

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# A Perfect Murder: An (Imperfect) School Theater Program Model

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## INTRODUCTION

On a rainy night in January 2009, ten Brooklyn public high school students walked through Times Square to the stage door of Theatre Row, an acclaimed theater on 42nd Street, to perform their show *A Perfect Murder*. They entered a few minutes before Lili Taylor arrived for her show. It was the same stage door that Ethan Hawke, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Cynthia Nixon and various other Off-Broadway stars had used in the previous months. The students went to their dressing rooms, warmed up by dancing around to Beyoncé's "Single Ladies," and then took the stage of The Kirk Theatre at Theatre Row before an audience of family, friends, the school community, and curious members of the theater-going public. They performed their own play, a hip-hop inflected "remix" of the Leopold and Loeb story (Hidgdon) entitled *A Perfect Murder*, and received a standing ovation.

Over the last five years, the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice (SLJ), a new, small public high school in Brooklyn, and The Essentials, a professional theater company, have joined forces to offer a low-budget, high-quality, in-house afterschool theater program for SLJ students. Both SLJ and The Essentials were in nascent stages when the partnership began. This article will describe the model the two organizations developed together over the course of five years. It will also recount lessons learned from pitfalls and successes encountered along the way so that the model's successes can be replicated – and improved upon – elsewhere.

## The Model

The defining features of the SLJ/Essentials model are two-fold: structural

and pedagogical. Structurally, it is an in-house after school program taught by a partner organization and offered exclusively to students who attend the school where the program is held. The program is funded by the partner organization and is free to the school and its students. In exchange for this free service, the school offers the partner organization in-kind support (in this case, The Essentials were granted access to SLJ space for its own rehearsals) and agrees to pay for program supplies (e.g. costumes) and a program liaison. The after school club (in this case, theater) is taught by professionals working in their field of expertise, not by the school's teachers. The program is offered as part of the school's larger on-site after school program (at SLJ, the After School Learning Academy), which has attendance policies and recruitment structures universal to all after school clubs at the school. A member of the school's full-time staff serves as liaison and co-directs the club with the volunteer outside professional. In addition to being present and active at all club meetings, the liaison is responsible for logistics (e.g. finding a classroom, communicating with parents regarding schedule changes, etc.), student behavior, and all aspects of retention (e.g. monitoring attendance, recruiting understudies, etc.). The staff member also liaises between the school and the partner organization. This article will detail the development of these partnership structures, which are foundational to the success of a program like this.

Pedagogically, the primary goals of this model are to (1) make high quality extracurricular programming accessible to all types of students – from academic strivers to those at great risk for dropping out and from natural ac-

tors to painfully shy teens – while establishing a culture of high expectations, collaborative problem solving, and craftsmanship and to (2) ensure that students have a stake in the artistic process. This article will detail both why these goals are important and how they have been accomplished.

## In Context: About SLJ & The Essentials The Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice.

The Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice (SLJ) is an unscreened New York City public high school that was founded in 2004 by the Urban Assembly, a non-profit educational organization that creates and supports small 6th-12th grade public schools. It is one of the dozens of new small schools that has been opened in the city over the last decade. Most of the school's 450 students are low-income, Black or Latino, and will be first-generation college graduates. At the core of SLJ's mission is the belief that the success of each student is a community responsibility; partnerships with outside organizations are therefore integral to the school's foundation. Staff, families and partners work together to challenge and support students with a curriculum that respects their right to learn at high levels and with enrichment services that every student deserves. SLJ delivers personal attention in an empowering environment that fosters intellectual independence and civic engagement. The goal of SLJ is for students to graduate ready to succeed in college and to affect change in society. In 2008, 93% of SLJ's first class graduated on time, and to date, roughly 85% are enrolled in college.

The theater program is offered through the school's in-house After

School Learning Academy (ASLA), a component of SLJ's Early College Awareness Program. Beginning in ninth grade, students learn about the virtues of extracurricular involvement. They study its importance in becoming a well-rounded, passionate and talented person and, of course, the role extracurriculars play in the college admissions process. Throughout their four years of high school, all students partake in a series of lessons dedicated to early college awareness and preparation.

