

Dramatic Sonata: A Musicking

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ABSTRACT

Couched in the politics of a Southern Indiana school district, this paper explores how Christopher Small's concept of "musicking" can be used as a methodological framework for critical pedagogy. The paper is presented in sonata form and with dialogue detailing the author's experiences advocating for his students to perform Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition in front of his local school board. It begins with a brief discussion on the political climate in Indiana, followed by exploring how musicking can be used to counteract these policies and how these policies impact the lives of students. The dialogue portion demonstrates musicking in action as all participants can music together.

INTRODUCTION: A PASSAGE AT THE BEGINNING OF A WORK AND PREPARATORY TO THE MAIN BODY OF THE FORM¹

A School Board Meeting, a Play, and a Culture

Instead of enjoying my summer break, I am in a well-appointed boardroom dressed in my nicest serious-but-artistic suit and my worn brown leather shoes I bought from Goodwill. The past month has been filled with meetings, phone calls, and exasperated emails. I was in this boardroom with microphones and cameras everywhere arguing for the local school board to approve the theatre summer camp and the play attached to it: *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*. In the past I had been to school board meetings, even contentious ones, but the attacks on free expression and the demonization of educators have only increased since then. I watched the meetings and always read the meeting minutes; I had never spoken at one before. I'm not scared of public speaking, but I was scared that I would become a martyr in the war on the human condition and that my students might lose one of their few safe places. School boards have become some of the most hotly contested and deeply politicized institutions in American public life and many of the local ideologues feel that it is their calling to fight a war on the students' right to free expression (Wong, 2021; Hetrick, 2023) and ultimately their self-made identities. It had been only a year-and-a-half since a dramatic election swept in three new board members (out of seven) who ousted the sitting superintendent two weeks after they took office (DeCriscio, 2023). 74.5% of this district voted for Donald Trump in 2025 (2024 Lawrence County General Election Results, 2024). This iteration of the school board was motivated and ready to take action. This had become a public fight and I was caught in its crosshairs.

The public schools in Indiana are being shaped to more easily dominate students as opposed to provide students spaces to discover and learn (Freire, 1970, p. 72). The Indiana Republican super-majority legislature has passed a number of laws that challenge the self-expression of all students and make the marginalization of LGBTQ+ students easier: Indiana HB 1608 is Indiana's attempt to copy Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, SB 480 attempted to ban gender-affirming care for minors (it was signed into law by the governor but was subsequently

¹ *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, "Introduction" (Randel, 2003d)

blocked by a federal injunction) (Tilley et al, 2023), and HB 1608 which effectively outs any queer students who use a chosen name in place of their given name (Bonilla Muñoz, 2023). Gustave Weltsek (2022) at Indiana University discusses in “Let’s Make Theatre Illegal Again” how the aims of critical pedagogy are at odds with the policies of the state of Indiana. I found myself in front of the school board defending my choice to mount *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*. The Republican conservative right found issue with one of the characters who was gay and other instances of non-traditional presentation of gender. Instead of allowing students to have a discussion and explore these issues through the production, the immediate response was to silence the material.

As a straight, white, cisgender male, I never expected that I would be asked to play this role in this war—but I needed to stand up for those students of mine who were affected by these new policies. In this paper I describe “musicking” (Small, 1998), why I use it as a methodology for theatre making, and then share a play that I wrote as a reflection so that the reader and I can *music* together.

EXPOSITION: THE FIRST MAJOR SECTION PRESENTING THE PRINCIPAL THEMATIC MATERIAL²

Musicking: A Methodology for Liberation

I began my journey as an educator working in a secondary music environment; as a student, I had been a member of my school’s Thespians’ troupe,³ but my main artistic pursuits were always in music. I didn’t find my way to teaching theatre until I directed my first show as part of my job as a high school choir teacher. Regardless of the artistic discipline, I always felt my mission was to bring opportunities in the arts to my students. To make sure that no one was priced out of my program, I started scholarship funds for private lessons and made sure that I ran my program on a shoestring budget. What I did not understand at the time was that, at its core, this was work towards liberation. I was creating situations for aesthetic and embodied artistic

² *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, “Exposition” (Randel, 2003c)

³ Thespians is a school-based drama competition run by the Educational Theatre Association (EdTA) wherein schools have teams who compete in a variety of categories, such as monologue or musical theatre scenes

experiences in order to achieve life-affirming humanization (Freire, 1970). The work of arts education is more than just creating a piece of “beauty” however defined, it is about creating an intellectual and emotional space for self-reflection and ultimately humanization. In *Poetry is not a Luxury*, Audré Lorde describes this sought-after humanization, writing:

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and our honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. (Lorde, 1984, p. 37)

This quote encapsulates how I strove to create artistic experiences for opening dialogue and reflective practice among young people to create a pathway towards breaking the systems of oppression which they face in their day-to-day lives. I approached this goal through “musicking” (Small, 1998).

