

7 More Minutes: Developing New Work in High School Theatre

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Cassandra Buescher

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Troy Dobosiewicz

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

December 2019

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2020

Abstract

High school theatre often brings back cringe-worthy memories of stilted productions of *Beauty and the Beast* or cobbled together versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; it does not have to be this way. I believe new work written for high schoolers and about high schoolers is a much needed breath of fresh air for high school theatre programs everywhere. I decided to test my theory as my thesis, I produced and directed Ball State senior Madison Bradshaw's new play *7 Minutes* at Muncie Central High School. I spent the last six months preparing, staging, and writing about this process. I can now say with confidence that producing new work and allowing high schoolers to have creative agency in their theatrical work is an incredibly effective practice. This is especially true because high school theatre trains young actors and attempts to create a more genuine performance. Through this production and writing process, I have learned even more about the power of the work that I do every day.

Acknowledgements

Thank you so much to everyone who was a sounding board for me in the process of putting this play together, particularly my "A+" support system: Mom, Dad, and Kyra.

Thank you to Dr. Dobosiewicz, Mr. Jones, and all of the Drama Club at Muncie Central High School that welcomed, with open arms, a stranger into a fantastically goofy family.

Thank you most of all to our lovely and incredibly talented playwright, Madison Bradshaw. Collaborating with you on this project was an absolute honor. You are an amazing storyteller, and I feel privileged to call you my best friend.

"Theatre is magic, and magic is theatre. Blessed are we that create this magic."

Process Analysis Statement

All the stories we now hold dear were once new. Shakespeare was once an unheard of playwright, and *Romeo and Juliet* was not a part of high school English curriculums across the United States. If theatre artists were allowed to experiment in the Renaissance, why is the idea of new work so revolutionary in high school theatre? Broadway would not be what it is without new ideas and stories to tell. The last two months that I spent at Muncie Central High School working on the development of a new play has proved to me just how powerful the use of new work is in the theatrical training of young artists. Many high schools across the country prefer to use familiar plays that will pack the theatre with community members who love the old stories being told; however, there is a strong argument to be made that the future of high school theatre lies with new work written for and about high school students.

High school theatre is the perfect laboratory to test out new ways of creating theatre and/or telling stories. That being said, not every new play is created equally. The first challenge when producing new work in high schools is figuring out which play to do. *7 Minutes* is a new work that accurately reflects the teenage experience of high school and the struggles of living in a small suburb of a large urban area. Traditional high school theatre is generally outside of high school students' realm of life experiences. This results in cringe-worthy performances, because we ask them to play experiences that they could not possibly be familiar with such as being a widow or losing a child. We as theatre educators have to find a different way of creating theatre, because continuing to do the same thing and automatically expecting students to just "get it" is just as bad as teachers who refuse to change poor practices. Jo Beth Gonzalez, a theatre educator at Bowling Green High School, puts it best in her book, *Temporary Stages II*, when she writes, "Many of us...were taught to teach in ways that provide a sense of security through conformity

and imitation,...but teaching, directing...and engaging adolescent students in the discovery and self-understanding of the dynamics of human interaction though the medium of drama is sometimes incomplete and seldom linear” (14). If education is not exactly what we expect it should be, why do we ask students to continue to do the same material that continues to avoid speaking to their lives and experiences?

7 Minutes is a departure from educational tradition, such as the ones discussed earlier, because theatre and art in general is often created as a way to break from tradition and regularity. It is incredibly difficult for students to create theatre that is outside of their life experience, because the majority of acting is based in the observation of how you as a person can deal with a given situation. In his article “Social Class and Social Consciousness: Adolescent Perceptions of Oppression in Forum Theatre Workshops,” Johnny Saldana says, “the essence of theatre resides in the human being observing itself” (14). Teenagers have not had many of the experiences that characters deal with in traditional drama which makes acting in a genuine way nearly impossible. There is no way that we can convince an audience that a teenager knows what it is like to lose a child or to have their marriage fall apart. Not only are we asking too much of our students, we are asking too much of our audience.

