they were, their favorite flavor of ice cream, and what character they were playing. I very quickly learned that most of the younger children and ensemble members did not know what clique they were a part of in the ensemble, and did not know what some of the cliques even were. Because of this, I then spent time defining what makes a "clique", and what each clique actually was in this play. I described how the thespians were the theatre kids, the jocks are the sports kids, the brainiacs are the super smart kids (which they promptly corrected me by saying "They're the nerds!"), and the skater dudes are the kids at school who are "super chill" and love to skateboard. After this, I opened up the floor to

questions to see if anyone needed further clarification. Some of the named characters, such as Kratnoff, asked about the who their character was, but other than that, the confusion over what the different cliques were seemed to be cleared up.

Finally, we had our read through/sing through. Before beginning, we reminded everyone to only speak if their character was speaking in the script, and that everyone was allowed to sing along to all of the songs since we did not technically learn any of the music yet. It was very fun, and all of the kids were super into it. They were very surprised by how excited Lauren and I were about the story, and even more shocked when Ravenne, Lauren and I started singing along with all of them. I think they expected us to remain serious and stoic since we were the adults in the room, but by singing along with them, it helped establish that we were there to have just as much fun as they were having, and began to build that ensemble feeling between cast, director, music director, and stage manager.

Following this first night of rehearsal, we had a mandatory parent meeting with all of the actor's parents and guardians. At this meeting, I was finally able to truly introduce myself to all of the actor's families, explain who I was, and tell them how truly excited I was to get to direct this show. For those who had not met me in the previous years when I was working at Camp Tricklin' Falls, it was a wonderful opportunity to get to know them, and answer any questions that they had at the time. I made sure to talk through the formatting of the rehearsal schedule, how to know if their child was called that day, and also was able to introduce Lauren and Ravenne to the families. We made sure to heavily emphasize that should they have any questions about scheduling, conflicts, or if they were going to be late or absent for rehearsal, that they were to contact Ravenne, and not

myself since that is part of her job as the stage manager. However, I did let the parents know that should they have any questions specifically about choreography, blocking, music, character, or even if they just wanted to check in and see how their child was doing, that they were always welcome to reach out to me at any time.

While I did still get many emails regarding conflicts at first because the parents knew me better than they knew Ravenne, and would often forget that they were supposed to email her, I definitely received less emails than I would have had we not made this announcement at the parent meeting. The parents eventually adjusted and began remembering to either email or call Ravenne instead, especially when they would send me a last minute email saying they were running late (which I usually would not see since I would be warming up the kids by that point), and they would get a concerned phone call from Ravenne wondering if they were firstly okay, and secondly, on their way. Y protocol requires that any child that does not show up for a rehearsal that they are called for without an explanation have their family called to make sure that they are okay. Additionally, as staff who not only work with but love these children, we are concerned for their wellbeing, as well, and want to make sure that they are okay. This was all explained at our parent meeting, and started to form that relationship for myself and the rest of our team with the families who were entrusting their child's care with us.

That Thursday in our second rehearsal, we began learning "Stick to the Status Quo", which is, in my opinion, one of the most complicated songs in the show due to its length and the number of people performing in it. At 5 minutes and 5 seconds, it is the longest song in the show, even after the "Megamix", and so it was what I described to the children as "a monster...a fun monster...but one that would take a lot of time and practice

to figure out”. At the beginning of rehearsal, I officially checked in with the child who had been re-cast as Zeke, and she was incredibly excited! We were ready to begin! I walked through the current floorplan with the children so that they understood how the stage would hopefully look at this moment (I was unable to solidify anything with my technical director and set designer, Grace, at this point, so I warned the children that the setup of the stage was subject to change). Surprisingly enough, after the first two hours of rehearsal, we had more than half of the number done which was *much* more than I ever anticipated to finish after one rehearsal of that song. By the end of the night, I had choreographed the jock’s section, the brainiac’s section, the skater’s section, Troy and Gabriella’s section, the thespian’s section, all the way through Ryan and Sharpay’s section. It was amazing! I made sure to thank the whole cast, and tell the children how impressed and proud I was of all of the work that they got done that night. We also made a recording of what we had finished so far, and Ravenne uploaded it to the Google Drive so we could share it with the kids.

On Saturday, we finished the entire number. We were surprised by the arrival of four Junior Actors Club members who had registered for the class the day before it had its first meeting, but they immediately stepped in and learned very quickly. The Junior Actors Club is a class that gives younger children the opportunity to be a part of the large scale productions without having to attend rehearsal three days a week. Instead, they meet for one hour on Saturday mornings with the whole cast, and are only present during one or two numbers in the show. Each Junior Actor is paired with an older “leader” or a buddy who helps keep watch for them backstage, and helps teach their smaller buddy the choreography for the show. It also helps establish an older individual in the cast that this

very young actor can trust and go to if they ever have any questions. Having these leaders not only promotes the YMCA of the Northshore's core values of respect, honesty, responsibility and caring, but it also gives our older actors a sense of responsibility by teaching them how to be a good example to those younger actors around them. It promotes youth leaders who are not afraid to take a stand in their community, and help others who are in need.

Even with our Junior Actors joining us, we still finished the entire song with enough time to run the entire number twice before dismissal. Once again, we made a recording of the entire number, sent it out to all of the families in their weekly newsletter (see attached form^{2*}), and I thanked all of the children for doing such an amazing job that week in rehearsal.

WEEK TWO OF REHEARSAL: Tragedy strikes.

“When the *status quo* is rotten...the only possibility is to judge events in relation to a possible goal...” (Brook’s The Empty Space, 32)

Our second week of rehearsal started out on shaky ground. After the previous Saturday's rehearsal, our stage manager, Ravenne, was taken to the hospital due to sudden appendicitis. With Ravenne's health in mind, Senior Creative Arts Director Nicole Heena assigned me a temporary production assistant, Alex Pasquale, to substitute for Ravenne while she healed. Alex was great, and is now a permanent substitute for team Haverhill should anyone fall ill or have an emergency in the future.

Once Tuesday came, however, we started off much stronger. The actors learned music for both "Stick to the Status Quo" and "We're All In This Together Reprise" with Lauren. I had two intentions with teaching the actors these songs first. Both songs are the most likely to be familiar to children in this age group. Even if they had not seen the movie previously, they would likely recognize these two songs from their limited exposure to the show from their friends, auditions/callbacks, etc. Also, those are two of the most complicated songs choreographically in the show. Therefore, I like to teach those dances earlier on in the process since it will take time and practice to pair that movement with the singing.

Since we had already learned "Stick to the Status Quo" choreography the week before, I wanted to begin teaching the next two most complicated numbers choreographically. "Getcha Head In the Game" is what my music director calls "a musician's nightmare" because it is rhythmically all over the place. It is important to note that it is not rhythmically challenging in the way that Sondheim's composition is. "Getcha Head in the Game" is the result of poorer, less crafted musicianship, especially in the cut made for the Junior score which causes the confusion in its composition. Contrastingly, Sondheim's work are beautifully and artistically crafted with purpose and

clarity. Because of its poorer construction, this makes it not only difficult to teach musically, but difficult to teach choreographically. It is resultingly a very difficult song for children specifically to understand musically.

Teaching the choreography for it was not as difficult as I anticipated, despite the song's rhythmic challenges, however. The kids picked it up surprisingly quickly, and only truly struggled with the "basketball knees" that I choreographed into it.

On Saturday, we had an all cast rehearsal where we predominantly worked on learning choreography for "We're All In This Together Reprise". It was extremely fun, and a really great way to top off the end of our second week of rehearsals. The kids were extremely excited to learn what they called "the High School Musical dance", and I was extremely excited to teach them it. I cited to them before the rehearsal that the choreography for the chorus would be pulled from the movie (it was the only thing that felt right), and told them the different sources they could go to outside of rehearsals to review the various chorus sections, whether it be from the actual movie clips, or the "Dance-Along" version featured ten years ago on Disney Channel.