I have long been interested in the debate of process versus product and have always felt myself drawn to the process side of the argument. In my experience as a musician, the preparation and my own learning were always more engaging to me than the actual performances which is why I have identified my educational practice with Christopher Small’s concept of “musicking.” Small defines musicking as: “...to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing (Small, 1998, p. 9).” Musicking is the doing, the verb form of the noun “music.” Musicking centers the exploration of an event and the navigation of it in real time instead of focusing solely on the final product of performance, allowing a fluid and embodied understanding of process rooted in the simultaneous interaction of immediate social circumstances, emotions, and mind-body cognition (Richerme, 2015). In *Towards a Critical Performative Pedagogy: Living Museums—The Empires Project*, Weltsek & Elfreich (2024) meditate on how embodied practices like musicking lead to a “vibrant and dynamic emergence that is making meaning rather than re-making tropes and social inscriptions.” Through musicking, the individual is actively engaged in creating meaning and in creating culture. In *Why*

the Arts Don't Do Anything, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) describes the rhetoric of cultural production as, "not what people are, what people have, or even what people value; culture is what people do" (p. 226). Musicking centers the process of doing in all its forms as a part of cultural production, democratizing the arts, and empowering young people to engage in "re-forming and re-defining the 'self' in the moment of doing" (Weltsek & Elfreich, 2024, p. 17).

Small suggests that the success of a performance is based in its ability to conjure a set of relationships and create an impromptu community. He writes:

Any performance, and that includes a symphony concert, should be judged finally on its success in bringing into existence for as long as it lasts a set of relationships that those taking part feel to be ideal and in enabling those taking part to explore, affirm, and celebrate those relationships. (Small, 1998, p. 49)

This creation of communities through the enaction of cultural production facilitates resilient spaces. I do, however, disagree with how Small suggests that the audience's participation in musicking is based on the relationships between the different roles played by those who are musicking. Small goes to great lengths to explore the different contexts of audience musicking, but I believe that the audience is a much more active part in the process. Small is content to stratify the performer and the audience in different castes, discussing how performers (particularly in many popular musics) suggest to the audience that they might be welcome on stage, however bodyguards are there to enforce a separation between the musickers on stage and the musickers in the audience (Small, 1998, p. 48). This forced separation, Small suggests, betrays any sense of genuine connection or genuine participation in the musicking event. Framing this logistical separation to invalidate the relationship is flawed because the purpose of musicking is the doing, not solely the doing in relation to other people. Musicking is also a method of nonhierarchical cultural production and the audience-performer relationship, which can be a tool for the liberation of the participants (as explored below).

Small makes it clear that every present participant is active in musicking (Small, 1998). Musicking as an embodied, participatory process requires what Brecht describes as *sehen* or active

spectatorship which is a key component of his epic theatre (Bradley, 2016, p. 16). The purpose of this active participation through spectatorship is to spur the audience to take action against the portrayed alienation (Brecht, 1948). This is similar to one of the common examples of spectators musicking, the premiere of John Cage's 4' 33" in 1952, wherein the silent composition forced the audience into listening to the ambient noises of the performance space and reacted in various—often visceral—ways to the performance of music without sound (Gann, 2010). Cage's 4' 33" is among the most documented pieces of arts-making due to the incredibly strong audience reaction.

