

Three Problems and Three Plays for the High School Stage

[ALEX ATES](#)

WESTTOWN SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

There are plays and musicals that are produced consistently every year—even every decade—by United States high schools. This article identifies three problems with that predicament: 1) the educational theater industrial complex, 2) the 24-year delay, and 3) dissonance from contemporary diversity efforts and standards. In the second part of the article, the author engages in reflective practice as a high school educator. The analysis fixates on a “reverse engineering” process where three new plays by professional playwrights are incubated directly for a high school stage in conversation with the school community.

PART ONE: THREE PROBLEMS

In the Educational Theatre Association's (EdTA) 2021-22 annual report of the most-produced plays on U.S. high school stages, there were some familiar titles. (*Dramatics*, 2021). Consider the table outlining the most-produced musicals:

Ranking	Title	Broadway or Off-Broadway Production Date*	Age in Years as of 2022	Notes
1	<i>Mamma Mia!</i>	2001	21	N/A
2	<i>All Together Now!</i>	N/A	N/A	This production was a special revue fundraiser organized in November 2021
3	<i>The Addams Family</i>	2010	12	Based on the cartoon illustrations originally published in 1938.
4	<i>The Spongebob Musical</i>	2017	5	Based on the animated television series that premiered in 1999.
5	<i>Disney's Beauty and the Beast</i>	1994	28	Based on the 1991 animated film.
6	<i>You're a Good Man Charlie Brown</i>	1971	51	Based on the comic strip that first appeared in newspapers in 1950.
7	<i>Little Shop of Horrors</i>	1982	40	N/A
8	<i>Into the Woods</i>	1987	35	N/A
9	<i>Disney's The Little</i>	2008	14	Based on the 1989 animated

(tie)	<i>Mermaid</i>			film of the same name.
10 (tie)	<i>Disney's Newsies</i>	2012	10	Based on the 1992 film of the same name.

*Production dates referenced by the Internet Broadway Database, produced by the American Theatre Wing.

Table 1. Top 10 Most-Produced High School Musicals in 2021-22 (EdTA)

National Public Radio (NPR) has organized EdTA's U.S. high school production data dating back to the 1940s (NPR, 2020). On NPR's data dashboard, there are 17 common musicals and 16 common plays that you can track through the generations. I bet you can name most of them, if not all: *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Crucible*, *The Miracle Worker*—go on, you know the rest!

Certainly, this canon of common plays creates a culture that some find nostalgic, charmingly Americana, or even connective beyond typical geographic or political divisions. After all, teenagers in California and Texas do *Mamma Mia*. However, this stasis of predictability deserves examination. Sure, some will argue that there are “oldies but goodies.” But what makes them good, and for whom? What does “good” even mean in the context of educational theater performance? Defining the term could unpack a concept. This essay understands “good” as a production that is resoundingly constructive as an experience for students and faculty. Predictable stories are good insofar that repetition and transference is in the nature of storytelling, communication, and education. Often-produced performances transfer stories through generations and this is constructive.¹ Further, predictable stories allow students to enter into the production process with some prerequisite knowledge of the material, thereby allowing them to dig deeper into the material sooner. However, this prerequisite knowledge can also create a mirage of the “way the performance *should* be done” which is creatively inhibitive to a student's artistic development and thereby, not constructive. Adult audiences and educators reminiscently view status quo performances as a reanimation of their own experiences. Indeed, adolescence is one of the most evocative development periods for self-identity (Pfeifer and

¹ This is the premise of the Classical Education pedagogy and, while growing increasingly politicized, is a valid and useful pedagogical approach.

Berkman, 2018). It's possible that adult audiences aim to nostalgically recall or transfer identity-relevant values from their own adolescence onto current students. However, this intention is not constructive, it's a replica of a once-constructive experience.

