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WRI 200: Intro to Creative Writing

Professor Berry

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Beans, Eggs, and Sardines?

The phones have been silenced in the crowd, the lights are off on the stage, the curtain is closed. I'm waiting by a door on the set, ready for the production to kick off. It's around 7:00pm at night in early 2019, and the last time I'm going to grace the Avon Old Farms stage. A place that has become a second home to me. As the curtain opens and lights go on, I reminisce about my performances in the past, all of the ones I have been in over my three years at Avon Old Farms, I'm nervously excited to go onstage and give it my all for one last hurrah, I keep waiting until I hear the cue line as well as the door opening and closing, and know it's time to step into the light, for one last time.

I participated in plays and musicals beginning all the way in elementary school, and performing them in high school was my next major step. However, I soon would learn the massive gaps between the level of middle school productions, and the "big-league" of high school ones. The high school I went to was Avon Old Farms, and right off the bat there were a lot of differences between productions there than at my old school. My middle school had one theatrical production a year, always a musical. Through my three years at the middle school, I participated in two of them, "Lion King Jr," as Simba's annoying and exhausted babysitter Zazu, and "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," as the piano-playing Schroeder. In contrast, Avon Old Farms held three productions every year, a musical and two non-musical productions. When

I first began at Avon Old Farms, I definitely wasn't as strong of an actor or a singer than I am today. Over the course of three years, and 10 fun productions, Adams Theatre, the location where all of Avon's plays occurred, became my home, as well as a personal playground. I began my time on Avon's stage as a sophomore tenor, obsessed with giants and getting into trouble by stealing those same giants' eggs, and exited as a baritone senior, falling down stairs and going crazy over sardines. I learned a lot, had unforgettable experiences, got past some challenges, and always "broke a leg."

Four years ago, I participated in my first theatrical performance at Avon Old Farms. It was the yearly musical, which took place in the winter, and happened to be *Into the Woods*. I also happened to have landed the role of Jack, from the "Jack and the Beanstalk" story, who also was one of the leads in the show. It definitely was exciting to be centerstage as a key lead character in my first production, but it certainly wasn't going to be easy. I was essentially a high-school theatre version of Joe Burrow, but honestly not as ready as him. My director, as well as sophomore English teacher, Chris Bolster, certainly thought I was capable and ready to take on the challenge of the role, even hinting throughout the fall semester that he wanted me to be that role in the production, which really added even more pressure for me. I was able to deal with the pressure though, and two of the seniors, who also had lead parts, were great role models for me and the other younger castmates. I was able to look up to them and get advice about the different performances, and they were able to help me develop into a stronger actor. There still is always a lot of work to do to prepare for plays and productions, and many people think that memorizing the lines is the hardest part. For me at least, this isn't true. In some cases, it is hard to memorize long passages, but for me, I find that the choreography, singing, and actions on

stage are the things that are harder to get down than getting the words right. In fact, for a lot of productions, actors don't even need to get all the words right, they need to be correct enough to not throw off the other actors or to confuse the audience. Singing, despite being something I am generally good at, posed some challenges sometimes, primarily with hitting high notes. There are four vocal pitch levels that are commonly used for theatre and chorale groups; Bass, Tenor, Alto, and Soprano. Male voices almost always were at the Bass to Tenor range, and female voices on the Alto to Soprano ranges, where Bass was the lowest, and Soprano was the highest. When I was younger, I could hit high notes very easily. In fact, I had a voice that could reach high enough notes that I could feasibly sing in the Alto range for some of the songs. For sophomore year, however, my range had lowered, I could less consistently get the higher notes, but I was able to. Another difficulty with this production was that one of the actors went missing in action just two weeks before the show. It was a smaller role, but it was quite an emergency, and the part needed to be filled. It just so happened to be a part I also was comfortable with, and I knew the lyrics to the main song that part sings. So, I got fitted for a potential costume, and practiced, learned lines and choreography, and was ready to perform what seemed to be an impossible dual-role task if need be. Thankfully, the actor came back, and I was able to rest a little easier. The show had some other hiccups, but the performances ended well, and it was a very successful debut.

After the success of *Into the Woods*, I had my sights set on the spring production, which was Shakespeare's "*A Midsummernight's Dream*." Many people really, really do not like Shakespeare because of the complexity of the dialogue, but for me, I love it. Before *Into the Woods*, I had a previous production as an ensemble role in a Shakespeare play at Avon's sister

school, Miss Porters. The two schools were founded by the same founder, Theodate Pope Riddle, and their students worked together for theatrical productions, with usually around five to ten Avon boys assisting Miss Porter's with their production, and around twenty Miss Porter's girls going to Avon to help with Avon's production. Each school also had a separate production going on at each school, for instance in the spring of my 10th grade, Avon was performing the previously mentioned "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and Miss Porter's had their yearly "One Act Festival," comprised of short plays that were directed and sometimes written by the own students. Both plays went very well, and especially the Midsummer Night's Dream production. I felt more confident, and also got another strong role, it wasn't a top lead, but it was much more than an ensemble role. Afterwards, my sights were set for next year's musical, where I'd get another chance to shine, this time at Miss Porter's school, as the musical rotated annually between each school. The musical announced was Chorus Line, which is one of the most famous musicals of all time, and all seemed well! However, there was one small problem.