Additionally, this week, the production team realized the conflicts that many of our actors had with the schedule, specifically our Sharpay. In retrospect, this was something that Lauren and I should have taken into account more when casting. We left the audition forms with Ravenne for filing and digitalising, so we did not have access to their conflicts in that moment, and honestly did not think of asking for the list before casting the show at the time.

Having no choice post-casting but to completely redo the schedule was tedious, but necessary, since one of our leads would be absent for a large chunk of our Tuesdays

where she was originally predominantly scheduled. In the future, we decided that we would pay more attention to conflicts when casting. However, we were inevitably happy that we made the casting choices that we made despite the difficulty of conflicts. We had cast the children in the roles that were not only best fit for them, in our opinion, but best fit to further their growth as actors and artists. Therefore, we were inevitably proud of the casting choices that we made despite the conflicts. Ravenne sent out the new schedule in a paper format as well as a digital format for the parents as soon as I finished creating it, and we reminded parents to send any future conflicts, whether they be due to illness, travel or anything in-between to Ravenne.

WEEK THREE OF REHEARSAL: The start of “Start of Something New”!

“Recipe for Creating a Character:

Mix: 1 cup script analysis

1 cup structure

1 cup substitutions

1 cup feelings

Stir until well blended. Then add:

1 ½ cups improvisation

2 cups moment-to-moment discoveries

Sift all ingredients thoroughly to remove all ‘acting’. Then beat in:

4 cups homework/preparation.

Pour into a rehearsal pan and bake for as many rehearsals as you can get, until the character is well-formed and springs back to the touch.

Decorate your finished character with a frosting of:

1 tsp. accents and dialects

½ tsp. props

1 tsp. costume

Add a dash of hair and makeup

Place your finished character on stage or set, and let the audience enjoy!”

(Templeton, *Acting Lions*, 57)

Our third week of rehearsal, we delved into the last of the complicated musical numbers for the show, specifically “Bop to the Top” and “Auditions”. On Tuesday we began with music for the former. “Bop to the Top” in the Junior production is not the fun, upbeat song from the movie. Or not merely it, rather. “Bop to the Top” in the Junior score is a complicated layering of that original pop song, layered with the soundings from the championship basketball game, layered with the soundings from the science decathlon. All three are supposed to be happening at the same time, but in different locations, so staging-wise it was very difficult. However, today was just for figuring out and learning the music with Lauren.

The kids struggled to learn this piece, partially because of the timing of it all, and partially because they were having a difficult time paying attention that day. Granted, this song was extremely complicated and difficult to follow along. However, many of the children were either distracted by talking to their friends, or distracting others by trying to talk to their friends rather than paying attention to Lauren. Because the skaters and thespians are technically not written into this song, Lauren and I wanted to add them in musically with the jocks and brainiacs, since the blocking would include all of the actors. Therefore, the skaters would sing with the jocks since the skaters would be blocked as the championship games attendees. The thespians would create the contrast by singing along with the brainiacs during their attendance at Ryan and Sharpay’s callback. However, when trying to add the skaters and thespians to their new groups, the skaters and brainiacs were continually getting confused because they were not listening to which group they were supposed to join. It should have only took hearing Lauren announce which group they were to sing with one time, but unfortunately, it took about five reminders because

talkative actors kept getting confused when the reality was just that they were not listening. At that point, Lauren and I held the rehearsal, and had a discussion about respecting Lauren and her time with us each week, and thanked those actors who had been working hard and listening throughout the rehearsal. I let it be known that I did not want to see actors disrespecting Lauren or their fellow cast members by talking during rehearsals again. It went well, and those who were distracted were more focused after. Since they are kids, they obviously still got distracted once in a while, but the times were farther and fewer between than they had been before we had this discussion with them.

That night, Lauren also taught the kids “Wildcat Cheer” which is the opening song of the show. This song was challenging for the kids. It is extremely short, and incredibly repetitive, however the rhythms are a little tricky to pick up right away. Once they picked up the rhythm, however, they simply were forgetting to follow along in their books, thereby getting confused on the lyrics at each individual point in the song. Lauren took a moment to remind them that they were not expected to know all of the lyrics right away, and to use their scripts until they felt truly comfortable not only with the music, but the lyrics so as to stay true to the composition provided in the score.

After that, most of the cast was dismissed for the night, and only Troy and Gabriella were required to stay so they could learn “What I’ve Been Looking For Reprise”. This song is absolutely gorgeous, and the only true ballad in the entire score. It incorporates difficult harmonies, vocal range, and layering. Both Lauren and I knew that this song would take a large chunk of time to learn, especially because of the difficult harmonies. However, Mikayla and Jackson picked it up beautifully. Of course, there were parts that they struggled with since it is a challenging song, but overall they were

focused, and picked it up quickly. By the end of the night, they sounded like two songbirds ready to take on the rest of the show, and Lauren and I were incredibly proud of them.

On Thursday, we started learning the choreography for “Auditions” which is the hilarious song version of the audition scene from the movie. Without attempting to, I realized at the beginning of that rehearsal that I cast all really small actors in these comedic roles. However, they completely stepped up to the plate and ate up the opportunity to have their moment to shine. They were so unbelievably hilarious during this song. I wanted the entirety of the piece to appear as a catfight between the actors, and show the contrast between when they were attempting to impress Darbus (spoiler alert: they don’t), and when they were fighting each other for the opportunity to show off at the audition. These young actors completely brought this number to life for me in only that first rehearsal, and it was an absolute joy to not only teach, but watch afterwards! Between the actors playing the auditioners, and Ms. Darbus and Kelsi’s reactions to whatever they may be doing at any given moment, I was literally crying because I was laughing so hard. It was an extremely fun number to teach them, and they all truly bonded over learning how to safely push their fellow actors on stage for this number!

That night, we also blocked scenes 2, 3 and 6, and these actors’ focus, as well as their willingness to try something new was amazing. This was the first time that we did blocking that was not simultaneously choreography, and watching them begin to find their characters for the first time was exciting. They were equally as excited getting to start seeing the connections that they have to other characters in those scenes, and start finding their characters body/voice.

On Saturday, we had an all call rehearsal again where we worked on the opening scene of the play “Wildcat Cheer” and followed that into “Start of Something New” which directly follows it. Because this number was highly incorporating the use of not only the platforms onstage, but the audience, it was a little overwhelming to watch originally because it appeared that children were simply everywhere when in fact they were not. I had to remind not only myself, but the confused looking actors that they would be much more spread out in the actual space, and would be at different heights. This helped keep the actors, especially the smaller ones who appeared to be blocked by taller actors in the moment, from worrying that they would not be seen.

“Wildcat Cheer” regardless of the level changes, definitely would need some clarification after this first night in order to make the scene more active and exciting, however, it was a good start. Heading into “Start of Something New” afterwards was heartwarming, however, and all of the kids were very excited to get to learn this pivotal number in the show.

The choreography for “Start of Something New” was one of the first parts that I was able to clearly discover and choreograph at the beginning of this process. I remember sitting in the Creative Arts office at the Salem Y, and just dancing around to the song. That dance ended up turning into the choreography for this number, and it’s organic nature was what made the kids not only have the ability to have so much fun with it, but also made it simple for them to remember. The movement just flowed. “Start of Something New” quickly became one of my favorite pieces of choreography in the show, and watching the kids put their own spin on it as they got more comfortable with the movement was lovely to experience.

WEEK FOUR OF REHEARSAL: “We’re all in this together” after tearing our friends apart...

“When you perform a somersault in space which you are usually not able to do because it seems impossible, you regain some trust in yourself....It is not knowing how to do things that is necessary, but not hesitating when faced with a challenge.”

(Jerzy Grotowski)

Similar to the weeks before, we started off our week doing music with Lauren. This week, however, not everybody was called. Only the jocks, the brainiacs and Kelsi were called that night, and it was much easier to find focus because of this. We had a staggered call so that there would be nobody waiting around while others learned their music. Because of this, we started off the night with the jocks and finally learned the music for “the music director’s nightmare”, also known as “Getcha Head In The Game”.

