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Seize the Day!

'Carpe Diem'

By Erin Holland

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Theatre is a tool for social change, cultivating compassion and opening our hearts and minds to diverse viewpoints and perspectives that we may not have previously contemplated.

However, it is also a truth, unfortunately not as universally acknowledged, that Drama as an academic subject nurtures lifelong skills that enables and enhances students' perception, understanding, productivity and wellbeing. It is the only subject that can engage all eight of our intelligences and develop all 12 critical skills that employers look for, in a one-hour lesson. And yet, it is also the only subject that does not hold a compulsory place on the national curriculum, thus making it a ripe-for-the-picking 'curriculum casualty' that is too easily being relegated to being extra-curricular, due to the continuous decline in funds for Arts education. For these, and for so many other reasons, I leapt at the opportunity to be a part of the Drama & Theatre Education Alliance's *Seize the Day* initiative.

Aligned with World Theatre Day, on Thursday 27th March, *Seize the Day* is a campaign to raise awareness of the value of Drama and Theatre education in our schools. The mission is for Drama teachers across the UK to spread the word of the importance of our subject, by facilitating special events, workshops or performances and inviting our school governors and local MP and councillors



to engage with this vital work. It's no secret that the current state of our education system and, the dire position that Drama has found itself in has been highly impacted by over a decade of Tory led austerity and, with a general election looming ever closer, this year's *Seize the Day!* campaign felt more important and political than ever. I therefore took it upon myself to facilitate not just one day of events but rather a week-long Drama extravaganza that took place in the final days of the spring term. Prior to this, I also embarked on promoting the event across our school trust and encouraging the Heads of Drama in our sister schools to sign up and run their own events.

Within my own school I presented to all heads of departments, heads of year and our senior leadership team, emphasizing the significance of this initiative and the urgency of the wider national problem. I talked them through my plans for the week and explained that part of it would be their own involvement, by employing at least one drama task or activity lesson in their own subjects. In addition to this I was granted the opportunity by my head of school to present to our school governors in the run up to the event. My points and plans were received extremely well and, after my presentation, the governors, along with some key members of SLT, had an important and productive discussion about The English Baccalaureate and the importance of arts education on the curriculum.

Day One:

As the end of term moved closer at Bishop Douglass Catholic School, we kicked off our celebration of the arts with a big

ole musical bang. Day one of our *Seize the Day!* extravaganza started with a Musical Theatre Workshop led by the very talented Assistant Musical Director, Matthew Jackson, who has worked on productions such as the National Theatre's *The Witches*, *Miss Saigon* and *The Bake-Off Musical*. The cast of our upcoming school production of *Matilda* and our live band had a fantastic day learning some of his professional industry tips. This was followed by a very competitive Staff vs Students Musical Theatre Quiz at lunchtime in the hall, finishing with one very happy student team and their Theatre-themed goodie bags and prizes.

Day Two:

Day two was another success with Sky Blue Theatre company visiting and facilitating Shakespeare focused workshops with our year 7s and our year 10s, who have been studying *Romeo & Juliet* and *Macbeth* in their English lessons. It was such a fantastic way for the students to bring these famous texts to life by becoming the characters themselves. I managed to walk in at the exact moment one of our year 7 pupils re-enacted Juliet's death, which was brilliant!

Day Three:

Day three of our extravaganza involved a whole school quiz promoting the literacy within our subject. The students not only needed to answer each quiz question with the correct key drama word/ technique, they then needed to move around the school and find the correct teacher who was wearing that key word on a lanyard around their neck. Students worked



together in small groups of 2-3 and by the end of the day we had some very happy teams who had completed their quizzes the fastest and walked away with some lovely Drama prizes and goodie bags.