Musicking should also be non-hierarchical and is open to all who approach it earnestly and without creating a value judgment (Small, 1998, p. 9). If art is approached with sincerity and the desire to build up all participants, there is no wrong way *to music*, much as there is no wrong way *to drama*. Boal neatly connects musicking and theatre by claiming that music is a language of the theatre; writing in the introduction of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal notes:

People singing in open air; the theatrical performance was created by and for people, and could thus be called the dithyrambic song. It was a celebration in which all could participate freely. (1979, p. ix)

In Boal's conception, it is only the outside power structures imposed by the bourgeois class and the "coercive indoctrination" that seeks to divide the roles within the theatre. Conversely, the dithyrambic song is free for all to join like Small's opening of the performative act to every person who participates (Boal, 1979, p. 119; Small, 1998, p. 9).

DEVELOPMENT: STRUCTURAL ALTERATION OF MUSICAL MATERIAL, WHICH MAY AFFECT ANY PARAMETER OF A THEME⁴

Complications in Musicking

To music more fully, I wanted to offer my students an opportunity to

⁴ *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, "Development" (Randel, 2003b)

continue their theatrical studies in the summer. My goal was to create a space where students could receive more individualized attention on their talents than I would have during a regular production and provide more students with the chance to work on full-sized roles. This also functioned to create an inclusive space for youth who might feel alienated being stuck at home.

The major issue blocking *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* from being approved was the involvement of a gay character, Noel Gruber, who at one point performs in a drag persona as “Monique Gibbeau,” a “carny with a heart of black charcoal” (Richmond & Maxwell, 2024, p. 27). The failure to understand that Noel is a moody teenager who longs to escape his boring small town is why this scene was so fiercely debated by my school board. The character of Noel presents a danger to homophobic hegemony in the presentation of his queerness not as a victim but as a person with wants and desires. Queerness is generally an unacceptable concept in school productions; it does find some acceptance as a victim narrative—a gay person being bullied or brutalized for their identity is acceptable (Simons, 2015). Noel, while the victim of a tragic roller coaster accident, is not a victim of his sexuality and leads the other characters in the show to question their own gender and sexuality. The attempt by the school board to remove the exploration of a character like Noel posed a huge blow to the education of my students while giving a huge victory to those who wish to continue to fight the human condition.

Many of my queer and queer-ally students seek refuge within the walls of my theatre, increasing the importance of gay characters in the works that are performed. This brings more acute attention to the dissonance between the experience of the students and what has been deemed acceptable by many in the local community. The existence of a gay youth character that has relatable teen struggles about his identity is such an important opportunity for the students but also for the audience who would rather not think that that is a valid identity. Part of the musicking of drama is to provide a place for the students to explore these elements of their identity. As Small says, musicking needs to be free from judgement (Small, 1998). If viewed as a “start again space” (Olsen, p. 41), these students are allowed to interrogate their lives and create new, more self-actualized identities and a place for them to be safe from the dangers often presented at home and in the community.

RETRANSITION: SETS THE STAGE FOR THE DRAMATIC RETURN OF THE ORIGINAL THEMATIC MATERIAL⁵

A Musicking

What follows is a short play I wrote as a musicking based on my experience starting the theatre camp and my advocacy for it at a school board meeting in my Southern Indiana school district. The play is structured in the sonata form utilized in the rest of this article, adding the repetition needed to complete the musical form. I created this play using mixed-methods including the creation of entirely fictional scenes, adapting emails into dialogue, as well as borrowing from the livestream of the actual school board meeting. While the school board meeting is a public record and can be found in my references, the names of all the characters have been changed and bear little resemblance to real-life people. It is a work of fiction created from the artifacts of genuine experience. The dialogue portion of the *Dramatic Sonata* has never been staged and was written as a reflective exercise.

The inclusion of the following dialogue is itself a musicking. I was musicking when I composed its text and I continued to music as I wrote the rest of this essay around it. The goal of its inclusion is to communally music here in the pages of *ArtsPraxis*.

EXPOSITION: PRIMARY THEME

The stage is bare except for a desk center stage in a soft special. It is disheveled and has way too many papers on it. Hayden is sitting at the desk looking at his computer monitor. From the darkness come Marie, Cassandra, and Zoë.

Marie: Mr. Hayden, who would you cast as Jane Doe?

Cassandra: I don't want to be Jane; I really want to be Constance.

Hayden: What makes you think that we are going to do *Ride the Cyclone*?

Zoë: We all know you're bad at keeping secrets, little man.

⁵ *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, "Retransition" (Randel, 2003e)

Hayden: Well, I'm not going to say anything. I can't tell you if we're doing it and I'm not going to start dreaming of casting a show we're not doing.