They actually picked it up pretty easily. Since most of the song is Troy singing and the jock ensemble echoing him, it was easy for the others to pick up what Troy was already singing for them. Rhythmically, it went much smoother than anticipated as well, probably because they had already familiarized themselves with it when they learned the choreography. Our Troy was a great leader for the rest of the jocks, displaying the Y core values strongly during this rehearsal. He came in ready and prepared to sing his song, familiar with the rhythms, and script in hand. Everytime Lauren gave him a note, he would mark it down in his script with his pencil. Jackson was a wonderful example for the rest of the jocks about how to come prepared and ready to a music rehearsal that night, and they all seemed to follow his example strongly. He was a great leader.

After “Getcha Head In The Game”, the brainiacs, jocks and Kelsi began learning the music for “We’re All In This Together” and “Counting On You”. This was where I made an error, however. I called all of the jocks and brainiacs for both of these two songs. However, I should have only called those specific jocks and brainiac leads who sing in “We’re All In This Together” only, and not the ensemble jocks and brainiacs as well. The ensembles should have only learned music for “Counting On You”. This got confusing once we began learning choreography for these numbers, and these characters

were not called to learn that dance. Consequently, some of them were also then confused about whether they were supposed to learn the blocking for “Counting On You” or not when we got to that rehearsal as a result. This was completely an oversight on my part, and I made sure to not only apologize to those actors who subsequently learned an additional song, but welcomed them to sing in the wings during it since they would not be blocked on stage during that number. I also made sure to set some extra time around to fill in the jock and brainiac ensemble that missed the “Counting On You” blocking rehearsal in the future due to the confusion. For the future, I will make sure to really check my french scene breakdown when scheduling everything, music rehearsals and blocking rehearsals, so as not to make a mistake like this again.

When learning “We’re All In This Together”, the lead actors singing each solo did have some trouble with the rhythms, surprisingly, since this version of the song has the same rhythms as the reprise which they had already learned. This surprised both Lauren and myself, but she took the time to really walk them through the whole song while making sure that they knew what was going on at each point.

They only got more confused with rhythms during “Counting On You” which is a song only featured in the stage version of *High School Musical* and not the movie. It is the musical version of the scene where Taylor and Chad are convincing Troy and Gabriella to drop the callbacks, and stay committed only to the events their cliques are competing in instead. It is a very aggressive scene, and shows the negative effects of peer pressure. We made sure to discuss this the night that we did blocking for this scene, so as to keep the rehearsal room a safe space for the actors, and also to make sure that they

knew that what Taylor and Chad were doing in this scene was not okay or appropriate in any way.

While learning “Counting On You”, there is a lot of layering, especially towards the end of the song when Troy and Gabriella are saying lines while the ensembles repeat a line of the melody multiple times in an escalating fashion. Keeping track of which number of these repetitions they were at was tricky, and eventually clicked with enough time and practice. It definitely was one of the most musically difficult songs for them to learn however because it was the only song that was completely unfamiliar to most.

The following Thursday, we blocked more of the scenes, and I got an entire 45 minutes to work with just Sharpay and Ryan on “What I’ve Been Looking For” choreography. This was so much fun for all of us. “What I’ve Been Looking For” is an outrageously corny song. It is a ballad converted into a pop song that is then sung by these two siblings in the most obnoxious way possible at their audition. I wanted the choreography to reflect how corny the conversion into a pop song made this piece, and really have the two actors ham it up.

After teaching them the choreography, and watching them grow more comfortable with the movement, I wanted to see them get even more ridiculous with it. We took some time and talked about how they viewed their characters, and what they were like. Both actors agreed that Sharpay and Ryan are larger than life, and absolutely ridiculous at times. They also both agreed that the characters are incredibly corny in this song. Afterwards, I gave them one of my favorite pieces of direction of all time. The kids are always laughing at me for talking about how much I love dairy products, usually ice cream, but how I am consequently extremely lactose intolerant. So this piece of direction

definitely made our Sharpay and Ryan laugh. I told them to “be so corny that my lactose intolerant self has a stomach ache by the end of the song”. And *they did it*. The staff was laughing so hard at this absolutely incredible, but ridiculous number by the end of their 45 minute rehearsal, that we all had tears coming down our faces. They absolutely killed that number, and it was not only fun for the audience to watch, but so much fun watching them have fun performing it.

That Saturday was honestly the day that I was dreading. I set aside the entire rehearsal to teach the blocking/choreography for “Bop to the Top”, which was the most intimidating number for me in regards to blocking this show. It was very difficult for me, as a first time director, to wrap my brain around how to teach each individual part of this song without neglecting to focus on another group present at the rehearsal. Thankfully, these kids are wonderful, and were incredibly patient while waiting for their chance to learn their part. Ravenne was great about giving them reminders to stay quiet while I was working with others, and the level of respect that they showed for the other cliques while they were waiting to learn their own part of the song was admirable. These children exemplified Y core values of respect and responsibility that day to themselves, myself, and each other, and I was incredibly proud of them. I made sure to thank each and every one of them for their patience and focus at the end of rehearsal that day, and also tell them that they did an amazing job learning such a difficult number.

WEEK FIVE OF REHEARSAL: Confusion

“Central to Grotowski’s conception of performance was the notion of the ‘total act’, a culminating moment in the actor’s role in which s/he is able to transcend the performance of score and the technical demands of the part, revealing a trust that is paradoxically both personal and universal. It is an act of self-sacrifice, requiring that the actor reveal in the presence of the spectator that which is most secret and essential, an impossible truth that transgresses the barriers of the admissible.”

(Hodge, *Actor in Training*, 204)

This was the week that got confusing because I had called for the jocks and brainiacs to learn the music for “We’re All In This Together” and “Counting On You”, but then lost the communication with them in regards to calling them for only “Counting On You” blocking. We had about half of the ensemble show up for the blocking rehearsal on Thursday, and the other half did not realize that they were called to learn “Counting On You” still. Because this was completely due to my own error, I set aside extra time to teach those who missed that afternoon to learn that number.

But first, Tuesday! On Tuesday, there was a staggered call with just those involved in the “Auditions/What I’ve Been Looking For” song called first for music with Lauren, followed by an all call for the second half of rehearsal. This was super fun to hear, especially since the kids had so much fun learning the choreography for these two numbers previously. Again, because they were already pretty familiar with the music, it made it much easier for them to understand and hear the layering that was happening specifically in “Auditions”. We did spend more time on “What I’ve Been Looking For” however because of the harmonies that Sharpay and Ryan sing together for almost the entirety of the song. Lauren wanted to make sure that those two actors felt completely comfortable singing these harmonies by the end of that rehearsal before moving on, and it definitely helped them in the long run. We did have to eventually go over those harmonies again, but that is to be expected with a difficult song. All of these actors did a great job learning music that night, and were focused the entire time.

After this, everyone quietly came in, and waited for them to finish with Lauren before heading over as an entire ensemble to learn “Breaking Free” and “Start of Something New” music. This was our first exposure as a cast to “Breaking Free” in this

process, and it was definitely very exciting for everyone, including the staff. Troy and Gabriella picked up their parts in both songs very quickly, and the ensemble was able to spend lots of time with Lauren figuring out their parts. By the end of rehearsal that night, it really felt like this show was starting to come together, and the energy in the room was poignant.

On Thursday, we had the “Counting On You” and “We’re All In This Together” rehearsal that I previously mentioned. It actually ended up working out that only the older lead actors (for the most part) were there to learn it. It allowed them the time to work on character development throughout this song with me without the risk of the younger ensemble actors becoming a distraction to their work. That was the day that I taught Troy and Gabriella how to scream healthily, along with the rest of the actors present because the script called for them to yell at the end of the song. However, teaching only those two actors how to scream properly and not the others who were present in the room felt unfair, so we all had the chance to learn this important, voice-saving skill. As the teacher, it was simultaneously nerve-wracking and hilarious watching all of them practice their healthy scream because I was incredibly proud of them as a vocalist for their healthy, correct placement while performing this task. However, I was also terrified that somebody upstairs would hear the screaming and assume something was wrong. We kept this lesson as short as possible while still giving them adequate time to rehearse it enough to gain the skill.

