

Editorial: Look for the Helpers

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I had a student... a young Black girl in my honors and my AP (Advanced Placement English) class. So I had an AP class that particular year—it was like sixth or seventh period—it was late in the day. So, she walks in and she's got a black eye. So I said to her, "Excuse me. Did you... How did you get the black eye? Like, are you okay?"

"Yeah," she says. "Well, my father punched me last night." "Punched me."

Okay.

So I said to her, "Well did you just come to school now?"

She goes, "No, no. I was....I was here at the normal time."

*"You...you went to **all** your classes?"*

She said, "Yeah."

"And none of the other teachers asked you about the black eye?"

She said, "No."

*I went crazy. I went **ballistic**. Okay? Not that I'm such a great*

guy. I'm not saying that. All I'm saying is, you have a girl...she was, I guess, 17—maybe 18 at the time. She was a senior. She comes in with a black eye and you don't even ask her how she got it? She could have said, 'I ran into a door'—you know, whatever. 'I tripped down the stairs'—but what she said about her father, okay, because she wanted somebody to know.

*Now, I think she may have even been 18 because a lot of times I had students who would be 18 and they said, "Well, you can't call child protective services or the police because I'm an adult and I don't want you to do that." And I would say—but I was always **crazed** when they would say that to me—but I said, "Look, you are an adult. As long as you say to me you're safe"—and I said, "Well, you think he'll hurt you any more than what he just did?"*

"No. I don't think so. He gets drunk and blib-blib-blib and that's when he hit me."

Okay. So I said, "Okay, look. You're gonna have to go to the nurse's office, but you know what?" And I've learned too. I said, "Okay. Wait 'til after class. I'm going to take you down there myself." I escorted her there, but you know why? Because some kids would say, 'Well, I'm not... I don't want to do this' and they'll run off. They won't go to them.

And I met the father, by the way, afterwards. He came to an open school night, or...some reason. I met him and he gave me the fisheye, you know? Because he knew... he probably... he must have gotten some trouble. But the girl was grateful.

And she also had a younger sister who I was worried about. You know, when I knew they had siblings in the building, I wanted to make sure—'Well, okay... Yeah, well I'll keep an eye out for them,' you know? So it was... it's one of those things where... but, but a lot of teachers don't want to get involved, you see? They didn't question it. (Cheung, 2022)

February 17 will remain a tricky day for me. It was my mother's birthday—a day which had been celebratory for most of my life and has turned bittersweet since her passing. But it was on that day that I saw a notice that Bill Schiavo had appeared as a guest on a podcast called *Art and Hustle Gallery of Conversations*. Captain Schiavo, as he is known in my family, was English teacher and mentor to my two eldest sisters during their respective senior year in high school. I changed schools

before I had the pleasure of sitting in Captain Schiavo's class, but I knew for many years the important role he played in their adolescent lives. How he, for them, was the first teacher to really shape their world view.

I had a similar teacher, but mine came much earlier than high school. In the fall of 1989, Janet Brown was 21 years old. Fresh out of college, this was her first year of teaching. Fifth grade. I went to a small Catholic elementary school. When I enrolled in 1984, there were two classes per grade; each class with about 30 students. Over the years, the school enrollment declined—most prominently in my particular class which had been whittled down to about 20 students in the whole grade by the time Miss Brown came along. And we were just off a tough year. Our fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Troutman, had a difficult pregnancy and was on bedrest after the Christmas holiday. And we'd loved her and were so excited about the baby.



Image 1: December 1988 - Mrs. Troutman's last day



Dear Grade 4,

You are very special to me. I am proud of how well you worked together like a family.



I have enjoyed being your teacher. I hope you will always remember your time in 4th grade with me as a special one. You have learned a great deal of information and I am pleased with your progress. Continue to work hard so that you can get good grades. Always remember to be good Christians. I am going to miss you. Thank you for being such a kind and caring class.

Please keep the baby and I in your prayers. You will be in mine also. I'd like to hear from you. Hope to come back with the baby to visit you in May.

May all your dreams come true! God bless you.

Love,

Mrs. Troutman



You are a great class! Merry Christmas
& Happy New Year. I Love You.



Image 2: Mrs. Troutman's farewell letter to the class.