**The Essentials.** The Essentials Organization Inc., a 501c3 non-profit incorporated in 2008, is a professional theater company in New York City. The Essentials have been hailed as "Magnificent," "Sensational," and "Well-nigh perfection," by critics from *The New Yorker*, *Show Business Weekly*, *NYTheatre.com*, *Theatremania* and *Backstage* among others. Company members perform on Broadway and off, internationally, and at regional theaters around the country. The Essentials teaching artists are all active actors, designers, or directors in the company, and have taught at some of the country's premiere secondary schools, colleges and regional theaters around the country such as The Dalton School, NYU and The Shakespeare Theatre. Founded on the belief that great theater is essential to the civic dialogue and that teaching is a crucial part of the artistic tradition, The Essentials devote equal time to making theater and providing arts education programs.

A core piece of The Essentials' mission is to bring world-class theater education to underserved communities. The type of teaching program that they provide to a top prep school typically costs several thousand dollars and is beyond the budget of the average urban public school. Using creative budgeting structures described later, The Essentials are able to offer a theater education residency to schools serving low-income students at minimal or no cost to the school.

### The Need: Why an In-House Theater Program?

In New York City, students have ac-

cess to a myriad of free arts programs. Museums like the Museum of Modern Art and The Whitney Museum of American Art offer courses in drawing, photography and even museum curating that are open to all New York City high school students at no cost. Ghetto Film School and Global Action Project offer excellent film programs free of charge to students. The Red Hook Community Justice Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music offer performing arts programs that are not only free, students are actually paid to participate. SLJ has developed relationships with these organizations and numerous others, and students have participated in all of these programs. Though students' experiences have been powerful and almost always transformative, there are several reasons why an in-house program is still critical.

Extracurricular participation has been linked with a wide range of positive outcomes (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005), and are particularly important for students who are at risk of dropping out (Mahoney and Cairns, 1997). Research demonstrates that students who are involved in afterschool activities are more likely to succeed academically in high school and to thrive in college. Involved students learn perseverance (Dunne, 1977) and leadership and demonstrate these characteristics years after participation. Participation has also been linked with greater self-confidence, maturity and self-esteem (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005). The problem with off-site extracurricular activities is that they often attract students who already possess many of the important skills that the most at-risk students lack. Off-site programs frequently appeal to students who have a certain degree of self-motivation and responsibility and do not need some of the support structures that on-site programs can provide for students. On-site programs allow schools like SLJ to target students who might not otherwise become involved in extracurricular programs or might not succeed in them, especially a demanding program like theater that requires a significant time commitment, involves homework (e.g. memorizing lines), and culminates in a high pressure event (a performance).

Furthermore, on-site programs allow low school staff to monitor participant progress and scaffold each student's experience according to individual needs.

Nearly 50% of New York City students drop out before high school graduation (NYC Department of Education, 2008; Schott Foundation, 2008). This rate is considerably higher for low-income Black and Latino youth, and it is highest amongst Black males (61%) (Schott Foundation, 2008). Mahoney and Cairns (1997) conducted a six-year longitudinal study beginning when their 392 participants were in 7th grade. They found a striking correlation between dropout rates and non-participation in extracurricular activities. This outcome was observed primarily among students who were at highest risk for dropout.

Feldman and Matjasko (2005) suggest that students who participate in extracurricular programs in their own school buildings are more likely to stay enrolled in school and less likely to get involved in risky behaviors than their counterparts. By offering students an opportunity to stay in the school building and partake in something they are passionate about, an in-house extracurricular program helps create positive associations between students and their school. On-site programs are important for creating community and for building a sense of ownership over the school as well. These positive connections can be especially important for low-income students, who often see school as an unfriendly place instead of a source of hope and opportunity (Noguera, 2008).

Another very practical reason for offering an on-site theater program is that students do not have to travel to participate. Many SLJ parents worry about their children commuting around Brooklyn or even into other boroughs, like Manhattan, to participate in extracurriculars. Students who participate in off-site programs often ride the New York City subway alone. Many students come from crime-ridden neighborhoods, and parents do not want their children traveling around alone after dark. Parents who may otherwise not allow their children to participate in off-site ex-

tracurricular programs may be more likely to allow their children to partake when the program is offered in school.

