



THE ROAD TO SOMBRELLU

The existence of a playwright is inherently romantic. It's easy to imagine a lone wolf gazing out the window of a cottage in the mountains as the words make their way to the page. With nothing but the sound of wind and wildlife in the distance, one can envision a peaceful place for creativity, yet it's difficult to imagine stories of inner-city America being born from such a perch. Idyllic as it sounds, this is not often the life of a modern day, urban playwright.

This year CITYstage embarked on a new venture, a student-professional playwriting partnership designed to link an active creator of new theatrical works, with several students at CITYstage sites throughout South Los Angeles. Students would collaborate by contributing ideas that would become the key framework for the play, and then ultimately

star in the handcrafted production they helped to initiate. And so, with a playwright at the ready and dozens of students at CITYstage sites around L.A. eager to contribute, we went to work.

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This creative process started not with unbridled ideas, but rather, with structure. A classic "voyage and return" storyline was selected in which a character, or group of characters, would leave home, travel to a foreign land, overcome a series of obstacles, and return home having learned something of value. A collection of prompts were then created to help guide students towards creative self-discovery with these parameters in mind.

Then came the day of the "blue sky" brainstorming session, a style of idea cultivation that leaves the word "no" at the door in favor of the more theatre improv friendly "yes, if" approach. Students at

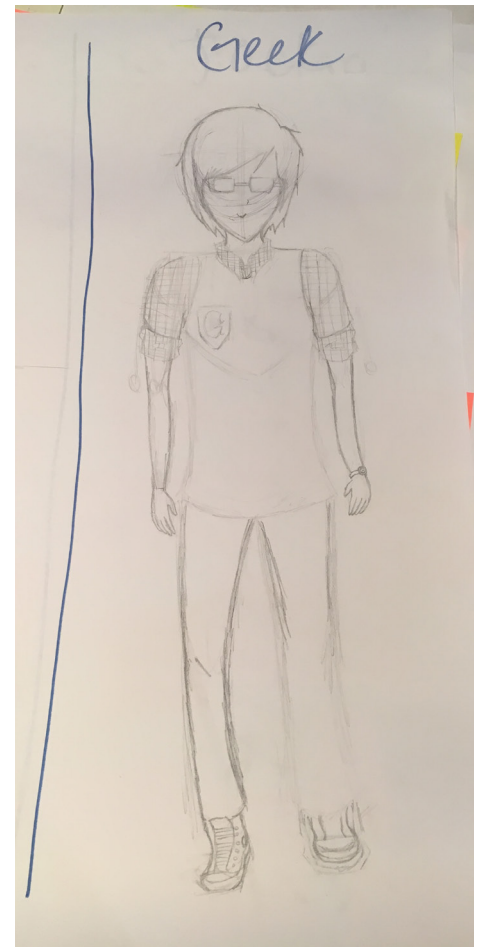
the CITYstage Leadership Academy filed into the classroom bright and early on a Saturday morning to find tables covered with an array of colored post-it note pads, pens, and giant sheets paper. Over the course of 3 hours and many rounds of brainstorming exercises, the students generated ideas that became the names and identities of the characters in the play, as well as the plot points that would later make their way into the show.

This is the part of the story where reality and fantasy start to blur, because writing a story about a journey and self-discovery, also demands a similar journey towards self-discovery on the part of the writer. Like a new person you've met for the first time at work, it takes time to understand who the new person is, what you'll talk about by the water cooler, whether they'll care if you get dumped, and how your relationship will develop over time. And so the tall order of combining a sea of ideas from 30+ students at multiple school sites into cohesive characters began. Through reading and review of the student's illustrations

and trait suggestions, it became clear who Harold was, and what he saw in Jake. By wading through piles of post-it notes, Jake's deepest darkest secrets started to emerge, as did her ability to overcome her past and stand up to Brad. And Brad, the school football star, began to emerge with depth in a way that even Annie, the intellectual and feminist at heart, could appreciate. These four main characters came to embody the personalities, hopes, dreams, fears, insecurities, and dislikes of the students who created them. And the journey that made it's way to the page became just as much of a journey for Harold, Jake, Brad, and

Annie as it would become for the students who ultimately played them on the stage.

