

**In Charge of Their School Play for the First Time,
Weehawken High School Students Make A Bold Choice**

Weehawken High School students, when given their first opportunity to select the play they would perform, chose one with no easy answers, and possibly no answer at all.

Weehawken High School students made an unusual choice for their latest school play, performed early December: They chose one that addressed the unfairness and illogical nature of human existence, yet offered very little comfort in its final scene.

Every Weehawken middle school student has learned in English class that plays and stories have a *denouement* at the end, in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved. In “Awaiting Wonderland,” by Steven Stack, though much was explained, little was resolved. That’s apparently precisely what these students liked about it. Their choice was a big leap from former choices of theater at Weehawken High School, which included such feel-good pieces as “Walt Disney’s Cinderella” and a play based on Frank Capra's “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

Not only was the two-night production of “Awaiting Wonderland,” chosen by the students themselves, they ran and executed every aspect of its production, direction, stagecraft, costuming, lighting and sound. For the last 20 years, professionals have done the lighting. For this production, the students were in charge.

This is Jacobs’ second year as drama teacher at Weehawken High School, and now heads the school’s theater arts program. Jacobs has a strong background in theater, including the Broadway

production of “Les Miserables.” She is passionate about having students be in charge of their own productions as much as possible. “Weehawken High School has a theater arts program with students up to the task at hand,” Jacobs said. “The addition of technology instructor Joseph Stratton as production manager has helped modernize our productions with such additions as large screens and backlit projectors to enhance our scenery design.”

In their stagecraft, students took full advantage of the play’s trippiness, with sets that featured op-art black and white spirals, and oversized, vibrantly-colored flowers with playing card motifs. The effect brought wows from the audience. Under the guidance of Weehawken Art teacher Elizabeth McParland, the costuming was effective as well. Sophomore Montgomery Swanson designed a hat the maddest of hatters could wear with pride, clattering with little clocks and festooned with a bow tie, and the class capped off their creativity with a super-sized teacup gracing the lobby as theatre-goers entered. The students’ choice of music was on-point: the rock songs “Welcome to the Mystery” by Plain White T’s, and Alice in Wonderland by Danny Elfman perfectly captured the unsettling truth that was the undercurrent of this drama. For the first time, the audience received a “Weebill,” inspired by the iconic “Playbill,” conceived of by Stratton.

The actors and backstage crew did a good job of making seamless transitions between the different settings (and realities) of a countryside, a backstage and Wonderland; and Student Lighting Director Luna Garcia, Sound Director Sydney Cheplic, and Visuals Director Natalie Jones created glitch-free, dream-like scenarios. Weehawken High School alumni Chris Devaney and Adrian Castellanos returned to volunteer with the design of the production’s lighting.

As far as the acting was concerned, an undeniable standout in the production was senior Rafael Sanchez, whose three turns as Ed, Alice’s patient and bookish older brother; Mike, Anya’s stalwart best friend and fellow thespian; and the Mad Hatter, were spellbinding. Sanchez had already wowed a Weehawken audience last year, when, relatively new to the United States and with less than four years of English under his belt, he played a wise-cracking, Sony

Walkman-wielding Mercutio in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." At the time, he captured perfectly that tragi-comic aspect of the bard's scene-stealing character.

In this production, Sanchez expertly moved between his three characters, differentiating them just enough to allow the audience to discern that there was indeed a connection between them. As Ed, in the opening scene, he captured the dreaminess of a remembered childhood interaction between two close but very different siblings. His Ed was gentle, affectionate and forbearing, and only just a little impatient with his sister. In his two scenes as Mike, he shined as a boy who could tell hard truths with great tenderness to his best friend; and as the Mad Hatter himself, he conveyed admirably the archetype of the sage madman. On opening night, Sanchez's rendition of the Mad Hatter was practically popping with frenetic madness reminiscent of [film noir actor Peter Lorre](#); by the second night, Sanchez presented a calmer, more restrained version of the character; less mannerism-oriented and more focused on exuding the character's interior insanity.

The picture of dramatic restraint, though, was junior Sofia Tauriello, who was utterly convincing in her various turns as a restless, slightly annoying little sister; an overwrought and somewhat bossy school play student director, Anya; and a mystified archetypal Alice negotiating the allogical world of Wonderland. Unlike Sanchez, though, Tauriello chose to make her characters more similar to each other. That choice worked well for her character, which was the lynchpin of the entire play.

As Alice, the junior captured the character's progress from a Wizard of Oz Dorothy-like character who just wants to go home, to a girl who can appreciate the mayhem of a world where nothing apparently makes sense. Sadly, Wonderland does make sense, and the sense it makes describes Anya's doom. "It's not fair," she says, both about her own fate and those of others in Wonderland, echoing no doubt the author's sentiment. Indeed, Alice is the only character in Wonderland that brings the concepts of justice and fairness to bear on a world built on happenstance and ennui.

That ennui was best displayed by Katherine Hinton, her first time doing a play at Weehawken High School. The seventh-grader played to perfection a sleepy, philosophical Dormouse who wakes up just often enough to make the nonsensical yet wise pronouncements that were Lewis Carroll's particular genius. In this play, the Dormouse is the character who is Alice's guide to how creatures in Wonderland think and operate. Hinton, expertly conveyed that the very act of trying to help Alice make sense out of nonsense was exhausting enough to make her character want to continue to sleep her life away. And in so doing, she persuaded the audience that her character was better off.