### Why partner with an outside organization?

SLJ believes that students should be taught by educators who are experts in their field. Partnering with a professional theater company that employs a highly creative budgeting structure allows low-income students in underfunded public schools to benefit from the same high-quality instruction enjoyed by their much wealthier peers in elite prep schools. Though several SLJ faculty members have experience acting or even graduate degrees in teaching theater, partnering with The Essentials allowed the school to benefit from the full resources and connections of a professional theater company. The Essentials brought in a professional director, costume designer and lighting designers to work on the production. Students received voice and speech training, and an acting coach taught and worked particularly closely with some of the more advanced students on their longer soliloquies. The playwright for The Essentials' most recent production wrote a custom script for (and with) the SLJ students. Finally, The Essentials were able to leverage their existing relationship with professional theaters in New York and find a subsidized performance space in which the students could perform.

### PROGRAM STRUCTURE

#### It Wasn't Always Perfect: Creating the Essentials/SLJ Partnership

**Take one: *Antigone*.** In its first year, 2004, SLJ had a class of 100 ninth grade students. Although no drama program was offered, over twenty percent of the incoming students wrote in this option as their extracurricular preference. SLJ lacked a plan for theater instruction and the faculty was already stretching to provide extracurricular programs. SLJ's founding principal, a board member of The Essentials, contacted their artistic director, and The Essentials provided a three month resi-

dency as a pro-bono effort. This was the first time that The Essentials' had formally offered an in-house theater program in an urban public school.

The Essentials helped the students create their own adaptation of *Antigone*. Students read the play together, debated its main issue, and read complimentary texts, including "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Then the students began creating their own modern translation of the play. They discussed what might happen if the story took place in New York today. The students thought about Sophocles' chorus of ordinary Thebans and created modern versions of these characters (TV news reporters, bodega owners, doctors, teachers, Antigone's classmates, etc). The director videotaped as the students acted out these characters - improvising, giving mock interviews, and engaging in debates. The videotapes were transcribed and culled and the script was created. Students rehearsed intensely, and six weeks later, the students had created their own production of *Antigone*. The following spring, the play was performed at The Ohio Theater in SoHo, New York as a sold out benefit performance.

The partnership was considered an unqualified success by all the invested parties. Students, teachers, the administration, and The Essentials all considered the experience to have been exceptional. Four years later as those students reached senior year, several of them wrote their college essays on their freshman year experience with *Antigone*, and others mentioned it at graduation. However, although this program was a success, there were a few factors that made replicating it unrealistic: it was one of only a few extra-curricular options that students had in their first year, it was provided entirely pro-bono, and for an afterschool program *Antigone* received an usually high - and completely unsustainable - level of attention from the administration and faculty. Attendance was checked by the school's Director of Programs, and the Principal called parents of students who failed to attend or showed up tardy. Because the program required so much attention from the school administration, SLJ and the Essentials

decided not to offer theater again until the school had finished growing and could dedicate human resources to the program in a more sustainable way.

#### **Take two: *Romeo and Juliet*.**

Three years later, when both organizations were four years old and SLJ had grown to capacity as a 9th-12th grade high school, The Essentials and SLJ tried another program with less success. By this time, the after school environment at SLJ had changed radically. Students had almost two dozen after-school activities to choose from and the robust After School Learning Academy had been incorporated into the Early College Awareness Program. Performing arts offerings included dance company, step squad, poetry slam, and drama at Brooklyn Academy of Music, as well as theater and dance curricular options. Much like *Romeo and Juliet*, the play chosen for the semester, the 2008 spring afterschool theater program was star-crossed from the start. Though the *Antigone* experience had made it apparent that a faculty liaison needed to be assigned responsibility for the theater club (so that the principal was not dealing with attendance), the responsibilities of this liaison were not fleshed out. As such, it was not clear to anybody involved what the liaison's responsibilities were, and it was therefore impossible (and unfair) to hold the liaison accountable for the program's success. This quickly became problematic. It was unclear who was in charge of recruitment and retention for the club. It was not made explicit that the liaison was responsible for student behavior during rehearsal. In fact, it was never even specified that the liaison had to attend rehearsal, which surfaced as a problem when it became apparent that the liaison had several competing responsibilities - including teaching another after school club during the theater club meeting time. In addition, though theater was now being offered in the context of a more structured afterschool program, it was also not articulated how the Director of Early College Awareness Programs and the Program Coordinator responsible for day-to-day operations of the afterschool program managed problems

that arose – particularly with faculty members who are directly supervised by the principal, not other school staff, and with volunteer-run programs, like theater. In short, the roles and responsibilities of the various staff involved were ambiguous and the structures for communication were poorly planned.

