

Switching Up

Standing on a stage to perform in a theatrical show for the first time transformed my entire life. Being a sophomore in high school at the time, insecurity overtook me on a daily basis, and I searched desperately each day for something that might make me just a little less awkward. I was in football for my first two fall semesters. I absolutely dreaded each day we had practice because it forced me to face how incredibly awkward and uncoordinated I was in comparison to the other players. When auditions came around for the mid-winter play of “Pinocchio”, I felt drawn to go out for it.

Though I felt a pull coming from deep within to audition, I had never done anything even remotely close to performing in my whole life, so the thought of being so vulnerable in front of a director terrified me. I consulted my girlfriend at the time, and she was supportive for the most part; however, I think she saw this as her opportunity to get some experience directing. I showed her the monologue I was planning on doing for my audition. Bluntly, she told me it was pretty bad.

“You think I should have more movement?” I asked, hiding my desperation poorly.

“Yeah, it would just add some life to your character while you’re up there.”

“Uh, okay. So when I talk about how confident I was, you think I should run my hand through my hair?”

“Yeah, but don’t do it weirdly. Do it like you’re cool and you’ve always been cool.”

So obviously, even she knew I wasn’t the coolest cube in the tray. It felt weird even at the time to do something I would never do “as a character” because the whole concept of playing a role was still a bit foreign to me. After a few times practicing this new version in front of her, she seemed pleased with her directing ability even though I was still not confident in my ability to show out like this on stage.

“Alright, it’ll be hard, but I think I’m ready for the audition tomorrow.” I lied.

“Just remember to be confident. That’s what they’re looking for.”

“Will do. You ready for your audition?”

“Oh yeah, I’ve had plenty of experience.”

In hindsight, I know this last line to be more posing than confidence in ability. With a few years experience with it at this point, I find that new actors fall into one of two categories: the shy and timid, and the overly confident and boisterous. Her and I were very different. On the day of the audition, I had this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach which spoke true to how I felt

about the audition. Throughout my classes, I kept losing focus on what I was doing because I was trying to be in just the right mindset. I found myself running my hand through my hair as if I were performing the monologue.

Once the audition did come around, I found myself standing outside the doors to the auditorium talking to friends. That was the first time I'd ever experienced my hands going cold when I got nervous. I'm not sure why this happened, but since I began performing on stage, it was like my hands both figuratively and literally carried my embarrassment and shyness for me. If I touched someone, I worried that I might turn them into ice similar to Medusa transforming her victims into stone. To avoid any accidental freezings, I avoided contact with others.

"You think you're ready, Chuck?" My friend Katelin prompted.

"I think so." I replied, obviously not thinking so.

"You'll do great!" She lied "Let's see what you have."

Because I thought I needed to be memorized, I tried running through the monologue without looking at the words printed on paper. I thought about exactly what I needed to do that might make me get the part. When I went through the monologue, I was skittish and frantic. Even an alien who knew nothing about the human race and had only been on Earth for a day could see in my eyes that I was terrified of the judgement that was going to ensue.

"You look nervous, just relax! You've got this." Katelin told me, but I knew that would be impossible. There was no way I could calm down in the twenty minutes allotted to me prior to the time I signed myself up for to audition. What made it even worse was I would be the last person the directors would see before making their decisions. During that twenty minutes, I tried to "flash memorize" my monologue because I was definitely not memorized. I ran it through over and over again in the dreary men's bathroom with brutal lighting that would make an infant look somewhere closer to a very small seventy-five year old man. When I came out of the bathroom, the main director, Mr. Gifford, was looking for me.

"You ready to go?" He asked. It seemed like everyone was leading with that that day.

"Could I get any more time?"

"I mean maybe five minutes, but we really can't do much longer than that."

"Alright, well then I guess I'm ready to go." I was transparent with the terror filling my body going into the audition. I made sure he knew exactly how scared I felt, as well as the co director. Little did I know I was already being evaluated for a role, and unless I miraculously changed their mind, they had likely already cast me as some small role.

I stood on the stage something like fifteen feet away from them, and they sat in the second row for some odd reason. I remember taking note of it because I was not sure what the motivation for that would be at the time. Looking back, I think it must've been to prevent any possible intimidation that could come from them being in the front row and not some ploy to make me perform my worst. The beaming lights blinded me to help distract me from the very intense embarrassment I was feeling at the time. They didn't do all that great of a job because throughout the monologue when I was supposed to be looking confident, I shook violently and stepped forward and backward hesitantly as if I had only done it once before. This was because I had only done it once the night prior. Halfway through, I spaced on what line came next in this extremely simple monologue about someone having the best day of their life with a cute little punchline of someone's fly being down. They knew I forgot because I broke what little character I had developed.