7 Minutes is a story that allows us to look at the world the way that teens actually experience it. Teenagers go through a lot on a day to day basis, especially if they are considered different from the status quo. Adults usually brush off bullying or the isolation and torment that teenagers experience as nothing more than teen drama or overreactions, however, this is a bigger problem than most adults are willing to acknowledge. Saldana states, “exclusion, intimidation, and ridicule by groups perpetrated on individuals perceived as different was the most prominent subcategory [of improvisation scenarios written] (62%)” (Saldana 15). That, left on its own with

no examination in the public sphere may be what has gotten us to the nightmare of cyberbullying and abuse we are in today. When we take a step back from high school theatre tradition and look at what drama can do, we realize that theatre is a way to take apart a common phenomenon like bullying or mental illness and figure out why something works that way in the “real world.”



Merik (played by Nate Gonterman) struggles with self-harming as a response to his depression.

When students can tell their own stories, or stories that are similar to their own, they are able to work through incredibly complex and abstract problems and thoughts. Gonzalez remarks that “all of these stories, original and professionally written, can motivate students to rethink accepted notions of marginalized ideologies” (138). If we do not try to tell new stories in our high school theatre programs, we are not giving students the opportunity to pick apart things that they have accepted as normal and figure out if they actually are as okay as they assume. Theatre that feels more real to our current experiences of the world also helps the audience think through these ideas. It holds up a mirror to the audience. This way audiences, without even thinking about it, can see how poorly humans treat each other.

We all regret the way that we treat others from time to time. Yet, the real problem is when we do not even realize that we are treating someone poorly simply because we have labeled them as “different” from ourselves. According to David Grote in his book, *Play Directing in the School: A Drama Director’s Survival Guide*, this is why “teenagers live in constant, daily terror that revolves around one single idea: No one must ever find out that I am different from everybody else” (159). That, of course, is ridiculous in the abstract, because we all know that no single person is exactly like another. We are all different and unique. So why do we

identify people as different from us? How do we prevent ourselves from “othering” those that we meet by determining how they are different and therefore not worthy of our time, attention, respect, etc.? Doing theatrical work that highlights this phenomenon asks students to disassemble the ways they quickly dismiss others based on the few details that they know about them.

After determining which new work to do, the director’s next challenge is to figure out why one is doing this work at this time. The reason I wanted to use *7 Minutes* so badly is because it was written within the last two years. This makes it very relevant to the experiences of today’s teens. I also chose to use this play as a way to introduce high school students to the development of new work. When developing new work, the rehearsal process can be incredibly different from anything students have experienced before in their high school theatre programs.

My directing style, which asks actors to make choices in the rehearsal room, coupled with the play being new, can be challenging for students. That being said, Gonzalez notes that “when the teacher purposely...establishes a...rehearsal atmosphere that requires teens to make decisions that affect the outcome of projects, they become actively engaged in the teaching and learning process alongside their teacher” (9). Asking students to make performance choices in their work challenges the students to take ownership of their acting in the rehearsal room, at home when they run lines, and at school when they practice scenes with friends.

My students’ work on this production was a big step toward getting this piece ready to be published, which puts pressure on the students to dedicate themselves to the work and the style of storytelling used by this play. The last thing a director has to ask before deciding upon choosing the right play at the right time is to determine why the play should be done in this place. *7 Minutes* was a natural choice for me due to the fact that Muncie is not all that different from the suburb east of St. Louis where the story takes place. In a town plagued by poverty, the

students at Muncie Central very rarely confront the issues that they face in their day to day lives on a stage where they are able to tell their stories in a way that adults will pay attention to.

Muncie Central has also been lacking a licensed theatre teacher for two years. When their teacher left midsemester in the fall of 2017, the choir teacher began to teach her classes.