Problem One: The Theater Education Industrial Complex

From the 2021-22 data collected from 1,941 EdTA-member schools in the United States, three problems can be observed. First, the most-produced full-length productions on high school stages typically fall into one of three categories:

1. **Classics:** productions that one could reasonably categorize as being cemented into an American or Eurocentric canon of Western dramatic literature, (i.e., Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*).
2. **Commercials:** productions with well-known origins as commercial (i.e., for-profit) Broadway productions (i.e., *Mamma Mia*, *The Addams Family*, *Disney's Newsies*).
3. **Breakouts:** productions that have settled into a definitive high school canon that have distinctly Off-Broadway origins (i.e., *Almost Maine* by John Cariani and *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen).

The predictability of these categories not only emboldens a theater education industrial complex that financially benefits conglomerate businesses (e.g., Disney Theatrical Group, Music Theatre International (MTI), Concord Theatricals, etc.) but it creates a status quo for high school stages that is *re-creative*—not *creative*. Or, to put it another way: a Xerox copy of a Xerox copy.

Theater Industrial Complex: The commercial system of conglomerated corporate publishing agencies that financially benefit from a limited and predictable status quo of production selections performed by high school programs in the United States.

Is this the true potential of theater as an art? It is not. And it's not what we should be teaching our students when they are most at their imaginative prime. Consider the following graphic for phases of

theater-making:

Phase	Phases of Theater-Making
1	Development of material (sometimes known as “playmaking”)
2	Original interpretation of the world of the play and characters
3	Rehearsals
4	Performance(s)
5	Audience discourse, reaction, and application

Table 2. The five phases of theater-making.

The first four phases are innate to the creative process; the fifth phase, the impact on the audience, is out of the artists’ hands. When schools produce “Top-10” productions, they are only activating stages 3-4 of the 4-part artistic process outlined—only half. To put it another way, “Top-10” productions are the theatrical equivalent to frozen meals ready to eat. It comes to you cooked and packaged—just heat up and *bon appétit!* More offensively, educational directors and designers often plagiarize directing and production designs from professional productions via YouTube or other streaming services, legal or not, inadvertently or intentionally (Viker, 2010). Further, it’s well-known that students will often replicate and plagiarize acting choices via bootleg videos and cast recordings (this would be a fascinating topic for further research).

Problem Two: The 24-Year Delay

Second, there is a distinct delay from when productions receive their premiere commercial production and when they get to the high school stage. The average delay from when an EdTA top-ten musical travels from professional stage to educational stage is 24 years.² But,

² This does not include the delay between the production and the inception of the material of the musical into the cultural zeitgeist such as *The Addams Family*, which entered American culture via *The New Yorker* 84 years prior to 2022. Or, consider *Charlie Brown* and *The Peanuts* which entered the culture 72 years prior to 2022. Of course, these are just considering musical productions. On the most produced plays

what's the problem with a 24-year delay? Isn't a play's longevity a testament to its viability and quality? Certainly, plays that have been produced for so long have the benefit of longitudinal success and refinement. The 24-year delay is innate problematic because it's a delay and such a delay becomes more pronounced when matters of diversity and representation are considered. The field of theater has changed significantly in 24 years.

Problem Three: The Diversity Discrepancy

In 1999, 24 years prior to 2023, the Theatre Communications Guild (TCG) listed the top ten most-produced playwrights by professional member theaters in the United States. Two were female, eight were male, and seven were white (*American Theatre*, 1998). In the 2022-2023 season, TCG demonstrated that out of the top ten most-produced playwrights, half were of the top-ten writers female-identifying and half were Black or People of Color (*American Theatre*, 2022).³ The demographic data referenced in this article is assembled and categorized based on an analysis of the playwright's official and most-up-to-date biography. By way of comparison, in 2021-22, out of the top ten most-produced playwrights on high school stages in the United States, 9 were white and 8 were male-identifying, seven were both white and male-identifying.