Marie: But it'd be fun! Plus, we all already know the show and there is a High School Edition now. Imagine, I could play Ocean! Cassandra would be the perfect Constance! Sarah really, really wants to play Ricky.

Hayden: Isn't the bell about to ring?

Hayden turns in his chair back to face the computer monitor, a knowing smile on his face.

Cassandra: You're just trying to not answer!

Hayden: Why on earth would we do that show?

Zoë: Because it's fun, duh.

Hayden: Fun isn't a reason to do a show. What are you going to get out of doing it? We don't just do shows because they're fun; we do them because of what we can learn from them.

Cassandra: I just think the characters would be such a treat to play.

Hayden: Why is that?

Cassandra: First off, Constance's monologue—that's crazy long. That and we don't really get to do dramatic roles like that.

Marie: You always tell us to think about what the characters want, and in *Ride the Cyclone* it's always very clear what they want. We could really make a lot of progress as actors.

Hayden: You all got to do dramatic roles in *Sound of Music*. Plus, there's really only 6 characters in *Ride the Cyclone*.

Zoë: Marie got a dramatic role; I just suffered through being a chorus nun.

Marie: I was so bad in that show!

Hayden: What do you think we have to say through this show? I'm not interested in just recreating the slime tutorial. And who would play Noel?!

Cassandra: Jim, of course.

Jim enters from the dark.

Jim: The high school version is dead to me. That's not Noel!

Jim exits.

Marie: It's a chance for us to explore the catharsis through the group. We can pour ourselves into the roles and heal our real hurts.

Cassandra: It's a show about loving and growing.

Marie: We can focus on reacting and embodying our characters!

Zoë: Plus, the music frickin' slaps.

Marie: See, it's perfect!

Hayden: *(playing devil's advocate)* It's still a cast of, like, six. How am I supposed to do a show that has only six kids that nobody is going to come to? More people in the cast means more people in the seats, which means more money in the bank. Which we need.

Marie: Well, it'd still be really fun.

The school bell rings. Marie, Cassandra, and Zoë all leave. Hayden is seated at a desk and looks at his computer monitor. He types something and sits back in his chair—a smile on his face. He stands up and walks away from the desk followed by a

spotlight. The special over the desk turns off as he walks downstage.

EXPOSITION: SECONDARY THEME

Lights come up on another office, Mike, a bearded man behind it with an energy that's wanting to escape from behind the large desk at which he sits. In another chair is Tricia, a middle-aged woman who is hoping this meeting is not as boring as her previous one. Hayden enters the office.

Mike: Nice of you to drop by, Luke. What can we do for you?

Tricia: I'm very excited to hear about what you have to propose for us.

Hayden: I want to present to both of you the idea of doing a summer musical theater camp this year. Our last show was a huge success and the kids are hungry for more, and I want to be able to serve that desire.

Mike: I'm interested in anything that gives these kids something to do over the summer.

Tricia: What do you mean by more?

Hayden: I want to provide an opportunity for these students to work on their dramatic skills, to create something that doesn't need to be driven by profit, like *Legally Blonde*, but instead driven by their own creativity and feeds their exploration of the human self. I want to help develop their abilities to express themselves through dramatic techniques and grow as actualized people. We would do enrichment and learning sessions in the mornings and rehearsals in the afternoons for the camp show. We can also learn the basics of running sounds, lights, and all of those technological skills that are really needed.

Tricia: What show do you want to do?

Hayden: I want to do *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*.

Mike: I've never heard of that, what is it?

Hayden: It's a pretty straight-forward crucible type of show. Six teenagers die in a roller coaster accident and are in limbo trying to win a chance at being resurrected. Their judge is a fortune telling machine.

Mike: That sounds fine and all but why this show?

Hayden: Well, it only has one set which will keep the costs down. The small cast of 7⁶ means that every kid that wants to be in this camp can be in a leading role and I can just double cast the show. This would make it a huge opportunity for the kids. Plus, it's a show they all love and would be willing to come out for. This show has been super popular online for a couple of years—kids love it.

Mike: Are there any content concerns? I know *Legally Blonde* had a few complaints about its content.

Hayden: So, this show is a High School Edition, they just finished making this version recently. I've read the scripts for both, and pretty much anything objectionable has been taken out. The original is pretty rough around the edges, but the gem of a story is still present in this version.