Although he is doing his absolute best and has been working very hard to keep the drama club running, he has not received the training expected of a theatre educator. Both the teacher and the students enjoy the work that they do, but they reasonably could use a challenge. In a survey of former theatre students from all over the country, researchers have found that “[the students] would have appreciated occasional work that challenged the social status quo or pushed the envelope in terms of genre or style” (McCammon, et al. 20). There is nothing wrong with doing productions of *Cinderella* or *Charlotte’s Web*, but they can only be done so many times before one may get tired of hearing the same stock story. Many high school students want to work on pieces of theatre that challenge them and push the boundaries of “normal” high school theatre.

Telling stories that have a bit more “meat on the bone” does not mean that the play just has more profanity or deals with mature themes like sex or drugs. The themes explored in 7 *Minutes* are more mature than those in the average high school theatre production, because they ask teenagers to take a step back from their ordinary lives and examine the way they live every day. The prologue and epilogue both ask questions that most teens have to deal with at some point in high school such as “Do they even know my name?” and “Does anybody care?” (Bradshaw 1, 68). The students in the story, much like their real world counterparts, are focused on shaping their legacies and avoiding their deepest fears. Each of the characters experience “othering” from their peers, and it is revealed in their actions and words. Seeing the way that the

characters interact allows the students portraying them to see the way their actions and assumptions affect others.

We allowed the story to speak for itself as this play is a piece of realism. Our design elements were all fairly simple and understated. Costuming was done almost entirely from the



Zoe (played by Laura Rogers) thinks “Does anybody care?” aloud as she takes a test. This line was used repeatedly throughout the show.

students own wardrobes, since they know better how teenagers generally dress than we do. Only a few pieces needed to be provided such as prom dresses and a soccer uniform. The set was made entirely of set pieces already at Central. These easily movable and simple pieces of furniture or props

helped to clearly indicate where the story was taking place. A unit set or drops hung from a fly system were not used. This was done partially to prevent the cost of building a set and partially due to Central’s lack of a fly system. The sound design filled in the blanks that set design might have left out. In order to build the world of the play, we also added announcements at the beginning of each new day. This design choice was used to enhance the fact that the story was truly set in a school. Once all of the designs were set, we were ready to begin the actual rehearsal process.

The pre-work on the play all led up to the day that the process started: auditions. I could not have predicted the response that we got. Thirty-five people showed up to audition for a seven person cast. I could not believe it. I was a new face at Muncie Central, a school that has lacked a BSU Theatre Education presence up to this point. I was directing a completely new and unknown

play. I expected maybe fifteen people to show up with all of those things stacked up against me. I thought we would have auditions, callbacks, and casting all done in one day. Obviously, that is not what ended up happening. We had to add another day for auditions in order to get through everyone who wanted to read, because all of the students wanted to read for every part they could. Our second day of auditions ended with callbacks, then the production team decided on a cast. The cast list was emailed out later that night. The next day the cast met for our first read through of the whole play. Most of the students were familiar with it, because we had made the script available to them as they prepared for auditions; however it was absolutely magical to hear the voices of these characters come alive. The playwright and I had been reading and re-reading the script all summer, but in that moment it became something alive and real. All of a sudden this project seemed like it was actually happening.

Despite all the magic of that first day, the rehearsal period certainly came with its own struggles. When full rehearsals started the Monday after auditions, we hit the first snag: one of our cast members dropped out of the show on Monday morning. We very quickly pulled someone in that we had called back for the part. He agreed to do the show despite missing the first week of rehearsals due to his job. The rest of the week's rehearsals went off without a hitch, so we thought we were in the clear. The following Sunday night, I received an email from the student that had agreed to step in. He told me he now had to drop out of the show, and despite our best efforts, we could not change his mind. We had to recast this character for a second time.

Two weeks into the rehearsal process, we finally had the cast that would end up performing on October 18th. Although the recasting process was stressful and more than a bit of an annoyance to a director and production team that just wanted to get started with the real work on the show, it ended up being a blessing in disguise. When we recast for a second time, we had

to find someone who was willing to jump into with very little guidance on character development since character work had already been completed. I was looking for was a student with incredibly strong instincts who was willing to make big choices and run with a few quick suggestions. Once we found that student, we were able to begin the community building that every cast needs.