In comparing these two data sets, what is revealed is an undeniable discrepancy between gender and racial diversity representation of playwrights on the stages of professional theaters and high school theaters in the United States. This is why the 24-year delay matters. In 24 years, the field of theater in the United States experienced significant diversification in the most-produced playwrights; educational stages did not experience this same shift. On average, 34.2 million more Americans see high school theater per year than Broadway theater at its most well-attended. According to EdTA's data, an estimated 49 million audience members viewed high school productions in 2021-22 (*Dramatics*, 2021). In 2018-19, the year before

list in 2022, number three was the 427-year-old *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

³ This data was assembled through the analysis of 551 member theaters along with Broadway houses. As a note, the 2022-23 data set is used because the organization did not make a top ten most-produced list for the 2021-22 season due to Covid-19-related programmatic impacts on its member theaters.

the pandemic shutdowns, The Broadway League reports that 14.8 million audience members attended Broadway productions—a record high (Broadway League, 2019). Given this data, educators must wonder: How important are production texts written by representatively diverse playwrights to high school theater education?

It has been widely researched that enhanced engagement and portrayal of diverse social identities benefits students and school communities (Armstrong, 2021). EdTA's data suggests that the majority of theater-going audiences are not exposed to diverse portrayals on high school stages. Of course, this means that students engaged in theater education generally aren't exposed to production materials written by non-white or non-male writers. This is not consistent with best practices in education and theater.

PART TWO: THREE PLAYS

Methods, Frameworks, and Approach

This article is not exclusively intended to problematize the state of high school productions. It is also an examination of responses to such a circumstance through on-the-ground praxis.

My positionality to this topic is direct; I am a high school theater educator who produces and directs educational productions. From here, I will engage in reflective practice and analysis on the approach we have taken on these problems at my institution. But first: on the framework: In the introduction to an anthology of reflective essays, *A Reflective Practitioner's Guide to (Mis)Adventures in Drama Education—or—What Was I Thinking* Peter Duffy synthesizes various definitions on reflective practice as such:

In drama education, reflective practice is more than an analysis of which strategies embedded within one's lesson plan were efficacious... [reflective practice] is an honest accounting of the development that follows when one sets one's ego aside in order to pursue a more truthful, vulnerable, and student-centered practice. (Duffy, pp. 4-5)

What follows is a reflective analysis on my school's programmatic attempt to respond to the implications of the datasets outlined in the introduction of this article. To underline: this article is not a proposition

for a franchisable model packaged for replication. This case has unique circumstances, which I will aim to identify transparently. From this reflective analysis, relevant observations from the field might be inflected for the field at-large.

In order to keep the analysis grounded and practical, this section of the article will use the data of dates and timelines as a framework for surmising analysis, a la a director's log. But first, it is important to establish context for the environment where these activities have and are taking place.

Context: Westtown School

I teach at Westtown, a day and boarding school affiliated with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), founded in 1799. We have students from grades pre-kindergarten to 12th. Only upper school students board in dormitories on the 600 acre campus in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The school's pedagogy prioritizes Quaker mysticism and morals, which includes a pronounced commitment to social justice causes; Westtown, like other Friends Schools, has been historically progressive on topics relating to race, gender, and anti-violence. As Stephen C. Gary, former president of the Quaker college Haverford, once noted: Friends schools operate with a "moral dimension." (Cary, 322). This moral dimension has validated initiatives with a social justice rationale.

Westtown is an independent school. According to an institutional 2021-22 annual report, the school has a \$27.2 million operating budget and \$110.7 million endowment (Westtown, 2022). In addition to students who come from the United States, there are students from 13 other countries. 8.1 percent of students are international and 34.8 percent of students are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) (Westtown, 2022).

We have a newly-renovated 526-seat proscenium theater in a large arts center, which includes a scenic shop, costume shop, prop shop, orchestra pit, dressing rooms, and a rehearsal hall. There are three theater faculty members (myself included), two affiliated faculty, and typically one guest director per season. For grades 6-12, there is a curriculum for theater education. Productions, however, operate in a credit-bearing co-curricular program. On average, 13 students participate in plays and double that participate in musicals as actors in the upper school.