But then came her replacement, Mrs. X, stepping right from the pages of a Roald Dahl novel. Whereas Mrs. Troutman was warm and welcoming, Mrs. X was cold and abrasive. We were at war from the start. And within four months of her arrival, though I was one of the highest achieving students in the class, I was exiled to sit in the back of a third grade classroom to school myself for the remainder of the year.

But then came Miss Brown. She was every bit a breath of fresh air that both my classmates and I desperately needed. She was young and hip. She talked to us about our interests. At our Halloween party, she let us bring in tapes to class so we could listen to our music. Her copy of the Ghostbusters Soundtrack got stuck in the tape player and I *insisted* I would fix it—as I had done at home so many times before. Unfortunately, Miss Brown's tape did not survive my intervention.

I remember well when we returned from the Thanksgiving holiday weekend and Miss Brown told us that her boyfriend (now husband) had taken her to see Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. I knew the fairy tale from Shelley Duvall's television series *Faerie Tale Theatre*,

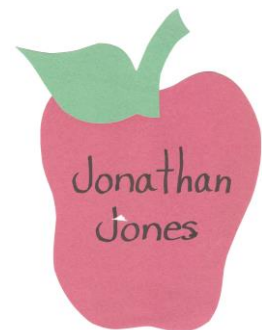


Image 3: Miss Brown welcomed us to her classroom on the first day of the year with our names written on apples.

so I asked, “Did she turn into sea foam at the end?” When I explained further that in ‘the real story’ the mermaid didn’t get her prince, Miss Brown burst into tears. She was real. Authentic. Radically welcoming. And so we shared our lives.



Image 4: 5th Grade class picture with Miss Brown; this author pictured second row, third from left

1989-1990. That year with Miss Brown was the very same school year in which the inciting incident detailed in this editorial took place. Whereas my sister had Captain Schiavo, I had Miss Brown. And when I heard Captain Schiavo speak in that podcast recording—as he recounted this harrowing tale about the day one of his students turned up with a black eye, I was taken back to that very dark year.

Yes, my father was drunk that day. He was drunk many days. But it's in what the Captain described as the *blib-blib-blib* that I knew there was much more to tell. The black eye was more akin to a burst blood vessel than a black-and-blue shiner, but it was a black eye just the same. And on a day not unlike that 1990-black-eye day, I'd gotten a black eye of my own. Yes, he was drunk then too. And yes, I too took my black eye to school. And yes, my teacher—my captain, Miss Brown—she too went ballistic. I would have many conversations with her about my life

with an alcoholic and abusive father—many hushed conversations. But those conversations only commenced after that January black-eye-day that Captain Schiavo recalled. It marked a turning point in my family as my sister was in fact 17 years old at that time. And while I don't think teachers were trained then as mandatory reporters like they are now,¹ the school nurse did report the incident to child protective services.

January 12, 1990 – 139

...pulled in driveway and man from Social Services was on porch. Asked him in. Went to kitchen. He asked John what happened. John told him Danette was saying things disrespectful to mother and he said to stop and not say another word. And he said she mumbled under her breath and he slapped her. He said he just lost his patience because he told her to stop it and she mumbled something.

Man asked if he saw her eye. He said, 'Yes, that night'—but he didn't think he hit her in her eye. 'That was an accident.'

He (the man) said he understood that, but that the law says you can hit your children but you can't leave a bruise or an injury on them. 'It's neglect and abuse.'

Man asked if we would leave him and Danette alone. We went into living room. Man asked if we'd be willing to go for counseling. I said yes. No answer from John.

In living room, John said he would not go for counseling.

The man finished with Danette and asked me to return. He told me this charge was just against the father, because Danette said I did stop him so nothing was against me—but if it happened again, I would then also be brought up on charges of neglect because I didn't protect the children.

He also said Danette said father hasn't been home but maybe once a week since September and you don't know where he's living—'Is this right?' I said yes. He said, 'Do you want to try to save the marriage or do you want us to give you help with getting your husband out?' I said no. We had talked and I wanted to give it another try. He said okay, 'But if you change your mind, let us help

¹ New York State's child protective system has been in place since 1973 and the NYS education law identified teachers as mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse at that time, though teachers have only been required to present evidence of required training in the identification and reporting of child abuse in order to obtain teacher certification since January 1, 1989 (Glick, 1977; Coughlin and Gerhart, LLP, n.d.).

you because you don't have to live like this and don't be afraid or think you don't have a way out because there's 5 kids—because there's agencies to help you.'

