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A STAGE OF ONE'S OWN

Reed Roberts

Where I went to high school, the old clichés and stereotypical truths still holdfast against ravages the progressive thinking that saturates liberal communities like the one I grew up in. No matter how much time the PTA board dedicated to lofty ideals such as acceptance and diversity, Hellgate High School remained always a place of hormonal segregation and juvenile ambition. In short, Hellgate was much like any other high school. Finding a group of like-minded individuals to associate with would defend you against the swells of intolerance that flood high school halls. To be alone and friendless not only meant that you were considered a failure your peers' eyes, but you also were prey for the bully's, the fear mongers, and the disreputable gym teachers; strength in numbers, death to the lame and antisocial; survival of the fittest among the ill fit and maladjusted.

In hindsight, a mob of drama kids who could make a linebacker hasten down the hall is fairly atypical of the traditional high school experience. But that was how it was at Hellgate High. We (perhaps delusional) thespians regarded ourselves as the elite, and that is how we conducted our lives: full of self-confidence verging on arrogance that stemmed from feeling protected. Unlike most others, if the social pressures ever became too great, we had a retreat, a home base if you will, where we could escape.

The Auditorium: lair of the thespians and domain of Bolton Rothwell. Mr. Rothwell, our drama teacher/life coach, was a bald, thick-chested man with a fondness for Altoids, salmon colored tee shirts, and had an unconscious habit of rubbing his nipples when waxing poetic. Memories of Rothwell and of his auditorium are hard to separate at times. He was always grumbling in his office, or singing along to the Talking Heads while standing precariously atop a ladder, twenty feet in the air, rigging lights for the next show. No matter where you were in the 500-seat house, you could hear the echo of his grizzly bear laugh. Four years of my life were spent under his tutelage, under his guidance. I think if not for him I would have never have made it through high school, and perhaps, for better or for worse, would not have been stuck with this elitist outlook on life.

Our respect for "Boltar the Magnificent," as we lovingly referred to him when he was out of earshot, was matched only by our fear of him. His wrath was the thing of legends: from throwing rings of keys at students for forgetting their props to tossing teachers out

of his auditorium for putting their feet on the seats, his word was law. Despite this, as a high school student, it is an unspoken rule that rules are meant to be circumnavigated, by any means possible if need be. We, the minions of Rothwell, may have taken this mentality too far at times, doing exactly what the rumors about us stated: having sex with each other. In the green room, in the dressing rooms, backstage, on the couch in stage-right well, we were as promiscuous as we were elitist. We experimented with each other, and condemned the rest of the school for not liberating themselves as we did.

Outside our comfortable home away from home, we were stoics, inside we became kids again: laughing, teasing, playing, crying, falling in love, getting in fights and starting overzealous tickle wars backstage. In the end, I suppose we weren't much different from our untheatrical peers.

Mr. Rothwell is dead now and the theater now bears his name. As he lay dying, the cancer eating away at his body, I visited him. We ate pastries and drank coffee. He poured a healthy dose of bourbon into his drink. "I know it's only ten," he said to me, "but what's the point of being a dying man if I can't break the damn rules some?" The last words he said to me were, "Reed. My good man, indeed, a great man. Keep acting kid, the stage will be worse without you." He was dead and buried three days later, and I have not been on stage since. I think that in reality the stage will never miss me. His stage though, Rothwell's stage, and the auditorium so important to him, will never be the same without that strange and brilliant man.