Consequently, *Romeo and Juliet* was beset by calamities. The rehearsal schedule was unclear to students, and early on, the cast dwindled. The lead actors had erratic attendance, and this affected the morale of the supporting cast. Because the liaison's duties were unclear, these problems were never followed up on with students or their parents. Furthermore, since there were no real communication avenues between The Essentials and the Early College Awareness Program staff, there was no intervention to clarify the liaison's role.

As the production date neared, it became apparent to The Essentials that the student cast alone could not perform a full-length show. Though the staging had originally called for ten actors, only eight remained committed and at least three cast members were absent on most given rehearsal days. Rather than scrap the entire performance, The Essentials decided to augment the cast with three professional actors from its company. They modified the script accordingly and the new company, comprised of professional actors and students, gave a book-in-hand staged reading of *Romeo and Juliet* for an invited audience of students and faculty. Though the performance was lauded as impressive by its audience, it was clear that major structural changes needed to be implemented before another theater program was offered.

**Take three: Towards a more perfect union in *A Perfect Murder*.** The Fall 2008 Theater program was created with an understanding of the previous two programs – a determination to capitalize on their success and avoid their failures. During the summer, the director of The Essentials and the director of SLJ's Early College Awareness Programs held a brainstorming session to work through goals, processes, and allocation of resources. A memo of understanding was created

detailing partnership goals, metrics for success, roles and responsibilities, schedule and locations, and budget details. A teacher liaison was selected to co-direct the club with The Essentials staff member, and his responsibilities were delineated in the memo of understanding. These responsibilities included overseeing recruitment and retention, attending every rehearsal and managing any behavioral issues, and coordinating all logistics (including calendar and budget) with the Early College Awareness Program staff. It was agreed that before the semester began, and periodically throughout the semester, the liaison would meet with the directors of both The Essentials and the Early College Awareness Program to check in about the program.

Both organizations agreed that students would have a stake in the success of the artistic process – they should feel like it was “their play.” Students would collaboratively create a new play and perform it for the SLJ community. Students, SLJ, and The Essentials would establish a culture of high expectations, collaborative problem solving, and craftsmanship. While the program staff would be encouraging and supportive and accept any student into the program regardless of acting capabilities, it would also demand much of our students and help them produce work of the highest artistic quality. If the school-based performance was high enough in caliber, The Essentials would attempt to procure a space to perform the show in an Off-Broadway theater.

The energy devoted to defining the partnership and delineating roles and responsibilities during the creation of *A Perfect Murder* definitely paid off. Because good communication between the school and The Essentials was prioritized, small problems were dealt with efficiently and effectively, and the show was able to go on with little interruption. When the program runs again next year, this model will most certainly be replicated.

### The Other Structural Piece: Partnering on the Budget

A theater program of this magnitude is a costly endeavor: it requires ma-

terials for sets and costumes, fees for designers, stage lighting, and food for students after school. Most costly, however, is personnel, as the faculty liaison and teaching artists need to be present for a minimum of 60 hours of rehearsal.

At a private prep school or in wealthier school districts, these fees and costs are often absorbed into an existing performing arts budget. Those performing arts budgets are often augmented by booster clubs, by charging admission fees to the performing arts events, and by selling advertising space in the programs. Though SLJ had enough money to compensate a liaison for two hours of rehearsal per week, the school did not have funds to compensate a teaching artist (let alone a teaching company). Furthermore, such additional revenue sources were not a viable option for the school; the majority of students are low-income and even a small ticket price could be a significant barrier to attendance. The school community is also small enough and sufficiently lacking in resources to limit the appeal to local advertisers.

The Essentials and SLJ came up with several creative solutions to meet the budget. Each organization paid the salaries of its respective teacher(s). In return for receiving The Essentials services pro-bono, SLJ agreed to provide free rehearsal space to The Essentials during the summer so that The Essentials could develop their next production. Meanwhile, the play was written and designed so that it could be performed without a set – The Essentials were able to create theatrical lighting by repurposing backstage lights and work lights in combination with simple hardware store dimmers. Additionally, the costume designer kept costs low by borrowing costumes.