"Shoot, I forgot my line." I admitted.

"That's fine, you can use your script if you have it." Mr. Gifford revealed with little faith in his tone.

"Okay, it's on my phone, so it'll just be a second." I tried to push my hand into the pocket of my well worn jeans, but my finger got caught and I had to try a second time. Once my hand was finally in my pocket, I fumbled getting my phone out and went to the Gallery app. I scrolled for a moment to find it because I had saved it a few days prior and had taken pictures since then. Once I found the script, I realized how incredibly small it was and this only added to my nerves. By the time I began speaking again, it felt like hours had past. It felt like I would look up when finished with my monologue and the two directors would have been gone. Eventually, I made it through my monologue, and to my surprise, the two directors were sitting there patiently.

"Thank you." These were the only words that broke the deafening silence that fell between the end of my monologue and their critique, and they were uttered by Mr. Gifford. Certainly, they were still in shock from the trainwreck that had just unfolded before their very eyes.

"Is that everything? Do you want me to do anything else?" Terror still filled these questions, and the only reason I asked them was because I had heard my friends talking about how they had to do something weird.

"No, thank you. You can leave." I still remember the energy in the room being extremely tense, and I'd guess that came more from my end than theirs.

A week later, the cast list was out. Everyone talked about how excited they were and who might be Pinnochio or even Geppetto. I, of course, was far more concerned with whether I would even get a role. If I didn't, I'd have no reason to be at rehearsals and would miss out on the wonderful friend group who attended. This was an oxymoronic fear because the proud part of me told me I would easily get a leading role, and the anxious part of me countered that immediately with how much I had actually prepared for the audition which was little. I finally made my way to the English department of Minot Central Campus High School, that dastardly building which felt more like a prison especially in this moment, and found the cast list hanging on the doorway of Mr. Gifford's classroom.

Stupidly, I began at the top of the cast list where the more important roles were. Pinocchio? No. Geppetto? No. Jiminy Cricket? No. Figaro? No. Instead, I had earned the role of Bernardo, the bread baker who would have definitely been played as a dual role for a more important character if the cast were smaller, but because so many people had auditioned, this was my part. Cheerily, I embraced the role and went to rehearsals day in and day out to try and be the best representation of a bread baker I could. There weren't many scenes I was a part of, so this gave me a ton of time to make friends with the other extras who were interesting and fun, as well as my girlfriend's friends who were also interesting and fun. I gradually developed a very real love for these friends I was making, and by proxy, a very real love for theater.

Though I had been in football the fall before that show, I had never felt a bond with my team as I had felt with the cast and crew. It was a river which ran far deeper than any small stream I had with the best of my football friends. I knew this and still went out for track and field in the spring, but the important thing was that I had planted the seed. A seed that would grow into a brilliant rose bush when given ample time, water, and sunlight.

Almost exactly a year later, it was time for auditions at the much larger, much more liberating Magic City Campus which felt more free than Central Campus from the moment I stepped foot in the building for classes. I had been in the building before because football and track and field had practices there, so it was not my first experience ever with the building. The two campuses were separated by grade: Magic City Campus having the juniors and seniors, and Central campus having freshmen and sophomores. Being in those sports almost felt like purgatory, like I was waiting out my days so I could graduate and be done with them forever. All I needed was some excuse to quit that would feel like validation. I was scared of what my parents might think if I told them I didn't want to continue sports without having some backup to

go to. The auditions were my chance to make this change, and I felt the motivation to try harder for this audition.

This time we were given an option of which script we wanted to read for our monologue, and this was an excerpt from the show's. This midwinter play, "Scapino", took place in Italy at a small cafe with the plot surrounding the two main characters: Scapino and Sylvestro. Scapino was the mischievous type who had a certain way of manipulating people to get what he wanted. Sylvestro was his loveable, not-so-intelligent friend whose unconditional, brotherly love for Scapino got him into peculiar situations with Scapino's antics. I chose a monologue where Scapino pretended to be a pirate and talked to his parrot, Pretty Polly. Even from that description after all these years, it's pretty easy to tell I knew this show far better.

Because of how poorly I had done at the year prior's audition, I wasn't even going to give theater a shot. I assumed I was just uncoordinated and bad at all things, as nothing seemed to work. My speech teacher, Mr. Koenigsman, convinced me it would be a good idea. Everytime he did a small promo for the auditions for the show, he always made sure to make eye contact with me. I think he could see the anxiety in my eyes, so he made sure to go out of his way to tell me about the auditions again after class.

