

I'm Not An Actor And That's OK!

Or, How Rejection Lead Me To My Dream Job

By Haven Mitchell-Rose

Since leaving YPC, I did not become a famous Broadway actress. While this would have been deeply tragic news to a 15-year-old version of me, I'm here to tell you that it's ok- that there are an incalculable number of ways to live a life in the arts, of which being a performer is only one. I found my life in the arts as an Early Childhood general education teacher, two things that do not seem like they might not go together. So how did this happen? Well, it would not have been possible without a great deal of rejection.

The countless times I have NOT been given opportunities I wanted, or thought that I deserved, are single handedly responsible for shaping the success I have experienced in my career. This is a story rejection, but don't worry, it all works out, because here's the thing about rejection: It forces you to create your own opportunities. There are three significant rejections that I credit with teaching me to create my own opportunities: Emerson college, my first audition in New York, and several college internships.

When applying to college, I knew two things: I loved performing, and I loved working with children. To my delight, I discovered that there were programs that combined them. One was at Emerson Collage, and the other at New York University. I was soundly rejected from Emerson, and was so devastated by this news, that I needed spend an entire day at home in my pajamas. I was convinced that my theatrical career

was over before it had begun. Then one day, I got an email announcing that I'd been accepted to NYU's program in Educational Theatre.

Upon arriving at NYU my understanding of Theatre- of all that it is and can be- exploded! I learned about Applied Theatre: The act of using theatre as a means by which to achieve a larger goal, such as drama therapy or using theatre in classrooms to enhance the teaching of academic subjects like history. I also learned about Devising Theatre: a process by which an entire cast collaboratively creates an original play around a specified theme. These concepts would shape all my future work. Had I been accepted to Emerson, I might never have learned these methods, would never have developed an understanding of New York City, and perhaps most importantly of all, I would never have met the people who made my career possible.

I was rejected once again my freshman year at NYU. Using Devising Theatre, my program was to create a show about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. This was my first New York audition, I prepared as much as one can for a show that does not yet have a script. The audition consisted of lots of ensemble work, and something called viewpoints – which essentially involves rolling around on the floor a lot. I was not cast, but, in a moment of astounding irony, was offered a position on the tech crew as the fireguard. In the event of a fire related emergency in the theatre, my job was to keep the audience from meeting the same grizzly fate as the characters portrayed on stage. It wasn't the role I wanted, but it provided me a with front row seat to the devising process in action. I watched the cast research the time period and events of the fire. They created relatable characters and engaging dialogue. Together, they shaped a poignant piece of theatre that no one of them could have created alone. I was determined to try devising

first hand. Had I been cast in this production, I would not have been able to witness the devising process from an aerial vantage point, seeing all of the moving pieces without the stress of being one of them. Perhaps I would not have pursued my own devising experiences if I had experienced it right away.

My next rejection was actually eight rejections. In a row. It was my sophomore year at NYU and everyone was getting internships. Everyone that is, except me. While all of my friends ran off quickly after classes to their important internships, I lagged behind obsessively checking my email for my opportunity. Then finally, I was offered an internship with Apple Arts: an organization that sent teaching artists of various disciplines into New York City homeless shelters in order to create art with the children living there. Here was Applied Theatre in the real world! I had an opportunity to utilize theatre to make a difference in real children's lives. After several months of assisting the teaching artists in working with the children on various visual art projects, I pitched the idea of helping the kids at the shelter devise their own show. We introduced the children to theatre very slowly. Many of them had never seen a play, and had only their experience of TV and movies to guide them. We played "zip zap zop" and "freeze." They loved these games and requested to play they often. We practiced telling stories in groups. All of the stories, while totally fun and silly, also contained sincere themes of loyalty, friendship, and valor. We were doing it! We were devising!

My group's story was called, *How To Get The Chocolate and Save the Princess*, and in it were portals through space, daring sword fights, and plenty of candy. After several weeks of rehearsal, the performance was upon us! All of the adult residents of the shelter were invited to watch, and many came. The children were nervous and excited

and enthusiastically supported each other. After it was over they were so proud. Their grown-ups were so proud. And I was so proud: of their collaboration, their trust, their joy. I later orchestrated an event at NYU in which acting students performed the plays written by the children in the shelter. We charged an entry fee, and all of the proceeds went to Apple Arts. I showed the children at the shelter videos of “real actors” performing their work. They were incredibly excited by this and I believe it was validating to them. Now I was finally utilizing rejection in a productive way. From the wreckage of eight consecutive “no’s,” I’d constructed an opportunity that I am proud of to this day. No one invited me to do this project; I had to fight for it. What if I’d been accepted to one of those eight theatres? A group of children would have never experienced the excitement and bonding power of theatre, and I would never have learned to create my own opportunities.