He then said, 'Danette says father has a drinking problem—that there's not too many days he comes home that he hasn't had a few already or has a bottle hidden in his pocket and sneaks to drink it when you're not there. Is this true?' I said yes. He said, 'Well, this is a problem then too because he shouldn't be hitting the children if he's been drinking because he's not in full control of his actions and may seriously hurt one of them without realizing it.'

He then called John in and said that yes, action would be taken on this matter because Danette had an injury and what this means is that this case would remain on file until Jason² turned 28. So if there were any further occurrences this would be on record. He said a field worker would be in contact with us in the next week to come see us.

Labelled '139', this entry was from the third of many journals that my mother began writing the previous summer, and this was the 139th day. She began counting those days with the first entry—the first night that my father didn't come home from work as he was supposed to. Years later, we would know that he met a woman in a bar on Broadway in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn on August 20, 1989 and started having an affair with her that would last for approximately six years. He was in that bar seven days before my mother started writing those journals. We were out of town visiting my mother's family and he'd stayed back home to work. We blew the head gasket in the family car on August 19th so we extended our stay—and he took advantage of our absence.

August 27, 1989 – day 1

Came home from Dad's. John called at 7AM asking where was I. I told him we decided to stay Saturday night after going out to eat. He called twice during the week telling me to stay until Sunday—like he had plans for Saturday and didn't want us home.

838 Monroe Street was the location of the affair. It is all seared into my

² My youngest brother.

memory. 139 days—in retrospect, things were just getting started. But then—in that tumultuous year—we were *drowning*—and who else but the helpers could throw us a lifeline?

When Danette told Captain Schiavo that her father punched her, he smartly picked up on the significance of that unbridled truth. There could be no more covering up—no more pretend. The dam was breached and the truth would flow forth. From that January day in 1990, it would be six years until it was clear that ‘giving it another try’ was no longer an option. Years of visits with case officers from child protective services, AA meetings, Al-Anon meetings, Alateen meetings, frantic calls to police, handcuffs, nights in the drunk tank, loss of numerous jobs, numerous drunken vehicle accidents, foreclosure—abandonment. But light only began to creep into that house of secret hidden trauma when Captain Schiavo insisted he would walk Danette to the nurse’s office.

Perhaps this was only the act one finale—preceded a few years earlier by one of my aunts noticing the grapefruit-sized bruises on the thighs of my siblings and remarking to my mother, “Oh, you better cover those up. If police see that, they’ll take the kids away.” It had all been noticed—but never acted upon until that winter day. And those bruises were the physical evidence of the trauma. But what of the emotional and behavioral evidence? Reading through those journals—there is one anecdote after another detailing all the ways my brother and I were habitually acting out at school. My sister Nicole breaking down in tears in play rehearsals. My sister Tanya running out of the house time and again. All of us running out to a neighbor at one time or another. We were just screaming into the wind, desperate for anyone to do *something*.

In the two years since the murder of George Floyd—two years of this racial reckoning, I’ve invested a great deal of time in my teacher education courses to culturally responsive pedagogy, reading Christopher Emdin’s *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood (...and the rest of y’all too)* and Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O’Connor, and Kestenberg’s *“The Kids Are out of Control”: Why We Must Reimagine “Classroom Management” for Equity*, among others. While discussing these texts with students, I have recounted again and again the consistency with which I enter drama classrooms throughout New York City and immediately identify the ‘problem child.’ Often the classroom teacher prepares me for so-and-so or such-and-such—the little one who

is always a challenge. And without fail, that is a Black child. Sometimes, a student teacher lets me know that the classroom teacher has advised them to disregard that child's misbehavior—that they are 'just seeking attention.' And they are—they are literally calling out to be seen. And what is behind that misbehavior? If we relegate every outburst to a child calling out for unwarranted attention, what might we be missing? Black Lives Matter activist and Missouri Congresswoman Cory Bush tells us, "A closed mouth will not get fed" (Pod Save America, 2022) and here you are, desperate to silence that child and keep them malnourished. And given the regularity with which Black children are so relegated, what traumas might this response from teachers be masking?