Reverse Engineering High School Play Development

I interviewed to be the director of theater at Westtown right before the Covid-19 shutdowns in 2020. By the time I entered the position, our school, like many others, was operating a virtual and in-person program to accommodate distance learning related to the spread of Covid-19. I have written about the international, digital devised work we created during that year in a prior edition of this journal.⁴ As pandemic mitigation evolved, we planned for a return to live performances and I proposed an approach to programming plays for our upper school which I described as reverse engineering because instead of waiting for professional scripts to be available for performance on high school stages, we intentionally commissioned playwrights who were interested in writing for high school actors, whom I had collaborated with prior (and had, thus, vetted), and who could counteract the three problems.

Reverse Engineering: The process of incubating, developing, and performing original plays intentionally-crafted by professional playwrights for high school students and school communities in educational settings with student actors, designers, and participants for general audiences.

Some will wonder, What is the difference between the concept of reverse engineering and the standard practice of new play development? Consider the New York City non-profit New Dramatists, founded in 1949 as a manifestation of Michaela O’Harra’s “plan for playwrights.” O’Harra’s concept for New Dramatists consisted of six parts:

- 1) panel discussions
- 2) rehearsed readings
- 3) a workshop
- 4) craft discussions
- 5) production observations
- 6) theater admissions. (London, 2013)

⁴ Ates, A., Feng, D., Hu, S., & Zhang, E. (2021). Measuring a verbatim effect with high school students 12 hours away and across the world. *ArtsPraxis*, 8 (2), pp. 32-45.

Since its establishment, the New Dramatists model has seeped into the field at-large, academically and otherwise. In many ways, the reverse engineering initiative is rooted in the New Dramatists new play process. However, unlike New Dramatists, reverse engineering is more site-specific and demographic-specific. Reverse engineering is qualified by the distinct capabilities and capacities of the adolescent actor as represented by the students of the institution commissioning the play.

Representative Opportunities

Further consideration was given to student racial and gender demographics on campus with intentional planning regarding opportunities for representation and the importance of students seeing someone who embodies similar identities in their community writing plays. This effort was undergirded and validated by the school's public-facing intentions of becoming an anti-biased, anti-racist (ABAR) institution. There was an identity-conscious intentionality too. As gender identity continues to become more fluid (or less binary), I would work with playwrights to make characters gender-neutral or flexible—thereby individualizing students' gender preferences and also not pigeonholing casting decisions via the gender binary.

Hour-long Shows

These plays would be roughly an hour long. With limited—and often—compromised rehearsal time in educational settings, one-hour plays would allow us to use rehearsal time to run the entire show, give notes, and work problem spots each session. One-hour plays would not only benefit our process but our audiences would likely respond well to them. It has been well studied and reported that modern attention spans are adapting to a short-spurt entertainment landscape, motivated by modern media (Newman, 2010). One-hour plays would reduce the feeling of being held in captivity as an audience member.

Field Situation: Distinctions and Deviations

As Amanda Brown notes in her article “A Welcoming Space for Whom?: Race and Inclusion in Suburban High School Theater Programs” published in this journal, high schools with traditionally-white student populations consider casting conundrums for producing

musicals like *In The Heights* (Brown, 2020). Would it be productive for a theater program to produce such a show without the capability for identity-conscious casting? No. Further, would it be appropriate for the production to be reliant on the participation of students of color at-large to engage with the production for it to be a competent performance? No, that's not ethical either as it puts the moral weight on the students of color. Our initiative allows us to engage playwrights via participation in our program while allowing us to tailor-make casting opportunities that our community can meet demographically.

This approach to incubating plays within the school environment with professional playwrights was different in nature from Daniel Judah Sklar's well-known pedagogy of Playmaking outlined in his 1991 book *Playmaking: Children Writing and Performing Their Own Plays*. Similar to Sklar's process, new plays are incubated via a longform process designed to generate student-centered dramatic material and performance. However, the difference between Sklar's approach and this initiative is that our approach of reverse engineering incubates student-centered dramatic material by emeshing trained playwrights directly into our program and pedagogy by putting them in proximity to our school community.

