

Teach theatre, start conversations

Outreach theatre program On Stage, which works to bring theatre into the academic setting, visits Hamline's Diversity and Education class.

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EVEN A SINGLE word can hold power, and it only takes one word to change the lives of college students Tom and Amber in Anna Ziegler's new play "Actually". The play tells the story of two first-year Princeton students recalling a particular evening to a university panel charged with determining if a sexual assault occurred. Thanks to the work of Lucas Erikson's On Stage, "Actually" was brought off the stage and into a Hamline classroom.

On Stage is a theatre outreach program with the goal of creating a community conversation around theatre in the area. Traveling to academic classes, Erikson brings local actors to read scenes from a play in current local production to a variety of classes and disciplines.

"The whole mission is to get a younger audience to see live theater and cultural events in the Twin Cities," Erikson said.

On Mar. 5, On Stage presented "Actually" to Letitia Basford's Diversity and Education class, an upper-level course for education majors. The class's official description says that it seeks to provide future teachers with an understanding of "the educational implications of cultural diversity: class, disability, gender, language, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation."

Along with Erickson, "Actually"'s cast of two was present to perform and interact with the education students. The topics in the play coincided with the class's current focus on compulsive masculinity. Diversity and Education was just one stop on the On Stage classroom tour, as "Actually" was previously brought to creative writing and criminal justice courses at other Twin Cities colleges.

The play is told largely in flashbacks directed at the audience. This narrative format allows the characters' inner thoughts to be heard. The class watched actors JuCoby Johnson (Tom) and Miriam Schwartz (Amber) read a scene depicting a date that leads to an intimate encounter. The consent of the encounter is brought to question when Amber attempts to stop the action with the word "actually."

The play delves into the identities of the two characters, Tom as a young black man and Amber as a white Jew in the first semester of their first year of college.

"[She is] a neurotic, young Jewish woman who is experiencing pressure in all areas of her life all the time," Schwartz said when describing her character. "She really wants to be seen by someone, by anyone."

Acknowledging that both characters bring individual stories that impact every choice made, Johnson believes the ultimate argument of the play is to look upon a system that is failing to prepare and protect students.

"There was no way that with their histories, with the way the world taught them about sex, that they were ever going to have a good interaction," Johnson said.

This is why the play was brought into the classroom.

"You are going to teach the college students of tomorrow what the system is," professor Letitia Basford said.

The class discussion focused on the importance of respecting future students, especially when a student's specific history is unknown. The class acknowledged actions may be influenced by a student's morning, yesterday and past.

The Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company's performance of "Actually" ran Feb. 16 through Mar. 10 at the Highland Park Community Center Theater. The Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company promotes "igniting your mind by touching your heart. (Even if you're not Jewish!)" in its advertisement material. More information on the company can be found by visiting mnjewishtheatre.org.