Over the following month, as the play was being written, it was time to prepare the students for onstage work. After 8 weeks of acting and improv classes, students attended an audition workshop where they learned how to present themselves with professionalism and confidence. Slowly, the vision started to come together. Abstract ideas started to take on a physical form as the play was finished, the cast list was taped onto the wall, scripts were distributed, and rehearsals began.



For anyone who has ever experienced performing in a stage show, the impact of the experience is long lasting. The focus, discipline, vulnerability, and long hours required to bring a story to life onstage are unmatched by most other endeavours. Memorizing several scenes

way that sports can't quite match. And remembering blocking and choreography for an entire show is a team effort that makes a group science experiment look like child's play. There's something about the performing arts that stretches a person further

schools where expectations were set a bit lower than schools on the other side of the city, who had never been to a theatre to see a play before -- for them the experience was tenfold. There was no way to coast through the play. Doing "C" caliber work wasn't going to fly. No shortcut was going to change the fact that on May 21st, they would be performing this play, on a stage, for their friends, family, and strangers.

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of dialog demands something different of you than casually completing weekly math homework. Opening oneself up to portray a person other than yourself requires letting go of insecurities and fears in a

than many traditional academic subjects and leaves one feeling as if he or she can do anything. And for high school students who have had few opportunities in the arts throughout their childhoods, who grew up in

That level of pressure got the best of some students. Fears took over, and the follow through did not happen. Others rose to the occasion early on and found a desire to succeed inside of them that we'd never seen from them before. And the vast majority of students





fell somewhere in between those two extremes. Every day of rehearsal illuminated new fears to overcome, and some students felt like they were holding their heads just above the water, one wave of anxiety away from taking the easy path and just getting out of the pool.

On the other side of the table, seeing these struggles fueled us to be better

teachers, better directors, and better administrators. Rehearsals became 50% rehearsal and 50% counseling sessions. But it's easy to sit on our side of the table and say "you'll look back and be so glad you did this," or "we chose you because we KNOW you can do this." But connecting those dots for a high school student who has coasted by on mediocrity their entire life, who

created a comfort zone in the world of not failing but not really succeeding either, connecting those dots isn't easy. Those positive and supportive sentiments are difficult to accept until you actually feel what it feels like to conquer the stage. For some students our only hope was that they would hold out long enough to see the finish line and feel that for themselves.

On the morning of May 21st, students got up early and headed to the theatre. With a restless night worrying about the unknowns behind them, they walked in filled with excitement and uncertainty. But then something amazing happened. As the house lights came down, and the stage lights came up, a shift occurred. Students who had spent the last month of rehearsals reluctantly reading lines of dialog through a lens of "I'm too cool for this," suddenly started delivering lines as their character. Comfort zones started to dissolve and the characters on the page came to life. By the end of the show the stage was filled with a team of students, taking bows, hand in hand, with huge smiles on their faces. Students who only days prior to the

show were considering not showing up because they didn't want to embarrass themselves, were beaming as strangers came up to them and praised their performance. Students who spent an entire year

ing with students in South L.A. to write a play. It was only partly about producing a fun and entertaining show. It was only partly about having something to show for a semester of classes and grant money

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with looks of disgust on their faces when asked by teachers to take their backpack off during class were snapping selfies with their show program, pointing to their name, and personally thanking the same staff members they refused to even take their backpacks off for just days prior.

well spent. But it had everything to do with that last second of the show, when the world got a little bit bigger for about 30 students who, at that moment, realized that yes, they can, and they were glad they did.

Visit www.lacitystage.org to read the play, Sombrellu.

The road to Sombrellu was only partly about collaborat-