Further, this consideration is distinct from play development processes outlined in such texts as Matt Omasta and Nicole B. Adkins' 2017 book *Playwriting and Young Audiences*, which generally focuses on the incubation of texts for professional productions. The reverse engineering programming initiative at Westtown School is similar to the approach of TADA! Youth Theater in New York City, which has been incubating and producing new musicals with youth ensembles since 1984, winning a Drama Desk Award in 2009. Now, let us consider three performances commissioned by Westtown School and incubated with its faculty and students as part of the reverse engineering initiative.

The Caretakers by Noelle Viñas



Image 1: Production image of *The Caretakers* by Noelle Viñas at Westtown School. Students performed with masks due to concerns over the spread of Covid-19. *Scenic and lighting design by Sarah Sullivan. Costume design by Heather Tannenbaum.*

Synopsis

Noelle Viñas developed a play about three teenagers who live in an unnamed metropolis decades in the future when the climate crisis has reached an inflection point: resources are low, weather is unpredictably dangerous, and ever-expanding cities are on the brink of collapse. While foraging for food to share with their families, the three teens stumble upon an abandoned shed (similar to one on Westtown's campus) which contains a portal into the future. The teens are transported into a future where a climate catastrophe has been averted through the creation of small, localized, hyper-resourceful communities which operate on a strict consensus model. The consensus model is developed so that no longer could the actions of a few determine the future of many. However, the collaborative governing model is too invasive: it determines jobs and lifestyles while curtailing impulsiveness, adventure, or independence. What first appears as a utopia to the teens slowly reveals itself as a dystopia of sorts. The teens, Max, Gunny, and Kit-Kat must decide if they want to return to

the past, where they now know collapses are imminent, or stay in this dystopian future forever.

Process

Month and Year	Activity
July 2020	- Once hired at Westtown, I immediately reached out to Viñas to assess if she would be interested in collaborating on such a project; Viñas is a former high school theater educator and I knew she would understand this assignment and context well. - Viñas confirmed and we established a retainer fee.
April 2021	- When the next academic year's budget was determined, an agreement was sent to Viñas and representation for approval. - A timeline for developing the play was determined.
May 2021	- Viñas met virtually with two sets of student focus groups. - The first group was an invited assortment of students who were associated with the school's theater program through curricular and non-curricular programming both on and off-stage. - The second group was an 8th grade acting class; these students were engaged as a means of establishing their relationship to the upper school theater program before they arrived as first-years.
July 2021	Viñas met virtually with several adult community stakeholders in the community including teachers, alums, parents, and staff in one-on-one virtual meetings. Viñas inquired about life at Westtown and how the community functions.
August 2021	Viñas visited Westtown's campus and observed distinct landmarks and hidden nooks. She also observed components of the campus' natural life.
September 2021	- Viñas developed a plot and gender-fluid characters and shared the initial concept with me; - Within a few weeks, a rehearsal draft was solidified.

Three Problems and Three Plays for the High School Stage

November 2021	• Rehearsals begin with 13 upper school student actors. • During the early weeks of the rehearsal process, students provided feedback focused on clarifying questions and suggestions for character development. • Viñas generously accepted many of these offerings and they were incorporated into the next draft of the script.
December 2021	• Production draft finalized and designs confirmed.
December 2021	• Viñas wrote lyrics to a song that would be sung a capella by the acting ensemble; • A colleague on the Music faculty composed the song in the style of a sacred harp hymn.
January 2022	• A variant of Covid-19 hit our community during our tech and dress process, we postponed performances of the production by a few weeks. • After a few weeks, our school was still navigating how to manage the variant and a surge in infections. • Within our acting company, several actors were exposed to infection or diagnosed with Covid-19, taking them out of dress rehearsals. • Our school began limiting attendance at community events to mitigate the spread of the virus. • We made the difficult decision to reduce the amount of performances to one night with the actors wearing masks on stage.⁵ • The audience had to be socially distanced so we allowed students to invite two friends to the performance. • With Viñas' permission, we filmed the production and told families and our community they would have access to a performance link.

⁵ The choice to have the actors wear masks was controversial within our community and production team, as some wanted the actors to test for the virus nightly; I made the decision that this would not be feasible or appropriate, given that the nation at-large was facing a shortage of Covid-19 rapid tests. In an informal survey of eight comparable Quaker schools in the United States who produced student performances from December 2021 through January 2022, all of them produced performances with students wearing masks on stage.