"So you going to audition?" He asked.

"I was thinking about it, but it went so bad last year. I don't know."

"I'd say if you auditioned, you'd have a pretty good shot." In hindsight, he had likely already type casted me as a character because I was animated in his class. I always put forth my best effort for speech class, but I was never sure why. Secretly, it was likely fate dancing with me once again as it had throughout my entire life. I took what Mr. Koenigsman said to heart and decided to audition thinking the worst that could happen was I didn't get a role.

I vividly remember having an oddly good day and frequently checked to make sure my pants zipper was not down. We had a lab for chemistry which was one of the hardest classes at that school, and I miraculously got one-hundred percent on it. Later on after classes let out, I was working on math homework that was far easier than it usually was. I blew through it in something around twenty minutes which gave me plenty of time to mentally prepare myself for my audition, something I was unable to do the year prior at a similar audition. I found myself sitting at a table reviewing my script when my friend, Ciara came up to me to see how I was feeling.

"What're you up to?" She asked.

"Just finishing up homework and getting ready for my audition."

"Oh! You're auditioning for the show? I just did."

"Woah, really? I'm pretty nervous about it."

"Why's that?"

"I dunno," I knew. "It's just a lot of pressure to audition."

"That's fair, but I'm sure you'll do great!" Ciara was always one for being genuinely supportive, if not sarcastically hostile.

"Thanks, it's coming up here pretty quick. I think within a half hour or something like that."

"Okay, well I'll let you get back to what you were doing, but it was great talking to you!"

"Yeah, you too!"

"Good luck!"

"Thanks!" With that, we gave a wave, I went back to my preparation, and she walked off to handle what other business she had that day. I'd decided I would just keep the script on me this time because I felt like I was on the director's, Mr. Koenigsman, good side. Though I was still very nervous and my hands had gone cold to carry my embarrassment, I felt more comfortable than my first audition a year prior. My eyes darted across the page as I reread my lines over and over. I tried reading it in different styles but realized I would just stick to my original idea of how the script should be read. What felt like both an eternity and an instant, the half hour was up and I made my way to the auditioning room.

Unlike last time, the auditioning room was not a theater. Instead, it was a small classroom adjacent to the theater and my classroom for speech. Like last time, there were two directors: my speech teacher and the assistant director, Kena. I would have many positive experiences with Kena in the future, but at that moment she was an unfamiliar character to me and so added to my stress. They sat just across from me in desk chairs which almost looked too small for them, but I'm pretty sure that was just an illusion because of how much older they were than the students who usually occupied those chairs.

As I delivered my lines, I felt a shift in the room. During the first audition, I had not felt this shift, but this time there was a positive reaction to my audition. They had smiles on their faces and laughed because it was a decently funny monologue. My nerves relaxed with this shift. I expected a much harsher environment similar to the one I'd experienced during my first audition, but with this one being so much easier, I wondered if perhaps I was the one who made my last audition have such a harsh aura rather than the directors. Once I finished, I dropped my face for the character, signifying I was done with the scene.

"Thank you. Could you do it all again but pretend there is a person in a burlap sack in the corner that you're messing with?" Mr. Koenigsman prompted.

"Uh, sure." I was optimistic, but taken aback by this slightly odd request. I repeated the lines but this time kicked at a pretend burlap sack and crouched near it talking to it. I made sure this time to put genuine energy into the lines rather some rehearsed energy that would not resonate with an audience.

"Thank you very much." Mr. Koenigsman let out through chuckles. "That'll be all. Have you ever done theater before?"

"Other than being in last year's midwinter play, no." I confessed. He didn't seem offended by this but looked rather understanding.

"Interesting, well we appreciate your enthusiasm." He complimented.

"Thank you for the opportunity." I replied awkwardly. I was a caterpillar about to become an elegant butterfly or at the very least a moth capable of flight and reaching for lights. I gave my friends a few salutations then drove home. On my half hour long drive back to the Air Force Base I lived at, I thought about how much kinder the directors had been this time around. It felt like I had a tremendous chance of getting into that show.

That following week, the week just before school let out for winter break, the cast list went up at 3:00 p.m. sharp. Once again, people chatted about what role they hoped to get and how excited they were for the show to start when we came back to school. I did not have as much contact with people in theater in my classes this semester, so I successfully distracted myself during the day. When 3:00 p.m. rolled around and classes ended, I made my way to the hall where the cast list would be just outside the audition room.