Hayden hands both Mike and Tricia a script which they flip through for a moment.

Mike: It looks like you've done your work, and I think this is a wonderful opportunity for the kids. I give you the go-ahead to do this.

Tricia: Since this is a new camp, we will need to submit it to the school board, but that shouldn't be a problem. You can go ahead and work on securing the rights and promoting the camp.

Black out.

⁶ The 7 roles described here are the total number of characters in the show. One character, Karnak, was portrayed by a puppet and was voiced by a staff member who was a retired local radio disc jockey. Because the character was not portrayed by one of the camp participants it has been excluded from other conversations surrounding the number of young people involved."

DEVELOPMENT: TRANSITION

Lights come up on Hayden sitting at his desk. He is looking at his computer. RECEIVING EMAIL SFX. Hayden clicks through to the email. A light comes up on Mike typing at his desk.

Mike: Hello, Mr. Hayden. I received a few emails about your upcoming *Ride the Cyclone*. People are concerned about the content of the show; particularly that it includes sexual language, talk of the loss of virginity, bestiality, references to pornography, and using the Lord's name in vain. Is this true?

Hayden: (typing) Hello. I appreciate your email. While those are elements in the original show, we are producing the "High School Edition." I double-checked the script and all the elements you mentioned are not in it. If anyone has questions, they can read a perusal of the script on the license holder's website.

Mike: (typing) Thank you. I will pass this information along. I am satisfied with this.

Blackout

DEVELOPMENT: MODULATION

Lights up on Hayden sitting at his desk making himself busy. He gives off an air of defeat. PHONE RINGING SFX.

Hayden: Hello?

Elizabeth: Hello, is this Mr. Hayden-?

Lights up downstage left on Elizabeth, an active middle-aged woman.

Hayden: Yes?

Elizabeth: This is Elizabeth Baker; I'm calling you about last night's school board meeting. Your proposal for the theater camp was tabled

because we really want to approve this camp for you and the kids, but there is some concern about the choice of show. Now, I'm a bit of a theater person and used to be on the board of the community theater in town.

Hayden: The contract has already been signed for this show. I asked both my department chair and Mike who both gave their approval. There is already considerable artistic and financial investment into putting on this show.

Elizabeth: There is already a contract?

Hayden: Yes, it was signed almost two months ago.

Elizabeth: Well, that changes just about everything. We are going to have to fight this one out. I am the president of the board, but I know some of my colleagues are very concerned about this. When I arrived at the meeting yesterday one member made a big deal about it before the official meeting started. Could I possibly get a copy of the script to read?

Hayden: Of course. Anything that can make this happen for the kids. If anyone else wants to read it, they can too.

Elizabeth: Would you be able to come to the next school board meeting? I will do what I can behind the scenes, but I think that it would make a substantial difference for you to speak.

Hayden: It would really be the least that I could do. What are our chances for success?

Elizabeth: We only need three votes to say yes for this to go through. I think most of my colleagues think this is either a waste of time for the board or are in favor. There is one member who can try to sway the rest of the board to vote against. I am more worried about what he will say than the vote, but there are no guarantees in politics.

Black out.

DEVELOPMENT: TONICIZATION

*The lights come up on a long-raised desk with five individuals sitting behind it. Elizabeth is sitting in the middle. To her left is Prince who gives off a curmudgeonly air. Other school board members are **Scott**, **Becky**, and **Bradley**. There are witnesses scattered around the room; many interested explicitly in the result of the vote on *Ride the Cyclone*.*

Elizabeth: Now we move to work session agenda item number 2, approval for the high school summer theater camp.

Prince: I believe we tabled that at our last meeting.

Superintendent Yancy: It is very unusual to have to vote on a school play; I thought I removed it from the agenda last night.

Elizabeth: **Yes, but due to our having tabled voting on it at our last meeting, we must vote on it now.** I have invited Mr. Hayden to come and speak. I have read the script, which Mr. Prince has also decided to read, and Mr. Hayden and I have discussed some of the content of the show that can be changed. However, legally no edits can be made. When I read the script, I didn't find anything wrong with the show. This is a very tame show, all things considered. I would like to welcome Mr. Hayden to give his remarks.