“Counting On You” was also the most stylized song in the show, and the kids loved it. I staged it as a reflection of what was happening in the two separate cliques in their two different locations at the same time, using the chalkboard placed vertically as a

barrier between them to show that they were in different spaces. All of their movement mirrored what was happening with their role's counterpart on the other side of the chalkboard which made it very visually appealing to watch. Anything that Taylor did, Chad did, too. Anything that Martha or Jack Scott did, Zeke would mirror it on the other side. It made for a very interesting stage picture, and gave each child's character a true purpose in the story of that song, including each of the ensemble members.

After this, we learned the choreography for "We're All In This Together". I wanted it to really echo what the song is about while simultaneously not confusing the actors with what's happening choreographically in the reprise of this song. Therefore, the blocking for each chorus was the same, sometimes just with a different facing to switch things up, and each part was in a different formation than in the reprise so as to make it look visually different onstage. Additionally, the rest of the song was just about the teamwork of coming together. Each jock was paired with their brainiac counterpart, and Jack Scott and Kelsi (love interests, as we are told by dialogue at the beginning and end of the show) were also paired together. Symbolically showing the different cliques coming together was a beautiful way to transition into the following number "Bop to the Top" which is transitioned into right after this song ends, and shows how the cliques decide to help Troy and Gabriella get not only to their different events, but their callback, as well.

On Saturday, we veered from the schedule and switched things up a bit. Since, the "Megamix" was going to consist of choreography already featured in the rest of the show as a sort of choreographic, musical summary of the show, I wanted to make sure that the kids had already learned all of the other dances that were featured in the "Megamix".

Because of this, rather than learning the choreography for the “Megamix” that Saturday, we instead learned “Breaking Free” since it is also a complete ensemble number, and features the entire cast.

The ending of “Breaking Free”, like the entirety of “Start of Something New” was one of the first things that I came up with when doing the original process for this show. Seeing it come to life made me as emotional as I anticipated when choreographing it. The kids eventually made fun of me (lovingly, of course) at every performance when this piece of choreography made me cry every night. “Brittani! Why are you crying?!” they’d ask, and I’d always respond, “You just make me so proud.” Every time. This first Saturday was the first time they got to see this.

At the very end of the song, when they have all finally come together and start singing, my leads run off the stage and join the others in the audience, creating a huge circle around the entire center section of the audience where they finish out the ending of the song. It was breathtaking every time. It became the kids mission to make sure that they were always completely filling in the circle. I gave them a note on this first Saturday to make sure that they filled in any huge gaps in the circle so that it was always complete. After seeing how incomplete it looked after the first few times while there were gaps, the kids made it their mission to never let that happen again because they knew that the completed circle, that full ensemble moment of being together so purely and honestly with the audience, was too important of a moment in the show to mess it up. I am so

proud to say that they hit that circle surrounding the entire audience every night. Not a single gap to be seen⁴.

⁴ See video of "Breaking Free" at one of the performances in the attached film reel. My apologies in advance that you can probably hear me crying and sniffing in the background of the cut from the performance. They just made me so proud.

WEEK SIX OF REHEARSAL: Trick or treat! No Tuesday rehearsal this week! Happy Halloween! ...And no, this is not a trick.

“The remarkable thing is that once we have acknowledged that there is something there-- an image? a feeling? a thought?--we can access the emotional life connected with that image by *mechanically* moving our eyes to the right position...By executing precise physical choices that we discovered during our training and rehearsal process, we can dependably access our emotional acting sources.”

(Wangh, *An Acrobat of the Heart*, 212)

Due to Halloween night, we cancelled our Tuesday rehearsal, meaning that we did lose a music day, but it was completely okay because the kids were doing so well with picking up their music already and were so ahead of schedule with blocking/choreography. With the night off, I used the break to prepare for rehearsals happening later in the week, and was very excited to get back to Haverhill.

On Thursday, I *finally* got to spend time with Troy and Gabriella doing character work. Due to their age, it was proving to be a difficulty to get these two actors comfortable working closely together at first. Typical pre-teen awkwardness. However, in this night, we finally had an opportunity to address this, and get started. I began the night just talking to these two. I opened up to them about how proud I was of all the hard work that they had done so far, and how they should be proud of themselves. They were playing two difficult roles that were more mature than themselves, and that's a difficult thing to access at their age. I also let them know about the moment that Lauren and I knew that each of them was perfect for their roles before casting them post-callbacks. It was a very special, intimate time, and it was really nice getting to finally share a private moment with these two amazing, young actors.

After this, I really wanted them to start opening up together. I made them sit down for three minutes and write down, on a piece of paper that only I would see, any concerns that they had with their character; anything that was making them feel awkward or uncomfortable, something they were feeling about their character, questions about their character, etc. After the three minutes, I took their papers, and promised them that only I would read it, and that it was going to be a way for me to figure out how to help them

further in not only discovering their character, but making them feel totally comfortable on stage together.

This began with getting comfortable touching hands/holding hands. The actors were told that if they were uncomfortable or wanted to stop at any time, all they had to do was say so and we would stop. However, by the end of the exercise, they were both having so much fun that they didn't even realize that they were making hand contact. We began by throwing an invisible ball back and forth between them, and then began changing the size of the invisible ball. This made them more comfortable making eye contact together and working together as a team rather than individuals. After this, we changed to the Little Ball of Light exercise. In this exercise, there is an invisible little ball of light held together between the pointer fingers of the two actors. This little ball of light is constantly moving, and can change the entire body shape of the actors involved, making them have elbow to elbow contact, knee to knee contact, or even back to back; anything to keep the little ball of light from falling to the floor. They really took well to this exercise, and were finding all sorts of funny ways to keep the ball from falling to the floor. One time, they even accidentally separated and both rushed to the floor to scoop up the little ball of light together from the ground. In this moment, they really bonded together and it very apparently showed when they blocked the next scene.

Following these exercises, I taught them one more trick to do anytime they were about to go onstage together. When I was a freshman in college, an upperclassman taught me this trick when I was nervous backstage before my first college performance, and it has always been something that has really stuck with me. You make eye contact, and stick your pointer finger together with the other person's, and then push all of your

energy into your pointer finger, creating a connection with that person, as well as amplifying your own energy in the process. You keep this up until your hands explode into shaking hands, and then immediately go onstage. Before blocking “What I’ve Been Looking For Reprise” with them, I had them try this trick and then immediately enter the scene. It immensely helped with their chemistry, and made them more connected onstage than I had ever seen before. This became part of their personal warm up each night before the show, and before every scene that they had together.

After this hour, all of the participants of scene seven came in and we pieced all of the different complexities of this scene together. This began with Jack Scott announcing the auditions, and then seeing the “Auditions” song. After that immediately came “What I’ve Been Looking For” followed by the Sharpay/Kelsi scene that leads into Gabriella and Troy’s entrance before they sing “What I’ve Been Looking For Reprise” with Kelsi. Piecing all of these songs together and finally giving them a concrete order in the actor’s minds was essential for moving forward after this difficult part of the show, and after running it a few times, all of the actors were getting much more comfortable knowing which part of this long scene came when and where.

On Saturday, we finally learned the infamous “Megamix”. The “Megamix” is not only supposed to be a culmination for the entire show, but it is essentially a huge compilation of every song sung throughout the score. In this way, it is incredibly confusing because the transitions were not always composed very cleanly between songs, so sometimes the actors would get confused about which song was coming next. However, they did go in sequential order of the full score, so once they got more familiar with it, they were able to move forward more easily.

Learning the actual “Megamix” choreography was simple for the most part since it consisted of choreography that the kids already knew, they were just in different places for it. For the most part, we were able to move pretty quickly through learning it, leaving enough time to learn their bow order at the end of the rehearsal. Learning their bows was *extremely* exciting for the kids, especially those who were new to theatre with this production. Seeing their own pride at their peers clapping and yelling for them just in the rehearsal space was so exciting for them, and their pride shone through their eyes. They all felt extremely proud of themselves that day, and reasonably so. We were a month away from tech week, and we had just finished blocking and choreographing the entire show!