I believe “drama is about community building” (Norris, et al. 65). With this show it was even more important that these students truly felt like they were a part of a community. We were asking them to take risks together and be vulnerable with one another, which is the essence of community. Vulnerability and trust are a lot to ask from teenagers, particularly when you do not know them very well. The wall students have built around themselves was slowly disassembled for each of the members of our cast with silly camp songs, theatre games, and relaxed chats during breaks and before rehearsals. This silly and relaxed attitude was very intentional on my



The actors annotate their scripts as we go through notes after a scene.

part as I wanted my students to feel safe when they came to rehearsal. We could not do any of our work if they came guarded and unable to connect with one another.

As a director and theatre educator, I feel that it is important to give students the opportunity to make choices about their

characters and blocking when working on a play. From the first day of rehearsal, my role as director was that of being a guide. I tried not to answer questions about their characters but rather turn their questions back to them with clarifying and more leading questions. This practice gave

the students more ownership of their work, and it pushed them to dive deeper into the work and trust their own instincts as actors.

Producing new work allows for students to make many decisions about their characters and their actions in any given scene. In the rehearsal period, I made sure to dedicate time to continually run the same scene in order to help the students fine tune their own choices. This is a technique referred to as moment-to-moment work. It allowed us to look at a scene from several different angles as the students tried out different tactics and actions as their characters struggled to attain each objective within a scene.

When I introduced actor-driven blocking, the students looked at me like I had grown two heads. Once they understood what I was asking for, it became a tool that they utilized extremely effectively. Actor-driven blocking challenged what the students might have experienced in theatre before and gave them more ownership of their work. When students are allowed to make choices about what they are doing onstage, it helps them to create a more genuine character and prevents the students from doing most things that would look or feel unnatural to the audience. As we put the show together, we paid very close attention to the way the students' choices were shaping the work itself. Our goal was to build these characters, that had previously only inhabited the pages of the script, into very real people.

As we were busy putting the show together, the almost two month rehearsal period absolutely flew by. Before we knew it, it was opening night. As is the case with every show, this production had things that could have gone better. We had a number of students drop out of the tech crew for unknown reasons. This was an unforeseen challenge that the remaining tech students took in stride. By opening night, five people were flawlessly doing the work of ten.

Losing students was not something that I had any control over, but I certainly had a few slips that were most definitely within my control.

In my tunnel vision of getting people in the door, I forgot to put “mature content and language” warnings into my marketing. This show had several instances of swearing and a number of references to self-harm, which most definitely needed a warning. I got caught up in doing the job of so many people, and it slipped my mind. I regret that mistake in particular. The rehearsal period itself did not even go exactly to plan. I was unaware of a number of things occurring at the school that threw a wrench into the rehearsal schedule: Muncie Central’s homecoming, e-learning days, the blood drive, and even school pictures. These things either prevented us from having rehearsal on a day where we were scheduled to have one or were happening in our space when I arrived. This often prevented us from beginning rehearsal on time.

Although we dealt with complication after complication, the students took to these challenges without hesitation. The sheer volume of students that showed up at auditions proved just how excited these students were to



Emilia Heard, Laura Rogers, and Rory Bennett run a scene during rehearsal.

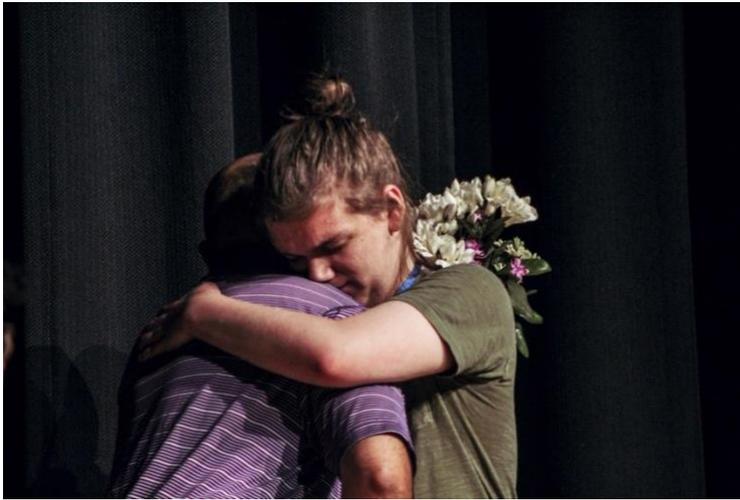
be faced with a bit of a challenge. Those that were cast then understood just how important it was to do their best work on this show. Since each role was a large part of the show, it motivated them to make the show something they were proud to present. They worked diligently not only