Day Four:

Day four saw a very successful visit from another fantastic company, Succulent Theatre who performed a version of their piece, *Nasty*, which explores themes of body positivity and self-love. After this they led a fantastic and dynamic all day workshop, with a group of selected students from year 9 to year 13, on autobiographical theatre. They encouraged the students to use their own personal experiences when creating art which led to some very emotive performances from the students and resulted in myself and the workshop leaders being moved to tears. The boys that were involved in these performances were particularly commended by the workshop leaders for their vulnerability. This was then followed by 'Theatre Night' which involved a special screening of National Theatre's musical, *wonder.land*. The students thoroughly enjoyed it and had access to their very own tuck shop which was organised by our 6th form Top team, who will put the money, made from selling treats, towards their prom.

Day Five:

On our penultimate day I invited one of my past pupils, Ernest Kingsley Junior, to come in and speak with my current students. Now a successful actor, Ernest is also an ex-student of one of the sister schools within our trust, a detail I thought



to be incredibly important in helping my students understand that their dreams of working within the industry are attainable as long as they are hard working and committed. Ernest led a Q&A about his journey from A-Level Drama with me, to being accepted into Drama school, to agents and audition processes, to finally landing his role as Washington Black in the upcoming Disney/Hulu series. My students loved his stories and advice and asked him some excellent and thoughtful questions.

Day Six:

On the final day of term and to complete our Drama extravaganza, we invited our school governors to a student-led presentation that rounded up the events of the week and reflected on why Drama and Theatre education is so important to them. One of my year 12 students, Ahoo, explained that,

I have been doing Drama since year 7. I chose Drama as one of my GCSE options and I am currently studying it at A-Level. I think Drama has a great way of allowing you to express yourself in a way that other subjects don't. Drama isn't just about acting it also helps me to understand history and issues we face as a society. This subject has allowed me to grow and I have developed a true love and appreciation for Theatre.

Speaking with one of our governors afterwards, he welled up due to his personal connection to the issue, explaining that his daughter had been given up on by her teachers academically, but it was through studying Drama and Music which allowed her to discover where her talents truly lay; and she is now in her second year of university studying Musical Theatre.

A whole school effort:

It was genuinely wonderful to see my colleagues supporting this campaign in a myriad of ways; but, most notably, seeing them employ different Drama themed activities in their own subjects. Some of these included a year 10 GCSE Computer Science lesson, in which the students acted out key words/concepts from the scheme of work, such as, 'bandwidth', 'python', 'data packets' and 'Alan Turing' as a starter for the lesson. Another was a Business lesson with a Year 13 class, who were preparing for their internal assessment on the recruitment and selection process of various companies. As their main learning activity they put their drama hats on and utilised role play with some quick fire job interviews working with their whole cohort. In addition to this, one year 11 Maths class physically acted out transforming functions, something which most of the class got wrong in their mock exams, but gained a new understanding of through this physical exploration of the problem.

It is incredibly vital that, for this *Seize the Day!* initiative to have the intended impact, it is a community effort. Not just within the Drama

teaching community which continues to face the daily struggle for others to understand the importance of our subject, but for the communities that we work within to also embrace and consider its worth. One voice has the power to enact real change but dozens, hundreds or thousands of voices are deafening. Together we can fight to ensure the inclusion of Drama as a foundation subject on the National Curriculum with the same status as Art or Music; the entitlement of every child to at least one annual engagement with professional theatre; and, finally, a drama curriculum and theatre repertoire that is more representative of the UK's diverse population. I can only hope that this time next year I will be reflecting on the success of another *Seize the Day!* campaign but with a different government in power: one that sees the value of Drama and theatre education and ensures it has the vital funding that it needs to continue to shape minds and change lives. ●

The Drama & Theatre Education Alliance's website



Erin Holland is a Writer/Performer and the Head of Drama at Bishop Douglass School in East Finchley. Her 5* one-woman-show, *Bad Teacher*, has had sell out runs at Edinburgh Fringe 2022 & 2023, VAULT 2023 & a successful transfer to The Pleasance, Islington. Her writing & performing has earned her an OffFest nomination and her play, *The Queen of Quex Road*, was recently long listed for The Bread & Roses Playwriting award.