The final revenue piece was the fundraiser performance at Theatre Row. The Essentials used their connection with the theater to rent the theater on a “dark night” at a dramatically subsidized cost. Both SLJ and The Essentials invited their donors to attend and to “Get One, Give One” – that is, purchase a ticket for themselves and purchase a ticket to be donated to a student's family. The Essentials also invited their patron list

of previous ticket buyers. All of these efforts combined to produce a capacity crowd for the student performance and funding for SLJ's theater program.

## PROGRAM PEDAGOGY

### Theater for All: Attracting and Retaining a Diverse Array of Participants

Since a primary reason for offering an in-house theater program is to ensure participation of all kinds of students – and, in particular, at-risk students – recruitment is the first step in meeting this mission goal. By the time *Romeo and Juliet* was produced, SLJ had developed a standardized, school-wide club recruitment process. Most recruitment takes place at the After School Fair, which every student attends at the beginning of each semester. For both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Perfect Murder*, over thirty students at the fair expressed interest in the theater program. For *A Perfect Murder*, students were also directly recruited by the liaison from his classes. Interested students then attended an information session.

For *A Perfect Murder*, nine students chose to commit to the program. One student dropped out within the first month of the program, another joined, and two understudies were recruited. Because students really understood their commitment before joining, and because attendance was monitored so closely by the liaison, attendance was overall very high throughout the program. The cast was comprised of an eclectic group of students who ranged in age, gender, acting background, and academic achievement. Six of the students were freshmen (including one freshman male who was repeating the ninth grade). Two students were sophomores (though one was new to SLJ), one was a junior, and one was a senior. In total, three students were male. Seven of the students failed at least one class during the first marking period, and all three of the non-failing students made the honor roll.

### Playwriting Using the Joint-Stock Method

The pedagogical techniques employed by The Essentials did not change much between the years. In all three iterations of the theater program, students spent the first few weeks of the program learning the basics of improvisational acting and collaborative story telling. Because SLJ is an unscreened public school, students come from a variety of different reading levels and academic backgrounds. Thus, all scripts had to be written at multiple reading and speaking levels, be accessible to all students, and be capable of challenging the most advanced readers and performers.

The play scripts were created using the "Joint-Stock Method" (Ritchie, 1987). During the initial weeks, students worked with a teaching artist and used improvised documentary style interviews to create a modern retelling of the basic story (in this case, the famous 1924 murder trial of Leopold and Loeb, two wealthy University of Chicago alumni who kidnapped and murdered another teenager in an attempt to commit the "perfect murder" (Higdon, 1975)). The Essentials teaching artists then transformed the student generated material into a script that the students rehearsed under the direction of the teaching artist and performed for the school community. As the process was fairly similar for all the plays, the details of *A Perfect Murder's* creation serve as the example following.

#### Initial weeks: Artistic creation.

The first day of the after school program was designed to be a self-contained unit that was a microcosm of what students would do in a semester. The group took the story of Humpty Dumpty and imagined how it might have happened in modern day America. Improvising characters and scenes, they created an investigative squad of detectives trying to figure out how Humpty fell (or was pushed), breathless news reporters interviewing sources, and even an Al Sharpton-esque character proclaiming that Humpty had suffered from "Eggism." The activity was a hit among the students. Every student in atten-

dance created at least one character, and their enthusiasm was palpable.

When they then dove into the Leopold & Loeb story, the students were initially just as enthusiastic as they had been on the first day. They responded passionately to the theme of evil and had animated debates about such questions as, "What is evil?" "What is good?" "Is the purpose of punishment to rehabilitate or to get retribution?" The students quickly generated almost two dozen characters for their script. However, while the students had no problems imagining scenes for the Humpty Dumpty adaptation, some of them had repeated difficulty remembering which events and characters existed in the historical story and which ones existed only in the play.

#### Middle process: Arrival of the script, rehearsals, & finishing the script.

During the fourth week, The Essentials playwright began to bring in scenes adapted from the student generated materials. Students responded enthusiastically to seeing their creations in print and expressed impatience at not getting to see their characters in a full play. The playwright exercised confusion at the task of trying to reconcile the students' wildly imaginative characters with the events of the original story. So with the play still not finished, he decided to let the students chose the ending. He led the students through a writing exercise, and, as a group, they analyzed each character's needs, the obstacles to those needs, and how the character might try to achieve her/his objectives. Students were asked to create final scenes (keeping in mind the events of the actual story) that would resolve each character's story line. The playwright incorporated many of those scenes into the final script, and the students began rehearsing immediately.

