

Student Editorial Board

INTRODUCTION

During the process of writing this book, we transformed from struggling students into published playwrights. *Arrive, Breathe, and Be Still* is the result of our semester-long project called Acting for Critical Thought (ACT), and it reveals, in our own voices, experiences of resistance and resilience, which are the themes of our pieces. The thirty-six students who wrote it attend Downtown High School, a continuation school where students who've had trouble succeeding in their previous schools have the opportunity to complete their high school requirements and earn a diploma. We all chose to attend this school instead of dropping out or giving up, and that is just one of the ways in which we are resilient.

Downtown has a project-based learning environment. Unlike your typical, traditional high school where subjects are broken into separate periods, students at Downtown choose one project each semester. Each project has a component of math, science, social studies, and art. We have the opportunity to meet with professional adult role models in the community and experience different fields firsthand. In this small learning community, everybody understands what everyone else is going through. We have shared experiences and shared goals, and our projects give us real-life skills.

For our ACT project, we worked with 826 Valencia and American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.). At A.C.T., we saw plays that inspired us. In *The House of Bernarda Alba*, by Federico García Lorca, Bernarda chose resilience in her attitude toward her daughters after her husband's death. In *Scorched*, by Wajdi Mouawad, Nawal learned to read and write and speak, which were her grandmother's last requests for her in order to survive

poverty and break a cycle of hate between mothers and daughters. She joined the resistance movement, she sang through times of struggle, and she persevered. In our own monologues and plays, our characters faced a problem or a challenge, and they had to stand up, fight the pressures against them, and come up with a resolution.

To help us write our pieces, tutors from 826 Valencia came to our school every Tuesday and Thursday for eight weeks full of hard work. We sat down with three writing prompts and discussed the different kinds of monologues we would be working with: transformative, conversational, and narrative. When we got to our plays, we worked on creating character profiles and brainstorming scenes and conflict. We learned about the five core parts for each of our plays: catalyst, big event, crisis, showdown, and resolution.

When we first saw our tutors, we thought some of them were actually students, so we were surprised when they sprang into action and started tutoring us. We wrote as many as six first drafts and did a lot of revising. At first, we were scared of how much writing there was to do, and a lot of us didn't think we were good writers until we really pushed ourselves. We wouldn't have gotten nearly so much done if it weren't for our tutors. They helped us establish ourselves in our stories, make our meanings clear, and build up to the big events. Our tutors gave us a lot to go off of and examples to help spark our creativity and ideas. We felt so comfortable with them that we even tried to sneak in help on other assignments. We wanted to take advantage of the opportunity.

At the same time we had tutors from 826, we were acting with A.C.T. What we did at A.C.T. was different from what we did in school. Acting, performing, and playing theater games isn't what you expect to do in a normal class—it helped us get out of our comfort zone, and lot of people proved to themselves that they could do it. Initially some students were not taking it seriously, but once they got into their element, they felt comfortable and started to come out of their shells. They learned how to make eye contact and project their voices. Guiding us through this whole process was Nick Gabriel, an A.C.T. core acting company member and teaching artist. He worked with us once a week at the A.C.T. studio and coached us on how to build a character and become an actor. Nick also introduced us to a group of first-year MFA actors at A.C.T.; working with these people was an amazing experience for us because they were like older brothers and sisters and so heart-warming and accepting.

To help us remember the techniques that Nick taught us, he gave us an “actor’s checklist,” which was to arrive, breathe, and be still. These three things help not only the actor, but also the audience prepare for what is about to happen. Nick said that you can’t just walk in and assert yourself. To arrive, breathe, and be still—these things are essential to the basics of acting, and also in the world that we live in: when going into an interview, giving a speech, or even dealing with personal struggle. These three qualities help you maintain your character. Working with A.C.T. broadened our horizons and really impacted our experience as playwrights.

When we finished writing our monologues and plays, a small group of us decided to join the editorial board for the book, and we talked our friends into coming with us. Thirteen students met for editorial board on Tuesday and Thursday nights for four weeks at 826 Valencia and worked with tutors who had professional editing experience. We first edited our fellow classmates’ monologues and plays. All this editing taught us about our peers, and we saw their true selves and what they were capable of. It was good to read our classmates’ work because they spoke to our theme of resistance and resilience.

The editorial board was also responsible for organizing the book and coming up with the title. We had more than thirty ideas up on the whiteboard during our brainstorming session, but the “actor’s checklist” that Nick gave us stood out the most. In our acting class, like in life, sometimes we just had to get up and get over it; we had to arrive, breathe, and be still. We couldn’t just sit there and do nothing, so we stood up and told our stories.

When you pick up this book, we hope our monologues and plays inspire you. People may expect failure from students at a continuation school, but it’s not like that. The pieces here demonstrate the strength it takes to keep moving forward, and even though we didn’t think we could finish this project at first, this book proves that we are capable of accomplishing something huge. We wrote with heart and did our best, knowing that our voices would be heard.

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