I might have lied about the problem being a bit small. That summer, I had a spinal fusion surgery to fix my scoliosis, a condition which I've had for my whole life. As much as I'd love to go deep into a story of learning how to walk and run again after this intense back surgery, it really wasn't anything too noteworthy. I was able to walk two days after the 14 hour surgery, and when I was discharged 5 days later, I could go up and down stairs. Despite the easy hospital recovery, I still would need a full year for recovery before I did any real sports/physical activity. The Chorus Line musical, which is about a Chorus Line, features a lot of dancing, which would simply be too much for me to be able to do, so I sadly had to miss that year's musical. That

didn't mean I couldn't perform in other shows, and I did three of them that year, two which were smaller productions, but also a larger and really fun spring production.

Since I missed the musical for my Junior year, I set my sights on trying to make the musical for my senior year count. It was also set to be a great one, Guys and Dolls. Interestingly though, I found that for this show, and throughout the senior year, that I really had to become more of a role model for the cast. Especially for the musical, there were new sophomores and freshmen joining the theatrical ranks. In their performances, excitement, and even some of the small mistakes and mishaps when rehearsing, I could see myself when I was Jack in Into the Woods in the sophomores and freshmen. At this stage, I had been in half-a-dozen productions, and I was well and truly a veteran. With my experience, I was able to give some wisdom and tips for the newer students, some tips which I had learned on my own on stage, or even some that my former upperclassmen had given to me. Despite being a veteran, performing never gets easy. Actors still need to memorize lines, get the movements and timings down, and for the musicals, there was also singing. For this production, I was cast as Nicely-Nicely Johnson, a chubby assistant to the one of the main characters. Despite being an assistant to a main character, he's actually very involved in the musical numbers and storyline, having a solo number near the end of the show, a two-performer song, and many different solo/smaller group sections in different numbers. This was great for me, and I could really begin to show off my baritone voice, I even was getting more practice with baritone having joined the Honors Choir and then the Riddlers, the elite singing group at Avon Old Farms, which frequently toured across the world. With this practice, and extra experience with my baritone register, I learned that Nicely-Nicely is a role with tenor notes. Ah man, here we go again. Despite the challenge of notes that are just too high

for my shrinking vocal range, a smaller challenge was that there was a new vocal teacher. He was very nice, and helped me out a lot with getting the notes and part down. Even when I got discouraged with struggling with the notes, he helped me work it out, and by the time the performances were about to happen, I could hit the really high notes at least 50% of the time, which was good enough. If I was two years younger, as a theatre rookie, most of the notes would be fine, and it would've been easier, but since I was older and had a lower range, the challenge was real. As much as I sometimes wanted to, and my vocal chords certainly did too, I never backed down from this challenge, and was able to pull through in the end.

Ten long productions, each of them usually lasting 2 months to learn lines, build the set, practice, and perform. From start to finish, each production was a journey, and they were journeys in many ways. Not only was it a journey for completing the production, but also for some the challenges I had to overcome, and things I needed to learn. After *Guys and Dolls*, which happened in the Fall of senior year for a change, there was one more Avon Old Farms production to perform in: "Noises Off." *Noises Off*, which isn't a musical, is a fun play about a play-troupe performing a different play, and how their relationships (and performance) deteriorate into a crazy mess as the production continues. Despite it being non-musical, it was my favorite one to be in, and a great way to finish my tenure in Avon Old Farms theater. It was my favorite, but also not the easiest, as there was a lot of choreography, set design, timing, prop location, and other things to get right. Ironically, the show frequently features sections where props are missing or don't work, which makes things even more confusing. Such as in any play, things can go wrong on stage during a performance, and they certainly did in this one, but the consequences weren't as negative as one would imagine. During an intermission (there were two

in this production,) a piece of the set fell off when it was being moved, creating a hole on the railing on the stairs. This allowed a box full of medical supplies to slide right through the hole in the production, and also spill its contents all along the stage floor. Normally, a prop issue like this would be catastrophic to a performance, but thankfully it was by the end of the show, and to any viewer, it looked normal, as things at this stage were “hitting the fan” in the actual version of this show too. This little error contributed to what could be called a “beautiful mess,” leaving the audience and even me in stitches, as I desperately tried to keep moving forward with my lines. As that scene ended, and the final scene ended, the curtain and I stood there, looking at the curtains close, the light having faded from a seemingly long three year theatre career, full of ups and downs. I never regretted any choice I made, or the way I performed, and even in that moment, I felt satisfied. It could’ve been my very last moment in the spotlight, and I felt very content. But it wasn’t my final time in the spotlight; I had to go back out to do bows!