One very important lesson of playwriting for the youth was the importance of keeping the script modular. Because of the script's modularity, the play director was able to decrease the size of a role for a student who was hospitalized for two weeks and to increase the prominence of another role for a student who was thriving on her existing material.

**Facing attrition: The realities of working with academically at-risk youth.** Though the structural components of the program were largely worked out (and highly effective) by the time *A Perfect Murder* began rehearsals, lateness and attrition were still a reality that needed to be dealt with. The lateness issue was related to students' academic responsibilities. As mentioned previously, several participants were failing classes. The school's policy is that students who are failing must attend after school tutoring, which conflicts with club meetings. The policy also dictates that failing students cannot perform publicly. During the creation of *A Perfect Murder*, the problem of failing students was dealt with by recruiting understudies. From an artistic standpoint, having understudies allowed rehearsals to continue uninterrupted when students were late or absent because of tutoring. The presence of understudies also provided a non-threatening reminder to students that their commitment to the play was taken very seriously and that if they could not improve their grades and make rehearsals, they would be replaced. One lesson learned from this experience was that it would be beneficial to monitor students' grades so that sudden absences to attend tutoring would not disrupt the rehearsal process. Interestingly, when students in the drama program who were failing classes realized that their academic status would cause them to miss rehearsals, they generally responded with an increased level of academic effort and output. In the future, it would be sensible to include report reflections as a systematized component of the program.

**Performance week.** As the performance drew near, two behavioral patterns emerged: students asked repeatedly if the play "was really happening?" and they started to "goof off" (talking during rehearsals, forgetting lines they previously knew, etc.). Consequently, the Essentials staff asked students to run their own rehearsals and take turns acting as Director and Stage Manager. The two adults were present at these student led rehears-

als but spoke only on rare occasions. The students were also asked to make a short marketing video to be posted on YouTube, which they successfully completed with little adult coaching.

The initial performance of *A Perfect Murder* took place on the floor of the basketball court (the students set up their stage at "top of the key" while the audience sat in folding chairs below the "foul line"). Following the performance, the response from the school community was warm and embracing - they showered the students with praise. The performance took place on a Friday night, and by Monday morning, dozens of congratulatory emails had circulated throughout the school's listserves. Though The Essentials director was not satisfied with the artistic standard of the performance, virtually every audience member - from parents, to teachers to school safety agents - was impressed by the play's caliber.

**The decision to hold a benefit performance.** Deciding that the quality of performance was adequate and repairable and that the level of student commitment was serious enough, the Essentials and SLJ staff jointly made the decision to produce a benefit performance Off Broadway, at Theatre Row, one month later. Together, the staff gathered the students together, explained that this would involve an even more intense level of effort from them, and asked if they were willing to commit as a group to performing. Additionally, students were informed that, congruent with school policy, anyone with disciplinary issues between then and the performance would not be able to perform. The students committed to the extra work enthusiastically but expressed some trepidation about the disciplinary ruling. Ultimately, however, they all exhibited exemplary behavior; in fact, teachers remarked to the liaison that they had seen marked improvements in certain students' behavior and participation.

Artistic changes included bringing a voice and speech coach in to work with the students and changing the script so that it included a framing device that incorporated the students (and many of the internal arguments that the cast

had about the play during rehearsals) into the actual text of the play. The student response to becoming characters in the play was incredible; whereas they had previously been reluctant to change lines once they had been written on the page, students were now enthusiastic tinkerers - they repeatedly changed and adapted lines so that they would "feel more like something I'd say." By the time the play was performed, its artistic quality had improved tremendously.

The Off-Broadway performance went off without a hitch. Veteran Broadway actor Noah Weisberg introduced the performance to a theater packed with an array of audience members, from students' families and friends to school staff, Theater Row patrons, and donors. Then the lights went down and the students took the stage. Thirty minutes later, the cast took their bows and the audience erupted with pride.