during rehearsals but also over breaks and during the school day. After all, they were telling a story about which they cared very deeply.

As I get to the end of this process, I have to ask myself, “How did what I have spent the last six months working on improve the world or even just the lives of my students for the small amount of time that I interacted with them?” I do not even know that I really have an answer to this just yet, but I know that those students now know they are capable of doing incredible things if they are willing to work and problem-solve their way through it. In the program note they wrote, my students said, “The most valuable thing we have learned is that it is necessary at times to step outside of ourselves in order to grow as people and a community.” Through the complex process of preparing a play for performance, a group of seven teenagers learned something about the way the world works and their place in it. The goal of the project was achieved: my students had a bigger take away from the show than “that was fun.” They felt like they were a part of something bigger than themselves.

I also know that the work that I did with Muncie Central has laid the ground work for several Theatre Education majors to come work with these amazing students. My thesis and the work that I did with it has created a mutually beneficial relationship between Muncie Central and Ball State’s Theatre Education program. Ball State now has another place for THEDs to direct shows which will become a good problem to have in the coming years. This will also allow Muncie Central students to work with pre-service teachers trained in directing and theatrical instruction. This relationship is incredibly important. In the grand scheme of things it has helped Ball State give back to the Muncie community in a very real way.

High school theatre is more than “wooden” productions of *You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown* or *Almost, Maine* would have you believe. It is a dynamic, vibrant place where students



Mr. Lodes (played by Nathan Jones) and Davis (played by JoJo Fleming) hug as Davis returns from the hospital with Brooke.

are encouraged to explore stories that they love and value. In a collection of case studies titled *Learning to Teach Drama*, one teacher outlines the role of the drama teacher as such: “Our task [as drama teachers and directors] is to take the students from where they

are and challenge them to use their strengths and skills to grow emotionally and intellectually” (Norris, et al. 35). Teenagers desperately need a safe place where they can fail, and theatre is a place where they are given the opportunity to make choices and take big risks. High school theatre is an opportunity for young people to tell their stories in a situation where their voices matter in a world that often silences them.

To watch a recording of Muncie Central High School’s performance of *7 Minutes* by Madison

Bradshaw, please click [this link](#).

Works Cited

Bradshaw, Madison. *7 Minutes*. 2019. PDF – Unpublished Work.

Dean, Morgan. “7 Minutes Production Photos.” 2019. JPEG files.

Gonzalez, Jo Beth. *Temporary Stages II: Critically Oriented Drama Education*. Bristol, Intellect, 2013.

Grote, David. *Play Directing in the School: A Drama Director’s Survival Guide*. Meriwether Publishing, 1997.

McCammon, Laura A., Johnny Saldana, Angela Hines, and Matt Omasta. “Lifelong Impact: Adult Perceptions of Their High School Speech and/or Theatre Participation.” *Youth Theatre Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2012, pp. 2-25.

Norris, Joe, Laura A. McCammon, and Carole S. Miller, editors. *Learning to Teach Drama: A Case Narrative Approach*. Heinemann, 2000.

Saldana, Johnny. “Social Class and Social Consciousness: Adolescent Perceptions of Oppression in Forum Theatre Workshops.” *Multicultural Perspectives*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1999, pp. 14-18.

I received written consent from all the students involved in the production as well as their parents to use all images and videos of the production in this paper.