	• Viñas scheduled trip to campus was canceled.
February 2022	• A video link was shared with the school community and with families of the performers and backstage crew; this link was given a one-month timeline before it was removed out of consideration of intellectual property.

Table 3. This table details our collaboration from the time Viñas was hired through the sharing of the filmed production.

Impact

- Undeniably, the impact of having to modify the performances due to a variant surge of Covid-19 had a negative impact on the morale of the students and the community; this disappointment was inadvertently yet inevitably tied to the launch of the reverse engineering initiative.
- I hope, however, to revive *The Caretakers* in a future season, given that it has already been incubated, workshopped, and tested for viability in our community.
- Students in 8th Grade Acting read the play every semester and use scenes from *The Caretakers* for their unit on scene work and contemporary theater.

Takeaways

- We learned that we needed to initiate the script-writing process sooner for the benefit of the design team. The turnaround time between when the rehearsal draft was completed and when the co-curricular program for design and technology was too tight.
- After *The Caretakers*, colleagues began questioning the pedagogical intention of the reverse engineering initiative. Where is the room for canonical production praxis? While students are exposed to common plays in their curricular programming, the point was well-taken. So, how could we continue the spirit of the initiative while also creating a dynamic of variety between new work and classical work? This led to our next production project.

Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare, adapted by James Bartelle



Image 2: Maddie Moore-Barkley, a student at Westtown, portrays Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, adapted by James Bartelle. In Bartelle's adaptation, instead of wearing the iconic yellow cross-gartered attire, the character wears yellow cowboy boots and a hat. *Scenic design by Jack McManus. Lighting design by Justin Baker. Costume design by Amy Grebe.*

Overview

James Bartelle was commissioned to adapt one of Shakespeare's plays to be responsive to our community, conscious to our students' identities, more explicitly relevant to current events, and be an hour-long. *Twelfth Night* is considered one of Shakespeare's most iconic plays. The story is about two identical twins separated by a shipwreck, each thinking the other is dead only to be gloriously reunited. When Viola washes on the foreign shores of Illyria, she decides to disguise herself as a man, Cesario, to serve the duke of the land, Orsino. Orsino is in love with Olivia, the countess, but Olivia falls in love with Cesario (Viola in disguise). Meanwhile, Viola (disguised as Cesario) falls in love with Orsino. Concurrently, Olivia's butler, the pedantic Malvolio, is tricked into believing that Olivia is actually in love with him—a ridiculous and cruel prank. Sebastian (Olivia's twin brother) arrives at Illyria and is mistaken by Olivia for being Cesario. By the end of the play, all knots are undone but the consequences of the follies are yet to be seen and the comedy ends on an ambiguous, foreboding

note. Bartelle's adaptation streamlined the plot without losing any essential points and modernized language without losing the meter.

For students, the benefits of performing the play are vast. The play includes spectacular prose and poetry. Thematically, the play explores gender and social signifiers. Finally, the play offers a variety of dimensional and fascinating characters for students to study and explore.

Process

Month and Year	Activity
March 2022	- I requested that we consider a Shakespearean comedy that was flexible with gender, could run roughly an hour-long, have a vocal music component, and not be <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>. Bartelle replied via email: "So... I mean... it should be <i>Twelfth Night</i>, right?" - I sent James a written agreement and retainer fee.
June 2022	- Bartelle crafted a first draft. - Bartelle's Process for adapting <i>Twelfth Night</i> included identifying terms that are so culturally-specific to an Elizabethan context that it carries virtually no significance to a modern audience. Bartelle adapted the language to carry more cultural relevance or meaning while still honoring the syllabic structure to maintain the verse. - One such adaptation was the iconic scene where the prattish Malvolio is tricked into trying to impress his boss, Olivia, whom he falsely believes loves him. In the classic scene, Malvolio attempts to woo Olivia by wearing embarrassing cross-gartered yellow stockings. The intention of this is that Malvolio is tricked into embarrassing himself. - In James' adaptation, Malvolio wears a large yellow cowboy hat and fluorescent boots.
July 2022	Second draft composed; Bartelle estimated that it was still running longer than an hour and would need to make additional cuts.