Idiotically, I started at the very top of the cast list, knowing full well there was no way I'd get a big role. I would just be happy to be around the friends I'd made the year prior. Scapino? No. Sylvestro? Yes. That couldn't be right. I blinked my eyes hard and wiped them just to make sure I was seeing what I thought I was seeing and sure enough, to the right of the name Sylvestro was my own name. I felt both nervous and excited for the months to come because I thought I would be able to become better friends with some of the seniors that year, but I also thought I might crack under the pressure.

Throughout the following two to three months, I went to rehearsals daily and steadily grew in confidence as a performer. I made it a priority to go to every work call as well so I could not only be proud of acting in the show, but also building the set. I developed deep friendships with some of my greatest friends during this midwinter play (some of them mentioned prior). I

found I had enough validation now to switch from sports to theater with minimal consequences. Without this experience to light the way, I'm not sure if I ever would have left sports to find myself and who knows where I'd be now.

Those next couple months hold some of my most cherished memories to this day. At first, I entered rehearsals extremely nervous because I thought I had been mistakenly put in the role of the second lead. Over time, however, I realized that I was developing true friendships, far more intimate than anything I had experienced in sports. It's as if the actors were okay with shedding a layer and being vulnerable with one another. In hindsight, this makes sense because a good actor needs to show hints of raw emotion during performances, but as a little newbie theatre kid, I had no way of knowing this factoid.

Friends who are still my friends to this day are people I met during those performances. I met my best friend to this day during that play, Hanna Bailey. At the time, she worked at Dairy Queen, and I vividly remember the days where we'd meet up after me going to work calls on the set or her going to work so we could eat ice cream and drive around Minot for hours on end with no destination in sight. A specific fond memory I have with her is when we were both at a work call and our director, Mr. Koenigsman (Mr. K), brought his dog in to work call as he sometimes did. No one was paying attention to Mr. K except for Hanna and myself, as everyone else was more focused on making that dog chase a tennis ball. While they were distracted talking amongst each other, they dropped their attention from the ball as it rolled towards Mr. K, and he gently picked it up and subtly pocketed it. He looked up to see who had seen, saw that Hanna and I were both watching, winked, and continued saying what he was saying. Everyone looked for the ball while Hanna and I laughed like hyenas about this ridiculously specific chain of events. We made sure not to reveal the whereabouts of the ball to them.

Once we were done with performances, I told my dad I needed to talk to him about something rather important. This was probably a terrifying prompt for a conversation for him because I usually joked around a lot and when I was serious, it meant something really intense was about to go down. We stood in the kitchen late one evening, and I proclaimed my love for theater.

"I don't want to do football anymore." I let out through gritted teeth.

"What do you mean? I thought you had fun playing."

"No, I only did it because I thought that's what you and mom expected me to do."

"We don't expect you to do anything besides try your best."

"I dreaded practice every day this semester."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Your mom and I only want what's best for you and want you to be happy."

"Really? You don't care?"

"We care in the sense that we want you to be happy, but we don't care how you get that happiness. Be yourself."

"I'm not sure why I had this feeling you guys didn't want me to do artsy things for extracurriculars."

"We never even thought to put you in acting."

"Oh, thank you. This'll help my attitude towards school. I'll be happy going!" My father single handedly just lifted the world from my shoulders. Even in hindsight, my dad never did anything to make me feel like I had to play football besides tell me I should go to practice. This was likely just his attempt to keep me involved in school. Without my parents' support during the period of transition, I don't think I would have been brave enough to make the switch, but I sure am happy I did. After that conversation with my dad, I returned not to football that fall, but theater. I auditioned for "Shrek: The Musical" for the role of Lord Farquaad and got in.

Though anecdotes can be helpful, I find the most helpful thing is supportiveness of others, as well as yourself. If no one around you believes in your dream or what makes you happy, then you must dig deep within yourself to find the courage to support yourself. I've read a lot of motivational quotes and watched a ton more motivational videos, and that's always my main take away from them. Sometimes things will be hard, and you'll likely fail. I've always found it helpful to look at failure as an opportunity to learn, especially when the failure seems so great there's no chance you're coming back from it. In those moments when you find yourself in the gutter, you get to know yourself the best and find a real love for the things that make you truly happy.

If I cowered at the thought of another audition after my audition for Pinocchio, the chances of me finding out that I truly love theater would have been slim. I felt an inkling for acting during that first performance but didn't chase it until I was encouraged to by my speech teacher, Mr. Koenigsman. If I cowered at the thought of telling my dad I wanted to do theater instead of football, I would have spent the rest of high school being bored and miserable like I had been the years prior. To anyone who may be struggling with wanting to make a change but being afraid of what others might think of your decision, remember to stay true to yourself. Everything will fall into place and you will find your tribe so long as you are genuine and following your instincts.