WEEK SEVEN OF REHEARSAL: Unnecessary key changes, and exciting schedule changes.

“The Homologous patterns are initiated by both arms or both legs together, and are reflected in the movement of the frog, rabbit, or kangaroo, for example...They differentiate the upper and lower halves of the body and occur in the sagittal plane.”

(Hartley, *Wisdom of Body Moving*, 74)

Week seven of rehearsal was exciting because we officially finished the show! On Tuesday, the kids learned the entire “Megamix” with Lauren. While Lauren and myself originally anticipated that this song would not be difficult since they technically already learned all of the music for it, it ended up being a very confusing number due to the number of key changes to the songs that they had previously learned in different keys. Breaking this muscle memory took lots of time and practice, but with Lauren’s patience and hard work, they were finally able to hear the differences. One way that Lauren combatted this issue was through a call and response technique where she would show the kids what they were originally singing by playing it out on the piano followed by playing the key that they would be singing in the “Megamix”. Then, she would have the kids repeat in the changed key. This seemed to work effectively for the kids. After teaching them each individual song and transition in the “Megamix”, she had them try singing it the entire way through. The first time through was difficult. The transitions between each part of the song were rough, and often the kids had trouble hearing the key changes between each section. With more practice, the repetition of this new song helped cement it more for them, and eventually it clicked.

The rest of the night, Lauren worked through as many of the songs as possible starting at the beginning of the show, and working through it in order. Because there was really only an hour left of rehearsal, and each song had moments in it that needed to be relooked at, we only made it through act one of the script before heading out for the night. However, having the time to review that music with Lauren was extremely helpful, and not only helped refresh the kids’ brains about the actual music, but helped them begin creating an order of the show for themselves. We heard a lot of comments such as, “Oh!

This song is next?! I totally thought that came later in the show”, and other similar comments. Getting to sing through even just act one gave them a sense of the order of the show, and this definitely helped prepare them for what came later that week.

Our first full review day! Originally, I had scheduled to work scenes 17 and 18 that day, but because the kids were picking everything up so quickly, we had already blocked out those scenes previously. Instead, because we had the whole cast, we had our first true review day that Thursday. It went very smoothly. The kids were excited to revisit the numbers that they hadn’t touched in a while, and it was great getting the time to finally work on more specifics in regards to character work, vocal inflection, and physicality.

Because these kids had not been exposed to lots of physical theatre before working with me, they tended to be stuck in what Hartley (Wisdom of the Body Moving) describes as homologous movement of the upper extremities. Most of their movement choices involved moving their arms in the same way, at the same time, and they were often stuck in regards to how high up or far out they would reach. Their arms were almost stuck inside a box of sorts, and the rest of their body with it. By having the time to work on finding their character’s physicality in that review day, we were able to specify how their character would choose to move in contrast to how they as a person would choose to move. This opened them up to making larger, more complex choices, and gave new life to the characters.

We spent a lot of time on this day specifically revisiting “Stick to the Status Quo”. Because it was one of the first numbers that they had learned, they had forgotten a lot of the movement that we had originally learned from it. They remembered the actual

choreography, but when it came to specifics with it, such as the timing, and what exact position their hands should be in, those specifics got a little muddy with the time break. Therefore, we spent a lot of the night just reviewing. I worked with each clique specifically on what was expected of them, and reviewed their individual movement segments in the order that they appear in the song: jocks, then brainiacs, then skaters, and then everyone altogether. This seemed to work really well for them, and having that time to specifically ask me any questions about their part in the whole song made it less intimidating on the whole, and easier to approach. By the end of the night, this number was significantly cleaner than it had been when we started that night, and I looked forward to getting to clean the rest of the show as much as this number.

On Saturday, we had our first run through! It went surprisingly smoothly considering it was the first run through, and half of the cast was under eight years old. After reminding the actors to follow along in their scripts so that they always knew where we were, they did a pretty great job of figuring out their cues, and knowing where they needed to be and when. I took the time to explain, especially to the younger actors, that if they were ever super confused about what was going on, to ask three friends and then come and ask me if they still did not have an answer. This prevented the opportunity for the actors to bombard me with dozens of questions about blocking, choreography, or even just what time it was, and take me away from focusing on the scene at hand. I learned this tool from one of the actor's moms who was a teacher ("Ask three and then me!"), and it became incredibly helpful as we moved into doing runs and tech week. I was still occasionally surrounded with questions during a run, but I would always take the time to remind the actors of the three and then me rule, as well as remind them that

they should respect the actors performing the scene at that moment by holding onto their question until we had a break. Instilling the Y core values like this into our everyday rehearsal life was effective at creating a safe, respectful environment for the kids where their patience was highly appreciated.

WEEK EIGHT: Off-book!

“The purpose of the material becomes the path that leads the actor out of the woods. An actor can get lost if all they do is look at trees. The trees are the words, and the words can mean anything. You need to ask, ‘Where’s the path?’”

(Templeton, *Acting Lions*, 45)

Off-book date was the first Tuesday of our eighth week of rehearsal. I purposefully planned our off-book date after we had officially finished blocking out the entire show, and after we had finally learned all of the music with Lauren. By doing this, it allowed the kids to learn the material comfortably in rehearsals with the safety of their script before allowing them the time to learn each individual section of the show. At the beginning of the process, I announced this off-book date to the kids, and told them that the easiest way for them to make sure that they were prepared for this day would be to memorize each scene/song after we learned it that week. By doing this, they would slowly be memorizing each section of the play slowly rather than overloading themselves come the night before the off-book date, and not effectively memorizing. Most of them did this method and it sufficiently paid off come that Tuesday when they were easily off-book, and only had to call for line occasionally due to finally having the show rehearsed in order from beginning to finish.

It was very obvious which actors had learned their lines over the rehearsal process, and the few who tried to memorize the entire book and score the night before. Those actors struggled a lot during that first off-book run with Lauren, and I made sure to sit them down after the rehearsal was completed, and explain the importance of being off-book for the show. By the end of the next week, they were much more prepared in and in a much better place during our runs. However, they did need that moment of seriousness where we warned them that by not knowing their lines, they not only were letting the other actors in their scenes down by constantly calling for line, but were not being good role models for the younger actors who were watching them come in unprepared. This hit

very close to home for these few actors, and they improved not only on their lines but their leadership for the next week.

On Thursday, I got to work more closely with the teen leads and the jock/brainiac ensemble. Having this time was great because we again got to work on more specific character choices, and work out the specific rhythms of these scenes. “Counting On You” was still the song that they were struggling with the most, so we spent a good deal of time that night fixing and being on top of the timing of this number. “We’re All In This Together” was also still off that night, but improved throughout the night. We also reworked the parts of “Getcha Head In The Game” that were still not working that night (i.e. the basketball knees section), and reworked it. The new movement flowed much better, and was not only easier for the actors to perform, but to remember.

On Saturday, we had another run of the show all together. At the beginning of rehearsal, I gave the actors the option to vote on if they would like to just run through all of the songs and work the choreography, giving us more time to clean specifics, or if they wanted to do a full run of the show. They voted to do a full run of the show because they wanted to get the rhythm of the show more into their bodies. I was so proud of them this day. They came in and did pretty well with being off-book (besides the few aforementioned actors), and had a really strong run. The show was finally coming together, and seeing where it started compared to where it was now was absolutely mindblowing for me as a first time director. I had watched these young actors take this show and begin to make it their own, and it was beautiful.

WEEK NINE: Thanksgiving

“I’m grateful for theatre, and the opportunity to do this program where I get to create something and have fun with all of my friends every week.” -Elyse.

