

Theater experiences: All my world's a stage

Hayley Friedline

Staff Reporter

The sound of the crowd talking. The thick blue curtains. The stage manager whispering, "Places," and the cast members whispering, "Thank you, places," in response. The hush that falls across the entire theater as the lights go down. The sound of the entire cast, crew and audience holding their breaths. And then...

"Welcome to the Younts Center for Performing Arts as FIRE presents *A Charlie Brown Christmas*."

This is it. I am about to walk onstage and ice skate (Yes, actually ice skate) in front of 200 people. I can feel my best friend Hailie behind me. I know she probably feels the same way I do: not nervous exactly, but... eager. Anxious.

We know this show. We know it like the backs of our hands. We know these lines and these characters. Now it's time for other people to see it.

I've felt this exact same feeling - minus the ice skating - countless times since I was eight years old. This is the feeling of opening night, or any night really, of any given show. Whether I'm a lead, like in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, or just in the ensemble, like in *South Pacific*, it always feels the same way. Theater -- and the people I've met there -- have had an incredible

impact on my life.

I always forget that other people don't understand acting. They think it's as simple as

putting on a costume and saying a bunch of lines. The first thing wrong with this idea is that putting on a costume and saying a bunch of lines isn't nearly as easy as it sounds, what with some shows being as long as three hours and all those lights making any costume hot and sweaty. The second, and more important, thing wrong with this statement is that acting is much more than a costume and someone else's words. It's working together with a director, a bunch of like-minded actors and, in some cases, a vocal director to make the show as good as it can be before you close. It's about, in the truest sense of the phrase, becoming an entirely different

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person.

When I'm onstage, I'm not Hayley pretending to be Lucy Van Pelt; I'm taking off everything -- mentally, physically, and emotionally -- that makes me Hayley Friedline and putting on everything that makes me Lucy Van Pelt. That's what acting really is. It's coming off the stage at the end of a scene and wondering for just the slightest second what just happened. "Feeling it" is a term I often use for how I feel if I had a good show. "You were great," my mother or friend will tell me, and I won't know how to respond other than "I was just feeling it tonight, man." There is no way I can describe what the "it" is; the closest I can get is an out-of-body experience, though I know that's not quite it. It's feeling almost as though you're watching yourself - or, more accurately, the character you're portraying - be in the scene but not being in the scene yourself.

The actual experience of acting is wonderful, but as Sir Robin says in *Spamalot*, "Victory depends upon the people that you choose." The people I've met through theater have changed my life just as much -- if not more so -- than the acting itself. My best friend of seven years, Hailie, did my first show ever with me when I was only eight years old. We've stuck with each other through everything and nobody knows me better than she. She has, in many ways, become my fake sister. Zac, our director, and Mackensie,

our production assistant and stage manager (who also happens to be Zac's wife and high school sweetheart), haven't been in my life for quite as long

as Hailie, but I feel like I've known them that long.

My mother and father divorced when I was 12, and while I'm okay with the divorce now, I've felt torn between the two of them ever since. I've felt like I've had a mother and a father, but not like I have parents or a family. Zac and Mackensie have unknowingly become my fake parents, and because of them I feel like I have an actual family now, which, looking back, I realize I haven't really had for a long time, even since before the divorce. Sure, I love my mom and my dad, but it's really refreshing to go



Photo by Zac Pelicano

My much-treasured theater friends and I celebrate at the cast party for our recently-finished production, *Young Frankenstein*. From left to right: Hayley Friedline, Reese Parler, Jonathan Marler, Hailie Gold.

to theater and I'm sitting next to my fake sister in front of my fake dad and fake mom as my fake dad tells us what we're going to work on that particular day. I'm exhausted by the time I get back to my house, but I'm thrilled to have been able to spend a couple hours with my pseudo-family that night.

There is one part of theater that is over-glorified, I feel. It's the part Hollywood shows in all the movies, all the TV shows, the part that every stereotyped character says is their favorite. While it's not my favorite, I will say it's pretty nice. This part is, of course, the bow.

The end of the show, the last note of the final number, when the curtain closes and all the lights go dark. The whole cast practically runs offstage to their respective wings, and Mackensie signals to our technical director to bring the lights up. She pulls the curtains open again as the lights come up, and the crowd starts clapping. The first group to bow goes out and the whole cast is backstage clapping along with the crowd, and I'm there in the wings cheering my lungs out for my castmates.

I wait, and I clap, and I cheer, and suddenly it's my turn. I run out from the wings and to the little black box on the stage that's been my marker since I was eight, front-and-center, and I throw the crowd my best grin and I bow. I can feel the rest of the cast behind me, whether on stage or in the wings, and I can see the audience in front of me, both groups

clapping, and for just that second, they're clapping for me. Then I back up and join my castmates, and we clap and cheer for the next few groups.

And then, this is it, this is the pièce-de-résistance: We all stop clapping, and we grab each other's hands. We step forward in one big line with the lead in the center and we all put our arms high in the air and bow as deeply as we can. Then we drop hands and gesture to our tech booth and orchestra if we have one. We wave at the audience and back up as the curtains close.

This is what you don't see, though, what they don't show you in movies: at FIRE Theater Co., our real "hurrah" isn't the bow. You always get the bow. Our real hurrah is this: All of us, every cast member on stage and every crew member backstage, unanimously let out a huge "WOOOOOOOO!" like we're at a football game and our team just won the state championship. Sometimes, when the show goes really well, one of my friends (usually Nathan or Marler) will pick me up and spin me around because I'm the smallest. The post-show high sets in, and we all hurry downstairs and out the artist's entrance to see friends, family and strangers for meet-and-greet.

For us, though, I don't think it's really about how many people come see the show. It's about doing the show: knowing you went out there and gave it your all, and knowing you earned that bow and that "WOOOOOOOO!" at the end.