Another strong performance came from Weehawken High School senior Nia Eberhard, who managed to make her no-holds-barred screeching evil diatribes teeter on the verge of comedy. The histrionic diatribes, it turns out, expressed her character's terrified knowledge that Alice's fate was not only sealed, but tied to her own: She is Alice's heart. (Alice has a cardiac condition from which both characters have already begun to die). The Queen's desire to send Alice back from Wonderland isn't borne of malice: She thinks doing so will save them both, though that misguided notion was one of several weaknesses of the play's storyline: Playwright Stack never explained how Alice leaving Wonderland would save either of them. It was also surprising that Stack had the Queen only represent Alice's physical heart, and hadn't made any correlation between the Queen of Hearts and Alice's figurative heart.

Student ownership of the drama seemed to give the opportunity for the younger students to shine in bigger roles more than traditionally is the case. Two seventh-graders, Robert Carson and Jack Taddei, were scene-stealers as Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. Both characters are too idiotic and good-natured to feel the ignominy of being made the Queen's croquet balls: In fact, they downright enjoyed it. "I'm not going to strike them," says Alice, who is the only voice of morality, normalcy and logic in the amoral, abnormal and illogical world that is Wonderland, and possibly, the author was implying, ours. "Please do," says Tweedle Dum. And Alice reluctantly complies. Both actors brought a sweet cheeriness to their roles (and gleeful rolls

through the croquet course) in nice counterpoint to the grouchiness of so many of Wonderland's other characters, which made their idiocy undeniably appealing to the audience. Their performances, along that of Sanchez's Mad Hatter, also called into question why either the craziest or the most idiotic characters were most at ease in the world, even if that world was Wonderland.

One of the production's most beautiful and charming scenes, choreographed by Weehawken High School's technology teacher, a 22-year veteran of the school system, Joseph Stratton (his first such effort), was dominated by an ensemble cast of lower classmen. Dressed as flowers dancing with one another, it was the first scene of Wonderland that greeted Alice upon her arrival. The children's dance captured well the magic of Wonderland before it is shed in favor of senseless violence.

And there was senseless violence. Perhaps in response to some crying from young children in the audience, it appeared that sometime between the first and second night, the Mad Hatter's head (post-beheading presented on a platter) had been made less realistic, so the head looked less like a head than a paper-mache soccer ball with a wig hastily pasted on it. (It is unclear why the Queen of Hearts wanted the Mad Hatter beheaded, or how he actually came back to life.)

Stack wrote "Awaiting Wonderland" as a way to cope with the fact that one of his students became fatally ill. At the end of play, sitting close to each other on the boards near the footlights, in an intimate portrayal of connection with each other and the audience (emphasizing that they are still on a stage), Anya is comforted by Mike, who tells her that perhaps her journey is just beginning. But he doesn't assure her, or the audience of that. It's just a notion.

It is unusual for a high school play to pose way more questions than it answers, and for the few answers that it tenders, to be tragic ones. The comfort level the high school students had in picking a play about inexplicable tragedy, speaks highly of their overall maturity, let alone taste in theater. The only thing that comforts Anya and the audience is the tenderness and loving care

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of a best friend. Perhaps for the teenagers who selected this play, that is the only thing, at this time in their lives, that does make sense.

The drama of Sanchez' expression of tenderness to a dying Anya was profound, and astounding to see in a 17-year-old. His character, Mike, expresses his love, and hope, but he never assures his friend that all will be well: Perhaps her journey is just beginning, he tells her, or, he implies, by using the word, "perhaps," the journey is indeed over. He, like all the characters except the Queen of Hearts and Alice, are satisfied to let their lives unspool without attempting to understand the why and wherefore. The tragedy of Anya/Alice is that, as the only character who really craves logic and understanding, she is just met with the biggest wall of all to those things: pointless and premature death. It's to the credit of the Weehawken High School students that they chose to bring that to life.

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Photos on following pages

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Caption: *Weehawken High School students Sofia Tauriello and Rafael Sanchez gave memorable performances as Alice and the Mad Hatter in a modern, tragic version of the Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland story classic by Steven Stack.*

Photo Credit: *Theresa Milos, Supervisor of Secondary Education, Weehawken High School*

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Caption: *In a “play within a play” conceit, Mike, a boy who plays the Mad Hatter in a school performance, comforts his best friend, Anya, after she learns from him that she is dying.*

Photo Credit: *Theresa Milos, Supervisor of Secondary Education, Weehawken High School*

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Caption: *Weehawken High School students Katherine Hinton and Rafael Sanchez, as the Dormouse and the Mad Hatter, participate in the iconic tea party as originally envisioned by author Lewis Carroll.*

Photo Credit: *Theresa Milos, Supervisor of Secondary Education, Weehawken High School*

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Caption: *Weehawken High School senior Crystal Serrano did Lewis Carroll proud, capturing the mischievous and yet thought-provoking ways of the iconic Cheshire cat.*

Photo Credit: *Theresa Milos, Supervisor of Secondary Education, Weehawken High School*

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Caption: *Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, played by Weehawken High School freshmen Robert Carson and Jack Taddei, are too clueless to take seriously the threats of The Queen of Hearts, played by senior Nia Eberhard.*

Photo Credit: *Theresa Milos, Supervisor of Secondary Education, Weehawken High School*