

As a high school freshman, I had admired the school's musical productions. Always too self-conscious to audition, I watched from the audience in awe. Everything about it was captivating: the lights, live music, dancing, the sets and the raw energy and risk of doing it live. No safety net.

I have a passion for music, but never had the confidence to use my interest for something bigger, *something* to get more involved in my school. A little too introverted and uncertain my freshman year, I watched each play with a longing to join, but always holding back.

After growing tired of sitting in the audience, I decided I wanted to be a part of it. The hardest part was convincing myself to actually go to the first audition. I've always been self-conscious of my singing and absolutely dreaded having to sing in front of people, especially people who have done this for years. Who could have guessed that auditioning for one play would change my entire high school experience?

So I did it - and my sophomore year was immediately different. I was now surrounded by completely extroverted people with high energy and extreme talent. I had no friends in the drama club, so I was alone and forced to open myself to new people. What makes these productions so intriguing and, for me, life-changing is that everyone is accepted. The mix of students and our interests is almost overwhelming. We represented "the fringe," coming together in this common interest that bonds us, often drains us, and always ends in immense satisfaction. We laugh together, we learn together, and we even cry together. I have never once questioned why I was there.

The effort that goes into our musicals is not typical of the average high school production. Practice is every day after school, and on the weekends. Three shows are produced every year with about two months of preparation before opening night. It's demanding, and the work and talent that is produced every day is inspiring. Through the hard work and intense preparation as a cast and crew, I have come to understand more about my peers and myself. I've learned that my peers have talents that are concealed during the school day, and a new person can be revealed through something as simple as a high school musical. Understanding that it's okay to be yourself and let go of insecurities is the best realization I've gained through my three years in the drama club. Judgement is so easily passed without even realizing it, but throughout my time with this group I've learned to avoid judgment and let myself get to know people as they truly are.

The past three years of theater have helped shape me into the person I am today. I am more comfortable with who I am and have developed my own authentic personality. Public speaking, which I feared as a freshman, is hardly a concern now; I am confident in front of my classmates and strangers. Anxiety that once held me back from joining the play and other activities is a non-issue. More importantly, I was able to become the person I was waiting to be, open, accepted and accepting.