

Report: Bracket-Based Learning for Drama and Advanced Drama

The LPS Education Foundation grant of \$500 allowed for the purchase of 40 new plays for the Drama and Advanced Drama courses at Stevenson High School. Although the proposal estimate listed a minimum of 50 new plays, Dramatic Publishing and Playscripts.com both charged unlisted shipping & handling fees, which reduced our overall total of purchased plays. Each new script has a message inside the front cover explaining it was purchased through a grant and this message includes a sticker with the LPS Education Foundation logo, so students for years to come will know of the Foundation's generosity.

The Board of Directors may be interested to hear more details on the process of procuring the plays. The students, themselves, suggested the new plays to add to the Stevenson Drama Department through a digital activity in Google Classroom aptly titled, "Spend That Grant!" These teenagers spent an entire class period in deep discussion, debating the merits of one-acts vs. full productions, reading reviews of playwrights and performances, ranking their choices, and rating others' selections. Through this assignment, we gathered 135 suggestions for new plays to update the Drama Library.

In narrowing the selections to the 40 purchased, I reviewed the detail persuasive arguments from the students and considered which plays would be likely to have the greatest positive effect. I spent time reading previews and descriptions of the plays from Dramatic Publishing and Playscripts.com. I looked for things that were age-appropriate, knowing my Drama and Advanced Drama courses contained 13- through 18-year-olds. I tried to honor everyone's requests, even if I was not able to purchase everything suggested. For instance, many of the ninth graders chose plays about fairy tales, and while I was not able to purchase all of those, I made sure to get a large compilation, *The Brothers Grimm Spectaculathon*, to meet the interests.

When faced with a choice between two equally amazing scripts, I looked at how many students could participate if we read aloud or performed the play during class. I gave special preference to plays without gendered parts, since some students are excited to read or act out a character but can ultimately become uncomfortable if the role misgenders them. In addition to these considerations, I tried to choose titles with content that would not overlap other courses. I gave preference to stories that may enhance the learning in core classes, such as *Radium Girls*, *Macbre Tales From Edgar Allan Poe*, and *Girls In The Boat*. These titles build on lessons in U.S. History and American Literature courses, and despite the titles, they provide equal opportunity for students of all genders to join the casts.

Not only do the new plays allow for more modern and diverse casts, but they also incorporate much more current ideas, humor, and language. For example, instead of the radio scripts from the 1930s currently available to us, these young actors quickly voted plays like *The Wacky Horror Cyber Show*, *Ghosts In The Machine*, *Left To Our Own Devices*, and *Selfie* to the top of the ranks. These titles offer students the opportunity to consider the roles modern technology like internet and cell phones play in our society. Furthermore, they were quick to pick plays that poked lighthearted fun at the course itself: *Casting Catastrophes*, *Bad Auditions*,

The Audition, and *Ghostlight* all provide a humorous outlook on the more stressful elements of drama and the acting industry. Plus, the newer scripts do not require any rewriting or improv off-script for the humor to be understood!

Surprisingly, the students were interested in tackling even tough topics through acting. For instance, the scripts *The 9 Worst Breakups Of All Time*, *I Don't Want To Talk About It*, and *It's Not You, It's Me* were consistently in the lead during the selection process. These afford students the opportunity to talk about relationships and mental health through the acting process. Likewise, students were quick to select *Lift Every Voice*, *Bulletproof Backpack*, and *Trap*, all of which deal with current issues like racism and school shootings. Reading, discussing, and acting out these plays provide an students an outlet and opportunity to see how some schools (even fictional ones within the world of the play) deal with these hot-button issues. The plays provide a safe framework to approach modern issues in a space where students are learning to develop their own voice.

During our first bracket-based (“March Madness”) style competition last fall, the students performed “cold reads” and on-script productions of 10 different plays to determine a winner. In the end, *The Lottery* (a theatrical adaptation of Shirley Jackson’s short story) and *Murder Well Rehearsed* (the most modern of the plays available to me prior to this grant) were the final round winners. For me, this result confirmed the need for newer, updated titles, because it was unclear whether the plots interested the students or they simply enjoyed not having to “work around” the old-timey stuff. Now with 40 new dramatic texts to choose from, student enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm is entirely enhanced. (One Advanced Drama student even remarked, “I wish there was an Advanced-Advanced Drama, so I could take the class again!”)

Finally, although the LPS Education Foundation Board of Directors is always welcome to visit my classroom, Drama and Advanced Drama were scheduled only as fall courses this year, so it would be difficult to see the new playbooks in action while visiting my regular ELA courses. That is, currently the scripts look lovely on a classroom bookshelf, because there are no Drama or Advanced Drama courses scheduled for Semester 2 at Stevenson this year. Instead, I invite the Board to attend Stevenson’s production of *The Wizard Of Oz*. Many of the students from my Drama and Advanced Drama courses went on to audition and be cast in this classic musical, directed by SHS Drama Director, Brittany Dimmitt. The show is running from April 21-22, with evening (7 P.M.) performances both nights and a 2 P.M. matinee on Saturday. Tickets are \$15 and available through <https://stevenson.seatyourself.biz>.

Ghostlight

A PLAY BY

Stephen Gregg

*The purchase of this script
was made possible through
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Playscripts

The title page (or inside cover) of each new script is labeled with a note indicating its purchase was made possible through a generous grant by the LPS Education Foundation.