	• We engaged our frequent colleague the composer and lyricist Ayla Miller to compose a medley of a 'Capella songs from <i>Twelfth Night</i>.
Early August 2022	• A rehearsal draft was confirmed, it was shared with the design team. • I decided to stage the production in the round on the stage of our proscenium; I not only did this to make the action of the play more immediate and intimate, I also did it as a means of simplifying the design world of the play.
Late August 2022	• Thirteen students auditioned for the production and all were placed in roles in the production. • The rehearsal process began with a pre-season week where the actors arrived on campus, alongside varsity athletes, to begin work on the play. ○ This preseason week was critical, as we had prolonged rehearsal periods during the week where we could intensively study the play's dramaturgy, language, and themes. ○ After the preseason week, we began staging. • Bartelle digitally visited rehearsals and the students were able to ask him questions about the play and his adaptive choices.
October 2022	• Three performances ran at the school—two evening performances and one matinee. The house was roughly 200 seats, given the on-stage and in-the-round concept. • Bartelle visited campus during the performance run and participated in community events including interacting with the acting company, speaking in classes, and attending each performance.

Table 4. This table details our collaboration from the time Bartelle was hired through the performances.



Image 2: Adapting playwright James Bartelle meets with students during the instructional day to speak about the process of adapting Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in collaboration with the school community.

Impact

- We recognized the success and necessity of exposing our students to Shakespeare's plays not only as a matter of canonical education or as a means of expanding student vocabulary and performance range. Therefore, we committed to creating a pedagogical rotation of production programming, where we'd produce a new play incubated in collaboration with or in response to the community a la *The Caretakers* one fall and then in the next fall we'd adapt a classic.

Takeaways

- Classical theater and heightened language is still intriguing and relevant to contemporary students, presuming educators have the appropriate time and capacity to dig into the meaning and stakes of the material.
- By establishing a preseason week of longer-than-usual rehearsals strictly focused on studying and unpacking the text made an extreme difference for the production's productivity as

well as the morale among the cast.

- Still, we learned we need to accelerate the development process even faster so the production design team can have a sufficient script sooner, particularly for the fall production slot. Design students need as much time to build as actors need to rehearse.
- Having Bartelle on campus was extremely beneficial for the reverse engineering initiative, as the community was able to see the direct connection between the writer and our community, page to stage.

It's Brutal Out There by Mark Galarrita

Synopsis

Mark Galarrita's *It's Brutal Out There* is set at an elite independent school much like Westtown, students are preparing for a competition focused on pitching digital applications (apps). With a growing computer science program at the school, these smart, capable students have the tools to develop apps that, if effective, could quickly enter the marketplace and change the world with viral speed. Tensions grow between students as they compete to create the most appealing and meaningful app. And an English teacher who is fixated on a student becoming a writer and public intellectual—and not a Silicon Valley techie—becomes obsessed with directing the student toward the humanities, not the tech industry—at whatever cost, including sabotage. Each of the students have ambition, dreams, and are competitive with their goals—and technology is key whether it's building a brand, impressing a venture capitalist, or gaining admission to an elite college that farms students to Silicon Valley. But what are the implications of all of this potential, all of this power?

Process

Month and Year	Activity
April 2022	• Galarrita jumps right out of the gate with a draft exploring topics of students, technology, and competition in an elite school environment.
May 2022	• Galarrita receives an agreement, our timeline is