Beyond the trauma that these behaviors might indicate, this orientation of teachers might be trauma *inducing* in and of itself. Maya Angelou used to ask, "Do your eyes light up when a child walks into the room?" She asked because each time they don't light up, you may well be scarring that child—providing them with yet another obstacle that they must overcome every day that follows—a feeling that they are unwanted, undeserving, unloved. And I know that feeling well. And that little Black child in those classrooms—I recognize them in an instant, because that little Black child **is me**. And Miss Brown—just a child herself in that first year that she was teaching—she took the time to notice me, just as Captain Schiavo took the time to notice my sister. And we really needed to be noticed then—just as so many desperate young people need.

Why this story? Why now? Mister Rogers famously implored young people to look for the helpers. He said,

When I was a little boy and something bad happened in the news, my mother would tell me to look for the helpers. 'You'll always find people helping,' she'd say. And I've found that that's true. In fact it's one of the best things about our wonderful world. (Rogers, 2001)

A platitude not without critics. Writing for *The Atlantic* following the mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA in October of 2018, Ian Bogost described this statement as, "a consolation meme for tragedy" when this advice is transposed from Rogers' preschool audience to adults. Bogost concludes,

As an adult, it feels good to remember how Mr. Rogers made you feel good as a child. But celebrating that feeling *as* adults takes away the wrong lesson. A selfish one. We were entrusted with these insights to make children's lives better, not to comfort ourselves for having failed to fashion the adult world in which they must live. (2018)

But we—drama educators and practitioners—we either *are* the helpers or are charged with *identifying* the helpers and providing our students and participants with access to those resources.

To you, I implore—just as I do to my graduate and undergraduate students—I implore you to *be* the helpers. And it's not too much to ask. In practice, I know well that being the helper is what brought you to this field. And yet, when I come to call at your classroom door, will I be forewarned of the problem child? Will I again lay eyes upon my younger self reflected in the eyes of your Black child who is calling out to be heard? Pioneering educational leader Dr. Maxine Mimm's advises, "A Black child cannot learn unless the teacher loves her or him" (Evergreen Sankofa Media, 2020). There was much to be excavated beneath my need to be seen. My very safety was shielded therein—and were it not for the *love*—the *dignity*—the *respect* of Captain Schiavo and Miss Brown, how much worse might things have gotten had my father not been put on notice?

Be the helpers. We need you.

IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue, most of our contributors have reflected on their educational theatre practices with a range of communities. **Amanda Dawson** interrogates her experience as a white cis-gendered woman developing the course Contemporary BIPOC Plays and Playwrights at a majority-white university in a majority-white city. **Evi Stamatiou**, **Eric Kildow**, **Freya Spearing**, **Georgia Nodding**, and **John-Paul Price** analyze the rationale, application, and evaluation of an educational verbatim theater case study that involved British theater students and American nursing students, from the University of Chichester and Kent State University respectively. **Lucy Kania** sheds light on larger-bodied adolescent girls' experiences of fatphobia in educational theatre. Finally, **Jason P. Lotz**

proposes ways in which teachers might employ reaction videos as intervention, in service of decentering the theater audience and the theater classroom.

LOOKING AHEAD

Having recently concluded another thought-provoking dialogue at the 2022 NYU Forum on Radical Imagining: Exploring Equity in Educational Theatre, our next issue ([Volume 9, Issue 2](#)) will focus on articles under that same heading. We invite you to join us in an exploration of the concepts of equity, diversity, inclusion, access, and justice (EDIAJ), investigating how these notions intersect, inform, and collide with theatre in community and educational spaces. We invite members of the Educational Theatre field to submit works that will share ideas, vocabularies, strategies, and techniques, centering on varying definitions and practices. That issue will publish in late 2022. Thereafter, look to the [Verbatim Performance Lab](#) for outreach and innovation from the NYU Steinhardt Program in Educational Theatre.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