Before rehearsal on Tuesday, I sat all of the kids down in a circle and took the time to really talk to them for fifteen minutes. With it being Thanksgiving, I wanted to spend time letting these kids know how truly grateful I was for each and every one of them in this process, and all of the amazing work that they had put into it. I never expected to be directing a full show before graduating, and these kids made it not only easy, but a dream. They are the kindest, most respectful, hard working kids I have ever had the privilege of knowing, and I needed them to know how much I appreciated them. In the spirit of Thanksgiving, we then went around the circle and each said something that we were thankful for. Many of the kids said things such as their parents, friends and family, but many also said that they were grateful for this program and the opportunities that it gave them to get to do theatre and make new friends. "I'm grateful for theatre, and the opportunity to do this program where I get to create something and have fun with all of my friends every week," said one of our teens when we got to her in the circle. Needless to say, these children and their responses inspire me everyday to keep doing what I'm doing. They make me so proud each and every day.

The rest of the rehearsal was another successful run through with another successful run on the Saturday following the break. Tech week was quickly approaching, and these kids were super ready to get going in the performance space.

WEEK TEN: The week of teens

“Your scene is prepared! Your choices are made. Now it’s time to put it all together for lift-off!”

(Templeton, *Acting Lions*, 94)

After doing so many full run throughs, I wanted to spend some time with the teen leads again working on specificity in the show. I had another night of character work with just Troy and Gabriella to begin the week, and it was really wonderful. In the time since our last character work session, they had retracted into themselves a little bit again, and let the awkwardness take over in certain scenes, especially in “What I’ve Been Looking For Reprise”. To dispel this, we again began with the same physical movement games that we had used before, beginning with throwing the invisible ball to each other, followed by the little ball of light. After this, I had them jump right into the rooftop garden scene that opens the second act.

Consistently, this scene was always just right regardless of how any of their other scenes went that night, and I wanted them to feel that comfortability and chemistry that they always had in that scene first so that they could then bring it into their other scenes. After talking with them about why they believed that scene to always go so well, I asked them to try “What I’ve Been Looking For Reprise”. It was better this time, but still not quite there. Some of the moments were clunky, and the actors were afraid to look each other in the eye on such a balladic song. We talked about how we could use the song to make the movement more comfortable, and decided that if they were trying to get the other to dance the whole time, it would be less awkward and give them more of a task. I also reminded them to breathe during this song since they kept holding their breath, especially at the end of the song. Doing this gave both of them more action outside of the direct action with Kelsi that they were “learning the song”. It gave the entire song more life, and more purpose, showing the connection that their characters naturally had with each other. After this day, both of these actors were much more comfortable joking with

each other in rehearsals and trying different things. They had finally broken down that awkward wall once and for all.

Afterwards, the rest of the teens showed up and we walked through each of their scenes moment by moment. This was a wonderful time to answer any questions that they had, and work out any moments that still were not quite there yet. That night, we really addressed why each of their characters says and does what they do when they do it. This clarification added more specificity to the text, and helped them expand their characters. We did the same exact thing for the entire rehearsal on Thursday. I had an hour of character work with Troy and Gabriella, followed by an hour with just the teens. By the end of this week, they all felt like they really knew their characters and their objectives at each moment in the show. We were ready for tech week.

Saturday, we did one last run of the show while our costume designer Ellie came and did measurements on the kids. She would pull them whenever they were not being directly used on the stage and try costume pieces on them, as well as figure out any adjustments to costume pieces that she would need to make.

WEEK ELEVEN: Tech Week

“When you dress up, part of the change you undergo is physical: high heels and a sheath skirt literally force you to change the way you walk. But part of the change is psychological: the image you see in the mirror, or the look and the touch of the clothing against your skin conjure feelings and thoughts and fantasies within you...Use costume and makeup to transform yourself so thoroughly that you look and feel like a different person.”

(Wangh, *An Acrobat of the Heart*, 260)

We made it to tech week. It was crazy how quickly this entire process went by and I could not believe that we were actually already in tech week. We invited the Junior Actors to everyday of rehearsal but they were only truly required to come to Monday and Wednesday. Three out of four junior actors chose to come to every day of tech week, and I believe this is a true testament to the power of this program. Actors who were not required to be there made the choice to be there because they felt so connected and involved in the program.

Monday afternoon, I had a brief presentation on how this process was going in my Honors Senior Seminar class, and then I drove to Haverhill City Hall for our first night of rehearsal in the new space. Upon arriving, I found our technical director Grace working hard at finishing up our platforms that we would be using in the set. I was honestly shocked. I had no idea that we would actually already have our platforms that first day of tech week, and the fact that we were going to get to begin using them so early was not only exciting, but so necessary.

Once the kids arrived and checked in with Ravenne, we sent them to the bathroom to do their hair and makeup before changing into their costumes. After this, they were asked to sit quietly in the first three rows of seats so we could prepare for the night. Once everyone was there and seated, we talked through the rules of the theatre. Nobody except for staff was allowed in the balcony. They always needed to ask permission to use the restroom, and make sure that an adult was standing at the door to make sure that they were safe. Additionally, we talked about backstage etiquette, and how they should always be quiet and respectful not only to their castmates, but to all staff backstage and all parent volunteers. I also warned them that if I heard that anybody was being disrespectful

backstage, we would have a conversation with themselves and a parent/guardian, and if the behavior continued, discuss their ability to continue doing the show. This was not meant as a way to scare the kids, but to encourage them to continue the good behavior they had represented the entire rehearsal process so far. Since we were guests in the space, I wanted to make sure that they were always displaying their best Y core values so we would always be welcomed back in the future.

The parent volunteers were the best thing I could ever ask for with this show. Every single night, they came in with a prepared potluck dinner that they worked together to bring in so the kids would have dinner while they were at rehearsal, which also meant that the staff actually got to eat dinner on these late nights! This was absolutely amazing, and I cannot thank these parents enough for all of the help they gave us during this entire week whether it be with food, helping backstage, supervising bathroom trips, or even just giving the stressed staff encouragement that we were doing a great job, I absolutely adore these wonderful parents, and am so incredibly grateful for them.

After dinner, we warmed up with Lauren and then did a quick physical warm up with me before beginning our run of the show. Because it was our first night working in a new space, figuring out transitions and entrances took a lot of time, but this was expected! The kids did a great job of staying focused, and really trying their best to listen backstage so that they would not miss any of their entrances and exits.

Because of the time that this took, we did not get through the entire show, and had to stop around “Counting On You” because the kids were having trouble hearing their part now that they were accompanied by the entire band. This was a good stopping place, however, and the next night, after getting ready, dinner, and warm ups, we picked up the

show from the end of act one with “Stick to the Status Quo”. However, this was not before finally working with the infamous “cake” that Zeke accidentally throws on Sharpay⁵ at the end of “Stick to the Status Quo”. Due to not wanting to use an actual dairy product which would fester over time and rot on the styrofoam cake, TD Grace used shaving cream instead of whipped cream, and took the time to properly teach Elyse and Sophia how to make this moment happen without ruining Sophia’s hair, makeup and costume every night. It went very successfully and the kids were *very* excited that they finally got to try this moment.

After this, we ran through the second half of the show, and then got to start back from the beginning again once we finished the entire run. This allowed us to get through the entire first act again, as well. By the next day, we knew which songs needed to be worked with Lauren more, and we took time at the beginning of that rehearsal and the next to work on those moments. Having their music very clearly down and learned was extremely important to both of us, and making sure that they knew how to follow the band was an absolute priority in that moment.

Those next two nights of runs went amazingly. By the end of Thursday night, the kids *knew* their entrances and exits, and were finally adjusted to the space. We had many a talk over those first few days about projection (which included a lot of me waving my arms to signal that I could not hear them from the back of the audience). We had some complications with microphones earlier in the week, but our amazing staff member Carl was able to fix the issue by the end of the week, so we finally got a full run with sound,

⁵ See attached video of our first rehearsal working with the cake. The actors were *very* excited, and could not wait to get to try and replicate the moment consistently every night.

lights and costumes. Everything was going pretty smoothly, and I made sure to thank all of the kids, their families, and the staff every night for their hard work.

There were not too many complications during tech week, surprisingly, considering that we were working on a show with a plethora of six year olds and teenagers. However, there were a few moments that I feel need to be noted.