	confirmed, and a retainer fee is provided. • By expanding the timeline of development, Galarrita's fee expands over two fiscal years. • I connected Galarrita with two seniors; One was a Duke-bound student who was engaging in a year-long playwriting independent study. The other student, Bennington-bound, was engaging in an individualized study in dramaturgy. We set up a conference call where Galarrita asked the students questions about their observations of the dramaturgical process for new plays incubated at Westtown. Galarrita gained insight from the two students about topics that are in the general zeitgeist among their peers. The conversation was equally beneficial to the students, who gained helpful tips and tutorials on playwriting and dramaturgy from Galarrita. • Galarrita engaged the Bennington-bound student over the summer and contracted them as an independent dramaturg with compensation for their services. From this engagement, a student got their first gig as a dramaturg!
October 2022	• Galarrita submitted a second draft that aimed to balance ensemble scenes with monologues. ◦ I requested that the script be monologue heavy to help students build their memorization skills and to provide them with potential college audition materials.
January 2023	• Students in the Advanced Theater class do a table reading of the second draft and it was audio recorded for Galarrita and for the design team. • The students offered dramaturgical feedback on contemporary colloquialisms and references that are often used by teenagers in their environment. • As an assignment, students in the class selected a monologue from the play to memorize, score, and perform.
February 2023	• The latest draft was shared with upper school administration and the department chairs of English and Computer Science.

	○ My pitch to the English department is that the script might be utilized in English classes next academic year and English teachers can assign prompts based on the page-to-stage experience; this would encourage student attendance at performances. ● The chair of the Computer Science program engaged his classes in dramaturgical support by mining their perspectives on accurate and relevant references for teenage technical engineers and coders.
March 2023	● Galarrita shared the third draft of the script; ● Almost one year after starting development of the play, almost five months before rehearsals begin, we have a functional rehearsal draft which has engaged a variety of stakeholders including students and colleagues. ● Designers begin preparing concepts for production.
May 2023	● Design meetings will begin for production.
August 2023	● Production meetings scheduled to begin; ● Rehearsals scheduled to begin during pre-season week.
October 2023	● Production scheduled to open.

Table 5. This table details our collaboration from the time Galarrita was hired through the scheduled performances.

CONCLUSION

The predictable carousel of certain established performance materials on high school stages in the United States leads to an educational theater industrial complex and puts high school performances on a 24-year delay that suffers from diversity dissonance. This article engages in reflective practice to assess an initiative to address the aforementioned circumstances. Below are some practical takeaways gleaned from the reflective analysis.

- When considering the overall impact of the initiative outlined,

one must consider both the students and the faculty equally—yes, equally.⁶ There has yet to be any research or data gathering on the impact of the reverse engineering initiative among students and faculty. The feedback thus far has been anecdotal. However, if such data collection should occur, it would benefit from a wide timeline so the impact could be sufficiently measured through developmental stages.

- Reverse engineering engages more Phases of Theater-Making (Table 2) than participating in the educational theater industrial complex.
- Reverse engineering plays for one's high school program requires sufficient funding. It costs more to incubate new works as opposed to licensing pre-established scripts. Further, it takes far more time. *The Caretakers* had a 20-month development process; *Twelfth Night* had an eight-month adaptation process; *It's Brutal Out There* has a 19-month development process. For overworked educators, it is very tempting to get the play prepackaged, licensed, and ready to go. However, the long term uses and accommodations of homegrown plays is worth the cost.
- In the context of the professional field, advertising a show as a "world premiere" might excite some; however, students and community members are generally more concerned with regenerating material that they are familiar with in comparison to other institutions.
- Our plays were able to be responsive to matters that have direct relevance to our students. *The Caretakers* explored community and climate. *Twelfth Night* explored gender. *It's Brutal Out There*, tech and teens. Communicating the responsiveness of the plays is key to the success of the initiative.
- Educational institutions can play a role in the incubation and development of new American plays for teenage actors and the

⁶ Some shudder at the concept: faculty engagement, satisfaction, creative engagement, and intellectual stimulation is equally important to the students'. Why? An engaged faculty is essential to an engaged student body within a school community. This is not a demented application of "trickle-down" logic; this is the reality of pedagogy!

majority of the country's theater-going audiences.

As I wrote in a 2013 *HowlRound* article: “We don’t need to knock at the doors of the established institutions, because we can open the doors ourselves. As new American theater artists, we can create the new American theater.” I still believe this. I teach it to my students.

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