Hayden: Hello, thank you all for having me here today and thank you to Dr. Baker for inviting me to come speak. I would like to talk to you about the great opportunity that I am trying to provide for my students and why *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* is the right choice for these students. This camp provides an opportunity for the students to learn more about theater, develop personal learning, engage them in critical literacies, and give them something to do this summer. This is a tuition-based extra-curricular program that students are electing to do. I believe that this camp is something that will enrich the lives of all my students, and my choice of show is a key component of that. This show was suggested to me by the students. I obviously could have never dreamed of doing the original version, but when the High School Edition was published, I knew this would be a great opportunity for them. What I really think is exceptional about this show is that every

character gets to have a complete arc. Every student would have to think about what causes their character to change, what they want out of this experience, and they get to make choices for that character. The characters are all teenagers and relate to the real experiences of our students—particularly those who would do a camp like this. Theater provides an opportunity to see the world through mirrors and windows. A student might relate to Ocean who is a try-hard but fails to connect with their friends and playing Ocean can give them a look in on themselves. A student might not be non-verbal like Ricky but by taking on that role, the student might become more aware and learn what it is like to be in that situation and how to treat their peers who might be different from them better. This is all while I can remove myself from their actions and lead them towards a student-led learning process. My job is to guide them on the path and then they take care of the rest. I believe that theater is, perhaps, a “magical” art form. The whole cycle of the show includes pre-production, rehearsal, and the performance, yes, but it also includes the response to that performance for both the students and the audience. It is irresponsible to not let students perform works that challenge them and challenge their audience. I believe this show provides a safe level of challenge for both them and for the audience. Thank you all so much for your time and I welcome any questions you may have.

Hayden relaxes for a moment after finishing his talk, knowing that the questions will be coming and could be contentious.

Prince: First off, I don’t think your students are the best judges of the plays they should be doing. Now, if everyone doesn’t mind, I would like to read passages from this play to show what kind of things are “appropriate” for these students... Noel, who I assume is the main hero, says “Being the only gay man in a small rural high school is like having your sweet sixteen on the moon. The decorations are amazing. The catering is sublime. But nobody shows up. It’s okay. You’ve already run out of oxygen.” Jane says “When a lioness has children, she stops making love to the lion. The lion gets jealous, sometimes so jealous that he eats the children. You’d think this would upset the lioness. Far from it, they make love again, as if the children never existed. I find that idea terrifying.” Then we get to the whole finale, the most important song, sung by Noel—dressed as a woman—and here

are some of the words: “broken-heart, a life of sin tattooed with a safety pin. Racketeering, bribery, extortion, fraud and forgery; super crusty, holy terror, wild eyes and bad mascara.” Later, Mischa says, “My divine Talia, when I look into your almond eyes, I do not see the boy I am, but the man I must become to possess you... Then we shall sing and dance and drink and then I shall whisper in your ear ‘let the water run wild or let them be damned.’ My perfect Talia, I lay my masculinity at the altar of your maidenhood.” Do you really think this is appropriate for kids?

Hayden: Yes, because not every action needs to be positive. You wouldn’t have very good dramatic stakes if that were the case. Noel’s lament ends with the Monique Gibbeau persona dying from their unholy lifestyle. The whole show is about this group of characters working out their differences and negative character traits to decide who is the most fitting to return to their old life; it is about friendship and learning to love one another. I would like to comment on your last reading from the script—you skipped a couple of lines: you missed where Mischa proposes to Talia in front of a river—he is pledging his love to her in the sincerest conceivable way. There is nothing subversive about that; he is working through his rage and anger and self-actualizing. This could be an immensely powerful role for any young person but particularly a young man who is trying to figure themselves out and I wanted to clarify what that scene is actually saying.

Elizabeth: Again, it is highly unusual for the content of a school play to be up for debate by the school board.

Scott: My daughter reads Shakespeare in her English classes and that has suicide and witches and all sorts of dark elements-

Prince: I would hesitate to put this on the level of Shakespeare.

Scott: Regardless, Mr. Prince, I have no interest in this school board micromanaging the content of classes or school plays. Now maybe Mr. Hayden should stick to more family-friendly shows in the future, but this went through the right channels and is not the responsibility of the school board.

Becky: I'm a sports person, but I always hear about your shows from my neighbors. Are you sure this is the right show for the community?