Due to the age of the building, being able to find outlets that not only work in the space, but also do not overload the circuit is extremely difficult. Our TD Grace worked extremely hard that week to find a way to properly light the stage with a full wash without losing the artistic integrity of her lighting design despite her inability to physically plug in more than ten lights at once. Watching her problem solve this in an efficient manner showed not only the kids but myself that despite all difficulties, if you set your mind to something, you will figure it out.

Similarly, we had issues getting the sound equipment to function in the space. For myself, I had to put complete trust in my team to solve this issue. Because any and all time I spent in the theatre was spent either with the kids, with their parents, or with Ravenne figuring out a situation with the kids, I did not have the time to help solve this issue, unfortunately. Carl was amazing about taking the time in rehearsals during breaks, and before/after rehearsals solving this problem. Between himself and Grace working hard at solving this issue, we finally had functioning microphones by the final dress rehearsal. It may sound strange, but even with the difficulties we were having with the sound system in the space, I weirdly was not worried about this issue. Even when it was the Wednesday before opening and we were still having issues with sound, I was not concerned that my team would be unable to solve this issue. Their dedication to this show

was strong, and without them, not only would we not have sound, but we probably would not have been able to do this show. This team kept everything together backstage during the shows. Without Justin, Ravenne, Carl, Ellie and Grace, this show would not have been able to happen.

This problem solving method came back when we realized that there was physically no way to mic the soloists in “Stick to the Status Quo”. Without even having me worry for a second, this staff already came up with a feasible, working solution. Grace approached me with the problem, and immediately gave me the solution which was having Jack Scott, the school announcer throughout the show, hold up a handheld mic to each of the soloists as if they were interviewing them in the moment. Character-wise, it made sense, and tech-wise, it meant that these singers would actually be heard. Part of the reason for this specific character choice was also that the actor playing Jack Scott was incredibly responsible and great at picking up direction. Before solidifying this answer, we talked to this actor about her comfortability with this last minute addition, and she was actually excited to be the person trusted to help fix this moment. Even with it being added last second, it went very smoothly three times out of four times that we worked with it over the last rehearsal and the three shows. The one time that this moment did not work was when the cord accidentally was unplugged from the mic during the scene, causing the mic to no longer function. Even with this unfortunate moment, the actors did not let it sway them. They took command of the moment, and made it work. Afterwards, they asked staff what happened, and if I could hear them, and I told them the truth. Yes, I could hear you, but it was more difficult over the band. But I also told them that I was proud of them for keeping their cool in that moment, and making it work.

Throughout the process of tech week, we did have an issue with sound backstage. As the kids became more comfortable in the new space, they let that comfortability create a safety in speaking louder than the space could contain. Some backstage parent volunteers were better at keeping this volume controlled in the green room than others, and there was a point during the week where we had to sit down and remind the actors about being respectful and why they needed to stay quiet backstage. I informed them that I was so distracted during the first act of the show one night during tech because of all of the noise coming from the backstage area that I completely could not hear an entire scene. This was unacceptable. Fortunately, the kids respected this conversation and for the most part, completely understood. Any children that specifically had trouble adhering to this had their parent's spoken to. However, an overwhelming majority of the kids were incredibly respectful backstage, bringing coloring books, homework, and other distractions to help prevent themselves from getting too loud in the green room. They knew that the most important thing was telling their story, and took it upon themselves to act as leaders backstage, quietly letting their friends know if their cue was coming up, or even quieting their friends if they started getting too loud, and I admire them for that.

The one other issue that we really had in regards to the performance during tech week was the entrance of the skaters during "Bop to the Top". Every night, all of the other cliques would make it into their places onstage on time, and only three skaters would consistently make it to their places. The others would wander in late from the wrong location, and put themselves directly in the path of the two actors playing Sharpay and Ryan who were the first two to not only sing, but dance in this song. After the first night that it happened, I made sure to give the skaters a note that they needed to pay

attention specifically for this cue, and the path they needed to take in order to not accidentally end up in Ryan and Sharpay's way. I also reminded them about what their cue was in case they had simply forgotten or gotten confused.

The next night, however, the same issue happened again with only the same three actors coming out at the correct time, and the others running in late again. This time, most of them took the correct path at least, so there was really only one actor in Ryan and Sharpay's way which was an improvement. However, I warned them again after rehearsal that night that they needed to be waiting backstage a scene before that number, so that they would be ready to go and not miss their cue. That was the night that I informed them that if they were late, they would have to wait backstage until the end of the scene so as to not get in Sharpay and Ryan's way since it was a safety issue for all parties. I also asked one of the skaters who was always on time for that cue if she could be a leader for the rest of the skaters, and let them know when they needed to line up for "Bop to the Top". She was super excited to get the opportunity to be the leader for this and did a great job of rounding up the skaters every night before the shows. For the rest of the runs, there were only one or two straggler skaters who were running late, either because they did not follow the rest onstage when they left, or they were not paying attention. However, they were finally all early enough to make it without placing themselves directly in Ryan and Sharpay's path when the actual singing and dancing began. In the future, I would like to follow a similar method if something like this were to happen again. Giving that skater the responsibility of being a leader worked really well, and made her feel super important during this part of the show. It also was a way for staff to show their gratitude to her for always paying attention and being on time, so giving her this special role was a great

reward for that. The other kids admired this skater (and those other two actors!) for always making it on time, and wanted to be thanked each night, too, so they paid closer attention as we got to that part of the show each night so as to make sure that they did not miss their cues. With all of the skaters, this resolution really worked, and I will definitely use leadership as a reward for great behavior in the future again. It is not only a great way to give a child confidence, but exemplifies the Y core values in every way.

WEEK ELEVEN CONTINUED: Performances

“We know the world can see us in a way that’s different from who we are. Now is the time to free us to touch the sky, to reach for the highest star.” (Ensemble, “Breaking Free”, *High School Musical, Jr.*)

OPENING NIGHT:

Opening night absolutely destroyed me in the best way possible. The kids were *so* unbelievably excited and the energy in the theatre was uncontainable. Because it was opening night, I got all dressed up in what I called my “Sharpay skirt” (which was essentially just a giant, pink fluffy skirt) and heels (which was a shock for the kids since they had seen me limping in a boot half of the process due to my broken ankle). As I lead warm ups that evening, I could already feel myself getting emotional. Before dismissing them to go to the green room to continue getting ready before the show, I had the entire ensemble hold hands in a circle while I gave them a pep talk for the night. I first told them how excited I was for them to finally be able to perform this show for a full audience. They had worked so hard, and done such a beautiful job with what was such a special show to me, and I could not thank them enough.

I made sure to thank each and every one of them for everything that they put into this show that night, and tell them how much I truly loved all of them. These kids had absolutely stolen my heart with this show. Their kindness, respect, artistry, and *talent* was like nothing that I had ever seen out of such a large group of children before. These kids were good people. They might be six or even fourteen years old, but they are the kind of people that we need more of in this world. They care for each other. They look out for each other. They care about the staff and this program, and the staff cares just as much, if not more, about them and the program in return. I needed them to know how grateful I was for them, and their amazing, wonderful, helpful, selfless families that put in just as many hours as staff did during tech week to help us get the show off the ground.

Before they headed backstage, I reminded them about why we were doing this show tonight one last time. They were there to tell this story, and to have as much fun as they could possibly have onstage. My favorite thing to ask them during this entire process was, “What’s going to happen if you mess up during the show tonight?”. The first time I ever asked it during our first week of rehearsal, I got a slew of responses from “You’re going to be mad!” to “I’m going to get kicked out of the show,”, all of which I immediately refuted. By this point in our warm up, pre-show prep talk before our opening night show, they finally knew the answer.