[Jonathan P. Jones](#), PhD is a graduate from the Program in Educational Theatre at New York University, where he earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. He conducted his doctoral field research in fall 2013 and in spring of 2014 he completed his dissertation, *Drama Integration: Training Teachers to Use Process Drama in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and World Languages*. He received an additional M.A. in English at National University and his B.A. in Liberal Arts from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Jonathan is certified to teach English 6-12 in the state of California, where he taught Theatre and English for five years at North Hollywood High School and was honored with The Inspirational Educator Award by Universal Studios in 2006. Currently, Jonathan is an administrator, faculty member, coordinator of doctoral studies, and student-teaching supervisor at NYU Steinhardt. He serves on the editorial board for *Applied Theatre Research* and *Youth Theatre Journal* as well as on the board of directors for the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE).

Jonathan has conducted drama workshops in and around New York City, London, and Los Angeles in schools and prisons. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. He co-produced a staged-reading of a new musical, *The Throwbacks*, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival in 2013.

Jonathan's directing credits include *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Elsewhere in Elsinore*, *Dorothy Rides the Rainbow*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *The Laramie Project*, *Grease*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, and *West Side Story*. Assistant directing includes *Woyzeck* and *The Crucible*. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Production credits include co-

producing a staged-reading of a new musical, *The Throwbacks*, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival and serving as assistant production manager and occasionally as stage director for the New York City Gay Men's Chorus since 2014, most recently directing *Quiet No More: A Celebration of Stonewall* at Carnegie Hall for World Pride, 2019.

At NYU, his courses have included Acting: Scene Study, American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Assessment of Student Work in Drama, Development of Theatre and Drama I, Devising Educational Drama Programs and Curricula, Directing Youth Theatre, Drama across the Curriculum and Beyond, Drama in Education I, Drama in Education II, Dramatic Activities in the Secondary Drama Classroom, Methods of Conducting Creative Drama, Theory of Creative Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Elementary Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Secondary Drama, Shakespeare's Theatre, and World Drama. Early in his placement at NYU, Jonathan served as teaching assistant for American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Seminar in Elementary Student Teaching, Theatre of Brecht and Beckett, and Theatre of Eugene O'Neill and worked as a course tutor and administrator for the study abroad program in London for three summers. He has supervised over 50 students in their student teaching placements in elementary and secondary schools in the New York City Area. Prior to becoming a teacher, Jonathan was an applicant services representative at NYU in the Graduate School of Arts and Science Enrollment Services Office for five years.

Recent publications include *Let Them Speak: Devised Theatre as a Culturally Responsive Methodology for Secondary Students* in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People* (edited by Selina Busby, Charlene Rajendran, and Kelly Freebody; forthcoming), [*Paradigms and Possibilities: A Festschrift in Honor of Philip Taylor*](#) (2019), and *Education at Roundabout: It's about Turning Classrooms into Theatres and the Theatre into a Classroom* (with Jennifer DiBella and Mitch Mattson) in [*Education and Theatres: Beyond the Four Walls*](#) (edited by Michael Finneran and Michael Anderson; 2019).

Recent speaking engagements include featured guest spots on Fluency with Dr. Durell Cooper Podcast, speaking about [Origins, Inspirations, and Aspirations](#), and Conversations in Social Justice Podcast, York St. John University, speaking about [Activism and Race within University Teaching and Research](#) (2021); panel moderation for Theatre in Our Schools ([Stage to Page: Reimagining the](#)

[Teacher/Practitioner Role in Scholarship](#)) and the AATE National Conference ([Pandemic Positives: What Do We Keep? Looking Backwards to Move Forward](#)); an invited lecture on Performance as Activism at the Research-Based Theater Seminar, Washington, D.C. Citizen Diplomacy Fund Rapid Response COVID-19 Research-Based Theater Project, The COVID Monologues, part of the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund for US Alumni Rapid Response made possible by the US Department of State and Partners of the Americas (2020); a keynote lecture on Drama and Education: Why and How for the Drama and Education Conference, Shanghai, China (2020); and an invited lecture, On Creativity, for the University of Anbar, Iraq (2020).

In addition to his responsibilities at NYU, Jonathan teaches Fundamentals of Public Speaking, History of Theatre, and Introduction to Theatre at CUNY: Borough of Manhattan Community College.