## CONCLUSIONS

It took five years and three iterations of a partnership between The Essentials and SLJ to develop a sustainable and replicable model for a high-quality, in-house theater program. Congruent with SLJ's mission, the theater program provides students with high level enrichment services that involve whole community support for students and empower all students, regardless of prior experience, skill, or academic achievement, to get involved. For The Essentials, the performance had a tangible benefit. It allowed the company to invite its audience that normally only sees its professional work to come to a familiar theater and experience its teaching work. Following the performance, patrons who may not have ever attended a high school play chatted with the stars in the Theatre Row lounge. For these theater patrons, the play provided an approachable access point through which to learn about the challenges in urban education and the work being done on that front.

That the program was in-house allowed it to target high-risk students and provide them with support to achieve what for some of them was their first significant success in an academic setting. One junior who pre-

viously had suffered from acute absenteeism, managed to avoid a single unexcused absence to rehearsal. Further, he had in years past failed several New York State Regents examinations. This year, when warned that he could only participate in the Times Square performance if he attended all of his Regents prep classes, he did so. On the morning of our Theater Row performance, he passed his final Regents exam, which would allow him to graduate from high school. Another student, who transferred to the school because she been disinterested academically at her previous high school and had gotten involved in high-risk behaviors and negative peer groups, remarked that she “loved coming to school because theater made life worth living.” Though she failed most of her classes during the first marking period, she said, theater made me want to good in school. I love theater because it made me realize that this is a great school, with lots of opportunities. Theater made me realize I should pay attention in my classes, cuz, it made me realize that there’s so much interesting stuff going on in this place. (Anonymous Student, 2009) She passed almost all of her classes during the second marking period. Several other students claimed that they felt more self confident, empowered to be a leader, and a sense of belonging for the first time because of theater. The students developed a tangible sense of positive community and exhibited impressive collaboration skills. Students who had previously been in separate social cliques continued to maintain their friendships after

the play ended. In addition, students who had previously lacked positive relationships with school staff developed close relationships with the liaison and The Essentials staff. On more than one occasion, students approached a staff member for advice about how to avoid a risky decision. All of these experiences are in line with prior research on why extracurriculars are so important for adolescents (Dunne, 1977; Feldman and Matjasko, 2005; Mahoney and Cairns, 1997; NFSHSA, 1985).

When this model is replicated or adapted by us or by others, there are several critical elements that should be considered. Developing clear lines of communication between the school and the partner organization is absolutely key. Appointing a liaison and delineating clear responsibilities is positively imperative; without an effective liaison who worked full-time at the school, knew the school culture, and interacted with students on a daily basis, this play would never have come to fruition. In addition, employing pedagogical techniques that foster student ownership and allow for last minute script changes are crucial to serving at-risk students and simultaneously offering artistically high caliber educational programming.

The purpose of this article is to provide a model that can be employed by other schools and theater companies. This partnership built real relationships between students, faculty, professional artists, and members of the general public. And, in the context of a difficult economy, it provided a unique way for a theater company to increase its outreach and for a school to address its most at-risk students. Most impor-

tantly, this partnership provided incredibly high quality programming to students who would not have had access to or taken advantage of it otherwise.

**Nicole S. Simon** recently resigned as Director of Early College Awareness Programs at the Urban Assembly School for Law & Justice and is now a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In 2007, she was awarded a Global Kids Urban Educator Fellowship for her work with Black male students. Nicole completed an MS in Design and Environmental Analysis and a BS in Human Development, both from Cornell University. She co-authored Building Quality, Academic Achievement & Self-Competency in New York City Public Schools, in *School Building Design and Learning Performance with a Focus in Schools in Developing Countries* (Knapp et al. (Eds.), 2007).

**Andrew Grosso** is the Artistic Director of The Essentials. Recent directing credits include *MOTHER*, starring Emmy Award winners Holland Taylor and Buck Henry, *Perfect Harmony*, *Wrong Way Up!* with the rock band The Niagaras, and the New York Premier of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. He has taught for the NYU Dramatic Writing Program, Fordham University, The Shakespeare Theatre, Off the Hook, the Urban Assembly School for Law & Justice, and The Dalton School. He is an alumnus of the Lincoln Center Theater Directors Lab, Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab, and Duke University. He is also a member of SDC and Dramatist Guild.

## ENDNOTES

i In the context of this paper, the term “at-risk” is used to describe students who are at-risk for dropping out of high school. Some factors that put students at risk for dropout include failing classes, being overage or not on track to graduate, having poor attendance, and/or lacking a pro-active parent (Bridgeland et al, 2006).

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