“Nothing!” one of the littlest actors yelled out, smiling ear to ear, and the rest of the cast laughed in agreement. “Exactly! Nothing! I want you to go out there, and have so much fun tonight because you earned it. If you mess up, who cares? Nobody is going to know except for yourself and me, and even then, I probably won’t even notice. I am just so proud of you for even getting up on that stage, and having the bravery to share your voice with this show. If you mess up, I don’t want to see any tears. Because even if you mess up, I will be so unbelievably proud of you. Have so much fun out there, and break all of the legs,” I told them before bringing in hands for our ritual send-off before the show. Everyone put their hands on top of each others in the middle of the circle, and one of our teens yelled out, “What team?!”. “Wildcats!”, the group responded. “What team?!” they yelled again. “Wildcats!”, everyone echoed. “WHAT TEAM?!” they yelled one last time. “WILDCATS!” they yelled back even louder. “WILDCATS.” “GETCHA’ HEAD IN THE GAME!”. Then the whole group trapped me in a group hug, and I shed my first tears of the night. They were a family, and I so proud of them.

Before the show, I made a director's speech to the audience. Honestly, this is the most intimidating part of my job for me because despite being an actor, I am very intimidated by public speaking. Pre-show speeches fall under that category for me. When I went up there to make my speech, I saw the faces of all of these amazing families that I had gotten to know so well over the past few months. I saw their siblings, aunts, uncles, friends, and grandparents all sitting there waiting to see their child perform in this show and I was filled with so much pride for these kids.

At the beginning of the speech, I introduced myself, and my position with the YMCA of the Northshore, and then told a summarized version of the story about how I came to be the director of this production. I talked about working with these amazing kids for the past three summers at Camp Tricklin' Falls, and how I knew there was no way I was going to let the opportunity to be their new director pass me by. And then I told the story of one of the actors who approached me at Camp Tricklin' Falls about their excitement to do this show. That actor was older and had left the program for a few years, but they loved *High School Musical* and were so excited to get to do this show. They told me, "I don't care what role I am at all. I'd be so happy to just be a part of the ensemble and finally get to be back with my YTC family." That actor then killed it at their audition, and was cast in a lead role. *And* they were absolutely killing it in that role. Being able to share this story in my director's speech only enhanced everything that this program is about for myself and these families. It's not about the parts, or how many lines you have. It's about the ensemble. It's about the family. And I knew that I did my job because of that.

By the end of the night I was a sobbing mess. I was so proud of these kids. I hid in the back row the entire show, and absolutely lost it when they did “Start of Something New” and “Breaking Free”. There was an incident midway through act one where a child in the audience puked all over his seat and in the aisle. Luckily, one of the moms was a *hero* and not only found the building’s custodian who cleaned it up without disrupting anyone’s experience (except for the woman who got puked on, for obvious reasons) but handled it so smoothly that the kids didn’t even know that it happened. Luckily, the woman who was puked on was actually the first woman to run the Haverhill YTC program, so she was understanding.

Special thanks to Maura and Hector for resolving this situation entirely in the sneakiest and most effective fashion imaginable. Additional thanks to the older couple in the audience who sat directly behind the child who puked. This couple, upon my apologizing, offering to move their seats, and offering free concessions, said that the apology was absolutely unnecessary and that not only was the show amazing, but thanked myself and Hector (the custodian) for handling the situation so respectfully. In that moment, regardless of how disgusting it was, our audience also joined our ensemble, and despite the spontaneity of events, made the night memorable.

CLOSING TIME:

Our two show day went surprisingly smoothly. The kids arrived at City Hall at 11:30am, got ready for the performance, and then we had one final “official” warm-up before our first matinee. After a wonderful first performance, the kids headed into the green room for their cast party. Thanks to the wonderful help of the casts’ parents, there was pizza and desserts for all of the kids, and staff! During this break between the shows, the staff got a little break to eat in the balcony, while the parents watched all of the kids in the greenroom. After this break, we ushered all of the kids into the first three seats of the audience for the ending part of their celebration: the cast awards!

Cast awards were a fun tradition that their first director started years before, honoring each child with a special certificate honoring all of their hard work. Being the goofball that I am, I wanted to change up the idea of the traditional cast awards a bit, and add a bit of humor to them. Awards were given for everything from Best Dynamic Duo (to the actors playing Sharpay and Ryan), to Silliest Skaterdude, to The Future Director Award. All of these kids shone in their own way during these performances, and cast awards were a really great opportunity to honor them all with a little special spotlight.

After that, we all gathered up for our final warm-up. I didn’t spend too much time doing this since they had already done a full show earlier that day, and didn’t truly need to warm up again. Instead, we did a little energizer game to get them all amped up for the last show, and I gave them a little farewell speech. I told them how unbelievably proud I was of each and every one of them. Standing in that circle, I had to hold back tears. When I looked around, I saw kids ranging in age from 6 to 15, and who, despite all differences, became a family. They were Team Wildcats, and I was so proud to be their coach. And it

was so incredibly important to me to let them know that. They were the theatre family that I know I had been looking for my whole life, a theatre family that went beyond roles, lines, drama, and competition. They were a family of love and support, of children who had each other's backs when they needed it most. And they had mine. I really, truly loved them for that.

Before letting them do their final focus exercise, I had one final announcement for them. After *over a month* of begging me to tell them what the next shows would be, I finally was able to announce it to them. Because my favorite trick was to tell them that I would make both the teen and kids shows *Aladdin, Jr.* if they kept pestering me about it (they all have a deep, collective hatred for that show), I thought I would keep the joke going a little bit longer. First, I announced the teen show, *Into the Woods, Jr.* After they finally stopped screaming with excitement, I was able to announce the kids show. "And the kids show is going to be....*Aladdin!*" I joked. I've never heard a large group of children grow so silent so quickly. I felt so bad that they took me seriously that I began apologizing profusely, admitting that it was a joke before saying, "It's *Beauty and the Beast, Jr!*" to which the screams erupted again. After a lot of confused/shocked staff faces and lots of excited hugs, we *finally* got them quiet enough again to do a final focus exercise. In that moment, we took a few deep breaths as an ensemble before doing one more game of "Pass the clap". It was the strongest it had ever been.

The final show whizzed by and left not only me a mess by the end, but so incredibly grateful for the experience. After talking to many of the kids, parents, extended family members, and more, we all corralled onto the stage for a group picture (with the

help of the audience). I will forever love my *High School Musical, Jr.* family, and hold dearly in my heart that we truly were all in this together by the end.

CONCLUSION: Did it work?

“We’re all in this together. Once we know that we are, we’re all stars, and we see that we’re all in this together. And it shows when we stand hand in hand, make our dreams come true.” (Ensemble, *High School Musical, Jr.*)

After months of preparation, months of work, and months of reflecting on that work, I have truly found the meaning of the ensemble. Ensemble is about trust. Being a part of an ensemble means relying on those around you without a hesitation, and knowing you can reach out a hand if you ever need a helping hand. These kids truly found that over the course of the *High School Musical, Jr.* process.

Watching them grow not only as artists, but as people means more to me than words can explain. Therefore, it doesn't feel right to end this thesis without hearing their voices, and their reflection of the experience.

From some of the cast of *High School Musical, Jr.*, here's what being a part of the ensemble means to them:

-Mikayla: "When I'm in the ensemble, it means that I may not be a main character but I help make up the show and make it realistic."

-Jackson: "It means loyalty."

-Frances: "Being part of an ensemble is like being a part of a team <3"

-Lidiya: "When I'm in an ensemble, working hard together and cooperating with each other is always key. I like it because I can work with other people and learn how to have fun with others, and not just do small scenes. You work together as a family and bounce skills off each other."

-Grace: "When you're in the ensemble, you truly become a family, and create long lasting relationships."

-Luke: "What I think is that it does not matter if you don't have a big part.

It is about having fun.”

-Sophia D.C.: “To me, being in an ensemble means support. In *HSM*, I felt constantly supported, meaning confidence boosts, and knowing we’re all there for each other if something bad happens. We’re all like a family, so I feel completely safe with this ensemble. We always have/had each other’s backs.”

-Sophia D.F.: “Being in ensemble means I get to sing and dance to a lot of the songs...and I get to be a part of the setting.”

-Bianca: “Team work.”

-Hannah: “Ensemble means family and family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.”

-Sara: “An ensemble means being a part of a family.”

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