I got a little better at applying for things, actually that’s another great thing about rejection- the more it happens the more you can practice the skills involved and improve upon them, because I got the next thing I applied for: an internship with Spellbound Theatre. Spellbound is a Brooklyn based Theatre for the Very Young, and would be home to my next several Devised and Applied Theatre adventures. At Spellbound, artists work together to create original theatrical experiences for audiences of children between 0-5 years old, occasionally in communities with little exposure to the arts. With Spellbound, I learned how to make a show that very young children could not only follow, but experience fully because it was designed specifically for them. I learned how to construct puppets and sensory experiences for young children. I learned to lead interactive story time classes with participatory elements, inviting children and their

grown-ups to engage in art together while helping me tell a story. But most of all, I learned to love working with this tiniest of all age groups.

Devising for this specific audience was thrilling. Working with talented artists who were also knowledgeable about child development? That's the dream! We created many shows in which children were encouraged to crawl on stage to touch the puppets and engage with the performers up close. I remember marveling at the capacity of the Spellbound Devising Artists. I wondered if I would ever learn to think like them, to generate developmentally appropriate content, and anticipate this audience's specific needs. It was an exercise in applied theatre also, as we were giving very young children skills they would use for the rest of their lives.

When I myself was very young, a beloved babysitter told me a story that I wanted to turn into a theatre for the very young play, and I felt that Spellbound was the place to do it. I pitched this to the Artistic Director, and I am incredibly grateful that she said yes. The process of making this play required that my co-collaborator and I devise dialogue, and build from scratch props, puppets, and sets. We also wrote our own contracts (we were getting paid to make theatre!), held auditions, and led rehearsals. Our play, *The Last Coin*, has now had two main stage runs with Spellbound Theatre, and is gearing up for a third this coming spring. Additionally, the show, its two performers, and its portable set, travel across the five boroughs, performing in preschool and kindergarten classrooms all over the city. Because of *The Last Coin's* theme and use of shadow puppetry, the show dovetails nicely with a light and shadow unit of the Universal Pre-Kindergarten curriculum in New York City. So, in addition to being a devising experience for myself and the other artists, it is also an Applied Theatre piece with the larger goal of exciting

preschool students about their education. This show would not exist if I had not created the space for it. The artistic director did not ask me if I wanted to create a show, I proposed it and defended it throughout its devising process. Many rejections have taught me to make my own opportunities, and this time I got a beautiful show out of it.

So, how did all these rejections and learning to create my own opportunities help me become a teacher? Well, after my work with Spellbound showed me the joys of working with young children, I took a tour of a preschool. I fell in love with it immediately. All Souls School utilizes a project-based approach called Emergent Curriculum wherein the teachers eavesdrop on the students, and create a series of unique projects each year based upon the children's expressed interests. I was emotionally moved (that's how incredible it was) by the independent hands-on exploration of the children, and the trust on the part of the teachers that it implied. As soon as I got home I sent them my resume. They had not asked for it, and there were no openings. Rejection. But I held out. And then, a few months later, there was a teacher position available. They had my resume on file, so after several interviews and a demo lesson, I was hired! No one thought there was going to be an opening when I initially sent my resume, but by sending it anyway I created an opportunity that, luckily for me, paid off very quickly.

I could talk about my teaching job all day. Case en point the original version of this speech was eleven pages long, but I will try to synthesize it for you now. My students and I have done some very cool projects together. Last year we created a character that we made into a stuffed animal. This year we are exploring airplanes in one of my classes and the postal system in the other. I have learned that teaching is inherently performative. My students are the audience, and my job is to engage them in the subject at hand. I often

hear from parents that the reason they elect to send their children to preschool is to get them excited about learning. Therefore, as a teacher, I have to make it exciting. My students are also my devising team, and if I listen to them, to their interests and wonderings and observations, we will collaboratively create better curriculum than I ever could have come up with alone, just like devising a play. Additionally, the other members of my teaching team, which I am lucky enough to have, are also my fellow devisors, always ready to collaborate.

So, it's official, I am not the famous actress the 15-year-old me would have envisioned. But I get to think like an artist every day, devising engaging curriculum for and with my students. I get to work with children who bring boundless enthusiasm and unedited joy to each project. I get to write and direct and share my ideas. I get immediate honest feedback- young children are the best, and most ruthless critics. I also get to utilize Applied Theatre in meaningful ways, and watch its profound effects unfold over time. I get all of this plus stability, a steady income, and benefits. For all you parents out there questioning your child's decision to lead a life in the arts, let me assure you that this is possible.

I have all of this because of what I was denied. All of the things I thought I wanted, thought I needed even, inform the person I've become, and the life in the arts I get to lead. So my advice to you, as you being to search for your life in the arts, is to invite a little rejection into your life. Do things that no one has asked you to do simply because you want to do them. You never know the wonderfully unexpected, and deeply fulfilling places, they could lead to.