Hayden: Yes. This is also a much smaller show and with that it is a much smaller advertising budget. I'm not going and buying radio ads for this. We have not even started advertising. Nobody really knows about *Ride the Cyclone* except theater people. That is why the camp is tuition-based—it is more about learning than it is about the success of the show.

Prince: I don't care if this is right for the community; I don't think this is right for the kids.

Elizabeth: There is a signed contract, and all the right channels were followed. Not everything can be a Disney show.

Hayden: I would like to point out that two of the musicals I have done were *High School Musical* and *The Sound of Music*. I am not trying to be controversial and I have no problem playing it safe—I just really believe this is the right show and that I have the right students to really make this show work. They deserve to be challenged.

Elizabeth: Any last comments? Can I have a motion to hold a roll call vote?

Bradley: Aye.

Elizabeth: Second?

Scott: Aye.

Elizabeth: Mr. Bradley, we will start with you.

Bradley: Aye.

Prince: I just don't think this is right for our community or for our kids. Nay.

Becky: Aye.

Scott: Aye.

Elizabeth: Aye. The motion passed for the summer camp and *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*.

In true dramatic fashion, there is celebration on one side of the room and panic and dismay on the other.

Blackout

RECAPITULATION

Lights up on Hayden and a group of 6 students. The students are all dressed in private school uniforms getting ready to perform Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition. It is opening night.

Alyssa: Have you seen my water bottle?

Tyler: No, I haven't seen your water bottle!

Marie: Hey, it's really not the time to be worrying about that. We go on in 5 minutes!

Hayden: Everyone, have a seat, we don't have a lot of time.

All of the students sit down looking at Hayden.

Hayden: I want to say that I am super proud of all of you. You worked super hard to put this show together. We all spent every minute of every day for the last two weeks putting this together. I hope you are proud of yourselves and the work that you have put in. I have loved seeing you all grow and become friends. This camp was about this show, but it was also about helping you learn and grow as people. I am so proud of you all and the work that you have put in. There was a serious campaign that didn't want this show, this camp to happen. I think this is the show that you needed and the show that they need. I want you to go out there tonight and create something so beautiful that anyone who might not want you to succeed can't help but be moved. I have loved leading you and now it is your turn to be in charge.

Everyone put your hands in. Break on “needs.” Okay? What the world...

All: Needs!

Blackout.

End of Play.

CODA: CONCLUDING PASSAGE OCCURING AFTER THE STRUCTURAL CONCLUSION AND SEVES AS A FORMAL CLOSING GESTURE⁷

What Has Happened Since

I initially wrote *A Dramatic Sonata*, in the summer and early fall of 2024. Since that time things in Indiana have only continued to deteriorate. Faye Gleisser’s *On Indiana: A Disorientation Guide* (2025) is a harrowing read discussing just how deep Indiana’s anti-humanization policy runs. A new diploma was passed into law that forces young children to make a choice that could affect all future career options and academic endeavors for the sake of corporations getting free labor in the form of internships (Appleton, 2024; Indiana State School Music Association, 2024). The Eyes on Education portal is collecting reports of educators who do not comply with the state’s demand for banking education and threatening to revoke their teaching licenses (Charron, 2025; Smith, 2025).

I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge that I did not win this fight to program *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* alone and I also want to note that while many of the new school board members are, in fact, conservative, I would not want to suggest that they are all reactionary ideologues; rather, they are doing what they believe is best for the school district and often their own children. However, with recent legislation making school board elections partisan, it is increasingly likely that in many school districts in Indiana people outside of the hegemonic ideology will not be able to be a part of determining educational policy due to having an R (Republican) or a D

⁷ *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, “Coda” (Randel, 2003a)

(Democrat) next to their name on the election ballot (Carloni, 2025).

I think the reasoning for the pushback against the camp, *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*, and the critical and embodied pedagogical practices that I was suggesting are rooted in the desire to stop young people from engaging with material that might suggest a way of being other than what has been deemed appropriate by those in power. Ultimately, they want to prevent students from musicking—to silence the dithyrambic song.

The good news of this story is that *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* was approved and the kids did get their camp. This was not just my victory; I received a lot of help from Dr. Wendy Miller who read the script of *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* and helped organize support and to prepare me for the school board meeting that is featured in my dramatic sonata. While one small play in a small town doesn't feel world changing, it really was for my students and for myself.

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