

English 180, First Place; Professor, Dr. Timothy Helwig

## **How Pen Met Paper and Fell in Love**

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Writing and I have a complicated relationship. At times there is nothing I want to do more than sit wrapped in a cozy blanket, holding a scalding hot cup of green blueberry tea and just write. Other times I find myself wanting to pull my hair out and cry when all I have accomplished is writing down my name and date. Even this particular paper began as a slow struggle. I love writing but often times I feel that it does not love me back. Writing was something that I loved to do but up until my time working as a theatre critic at the Goodman Theatre I was always the slightest bit insecure about my work, staring at blank pages and wondering what the readers (be it teachers, followers, friends or even family) would think of my writing style. I found myself constantly writing in a way that was not my own, focusing too much on finding a different way of writing and not focusing enough on whether what I was writing was quality content. I continued hoping that whatever I managed to write would please whoever read it. I never thought about if what I wrote would please *me*, if I would actually be proud of what I wrote. Soon writing, something I once cherished deeply, became commonly associated with feelings of dread and disdain.

My high school theatre teacher approached me one day with a blue sheet of paper. She told me that this paper would lead to what she believed would be a great opportunity. It was a program at the Goodman Theatre that would allow young girls to broaden their experience with journalism. At the time I had no interest in this “invaluable opportunity” since writing was already an overwhelming burden for me. To write for the sole purpose of having my work being

criticized and picked apart was not a situation that I wanted to put myself in; however, because I am seemingly incapable of allowing myself to have a moment of leisure, and wholly incapable of not torturing myself, I decided to apply for a spot despite my reservations.

Every two weeks I along with the other girls would attend a Goodman production. Every Friday I would send a review for the last play I watched. The review would in turn be critiqued by an assigned mentor and it was up to me to fix the review. For the first few weeks I thought I had made a terrible mistake. I tried not to take the feedback too personally, but unfortunately my anxiety was alive and hungry, ready to turn any criticism into a personal attack. In response I also tried to write how I thought the mentors wanted me to write. I did not even realize that style was not a part of the problem, that criticism is a natural and necessary part of the writing process for any and every work. It got to a point that I hated Saturday mornings, hated the feeling that I was going to a program to be something that I was not. Writing is something so important to me so as dramatic as it seems, this process really had an emotional impact on me.

Then something magical happened—I saw *A Christmas Carol*. Looking back I suppose it was the second-hand holiday spirit that impassioned me. After getting home from the production, I immediately began to type out the notes I took during the show. I put aside invasive thoughts and just typed and typed until I had three pages of content. Gone were thoughts of the negative variety and present were thoughts driven by confidence and passion. It was *this* critique that got published on the Goodman Theatre's website, and I had never been so proud before this moment.

Through my experience I learned that while one should keep the audience in mind when writing, it is entirely okay to make creative decisions based on one's particular voice. Content is what is most important for the audience; personal style and originality is what is most important to me. I became free to explore journalistic styles outside of the academic setting. In the comfort

of my own home I could touch pen to paper and learned to just not care. I wrote so much—think pieces, movie reviews, critiques of and arguments for modern day movements—and somehow found the courage to actually put my work, and by extension myself, out into the world. I was exposing myself to a new world in which I finally allowed myself to be vulnerable and confident, and there is no way I could have enjoyed my awakening more.

When it comes to school work, academic papers and even short answer essays for DBQs, I still find myself holding back, always backtracking and over editing. I still get worried and constantly ask myself *do I sound smart enough? What if they don't like my choice of the word and in that specific sentence? Is this even a D worthy paper?* I am not entirely okay with feeling this way, and I am still learning, but I am 100% okay with knowing that writing is no longer the suffocating burden that it had started to become.

In a way I am just as grateful for my negative experiences as I am my positive ones. Without the bad, I might not have ventured to the world of journalism and my love for writing definitely would not have been as intense and therefore as fun as it is now. Of course there are things I can improve on. I still struggle with the conventional aspects of writing - logical organization, knowing when to stop overwriting, unlearning how to sound like a thesaurus but I could not even begin to care about improving on these things had I not done the Cindy Bandle's Young Critic's program.