

A day in the life of a public school in immersive 'Learning Curve'

By CHRIS JONES
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Maria Velazquez, left, and Lizbeth Acevedo in "Learning Curve," a play about a day in a Chicago public high school. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

Sunday night, I watched a kid get bullied in a school bathroom. The time I was attacked myself in a school bathroom, 30-odd years ago, thus came flooding back into my consciousness. This was not my favorite part of the week.

Then I took a standardized test; it was considerably harder than you might imagine.

And I was inspected by an officer of the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps; I stared down at my shabby shoes with their frayed laces, pondered how I had no earthly idea how to march, fall out, carry a rifle, seriously doubted my ability to actually execute the punitive sit-ups that were apparently one lick of the commander's lips away, and generally felt like I fully deserved the zero I was given.

All of these experiences took place at Ellen Gates Starr High School, a fictional creation of the youth-oriented Albany Park Theater Project, which is occupying a shuttered former Catholic school in the Avondale neighborhood to offer the kind of immersive experience of a day in the life of a student of the Chicago Public Schools that you only could do inside an actual school building, replete with seemingly working classrooms, a library, an office, security officers and a metal detector.

In this school, there are 26 scenes taking place in what feels like every corner of the building— I experienced 13 of them, I think, and I heard, post-show, about several of the others from my friend Lauren, who was sent off on a different track, once we both had our identification checked. These are not all traumatic, and just how traumatic you find them will probably say a lot about your particular memories of your own high school days. Some were scenes of high school joy — time in the library, say, with a caring librarian and a book by Toni Morrison. And although asking people to dances was never this much fun for me, there is a truly joyous participatory moment where a young fellow creates an entire fantasy romance to woo his grinning gal.

Created with Third Rail Projects of Brooklyn and with the Goodman Theatre as a partner, "Learning Curve" teaches many things, not the least of which is just how difficult it can be to get through a day in an inner-city school, mostly because students have so little power. We forget that as adults, even if we feel we have little power ourselves. We similarly forget a life in which we're constantly in danger of being revealed in all of our ignorance — in my adult life, I avoid being put on the spot assiduously; I'd far rather put people on the spot that be stuck there myself. High school kids are put there all the time — usually without regard to personal circumstance.

The show is a reminder that the school corridors of Burbank and Beverly Hills seen on TV —usually populated by atypically good-looking actors who actually have graduated college already — hardly have anything to say about one of the few common experiences left in America. Except one of the central points of "Learning Curve" is that high school is not a common experience, since it all depends on what kind of school you attended.

All of the various authority figures in the show are played by the teenagers of APTP, whose performances resonate in all kinds of ways. My memory of the night will be seared by a young woman who went flying around the library — a magical enclave in this telling — in search of the right book for me. I knew such a librarian once. And, of course, by the young man who asked me what I thought he could do to prevent being bullied again.

He looked me in the eye and I looked back. I gave the question a lot of thought. "I don't know," I said. For I did not, and all of what had come to me as possible solutions felt either impractical or ridiculous or humiliating, or all three at once. The kid playing the role shot me a look, partly of shared experience, partly critical of the inadequacy of my response. Those were, I thought, as I was ushered through the hallways (without a hall pass) precisely the right responses for an actor in the moment and I marveled, and marvel still, at the sophistication of that young actor's choices.



The cast of 'Learning Curve' Maidenwena Alba, center, and several other Chicago high school students perform a classroom scene during a rehearsal of "Learning Curve" on July 22, 2016. (Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

But then "Learning Curve," which is directed by David Feiner and Jennine Willett with Marissa Nielsen-Pincus, Stephanie Paul, Maggie Popadiak, Edward Rice, Rossana Rodriguez Sanchez and Carlton Cyrus Ward, is a very sophisticated piece of theater. There are, after all, 26 sets, all of which are lit, many of which are filled with complex movement and some of which feel more like art installations. Most high school drama you'll have seen will have inhabited merely a literal plane; "Learning Curve" embraces the symbolic, the inner life of the kid, the deeper context.

So, it is not to be missed (if you can snag a ticket; capacity is limited and the show is heavily sold already). I've been staring for the last few minutes at what I wrote on the front of my yearbook — or program, if you like.

It was a note about the scene that took place right before the test. The teacher told us that the school was on probation and that if we did not do well enough, the school probably would close and the teachers would be out of work. I don't doubt for a second that students are told that every day, and it is not a lie. But what I was thinking about in that moment, re-embracing my 16-year-old self, was how I would do. That wasn't selfishness, it is what a student should be thinking, although you could well argue that they should not be taking any such test at all.

To say that the only way to save a flawed but beloved school is to do well on a test is not unlike your parents telling you that if you don't behave, they'll get a divorce. It is not something that should be the concern of a young person. Adults should have taken care of it, allowing every student to learn.

For the biggest takeaway of all about "Learning Curve" is just how many curveballs adults throw in the way of actual learning, even though the faces you see in this show are upturned with determination, talent and ambition.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.