

Grown-Up Theater Kids Run the World

A Supreme Court justice. The governor of New Jersey. Senator Ted Cruz. A prominent MSNBC host. Practically half the tech world. What's behind this moment of thespian power?



By Madison Malone Kircher

Madison Malone Kircher has performed in 18 musicals.

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They're everywhere.

Muttering “thank you, five” under their breath when you swing by their cubicles to remind them about a team meeting happening in five minutes. Performing slightly too well at office karaoke after protesting slightly too much about getting onstage.

Former theater kids. They walk among us.

Technically, I should say *we* walk among you. I have a decade's worth of unflattering photos of me in cakey makeup and a scar on my stomach from a quick “Grand Hotel” costume change gone awry to prove it. If I never participate in another massage circle again, it'll be too soon.

What happens to theater kids when we grow up? There's, of course, the dream scenario: The theater kids who are driven and talented and lucky enough become working theater adults.

Like Ben Platt, who in 2017 at age 23 became the youngest individual winner of the Tony for best lead actor in a musical, for his star turn in “Dear Evan Hansen.”

Mr. Platt's fiancé is the actor Noah Galvin, who also played Evan Hansen on Broadway. (Yes, you read that right, the Evans Hansen are engaged.) And this summer, you can see the Evans Hansen onscreen in “Theater Camp,” a mockumentary inspired in part by Mr.

Platt's childhood experiences. Mr. Platt and Mr. Galvin are also two of the film's writers.

The film's success — Deadline described its opening weekend box office take as “notable” — suggests there is a paying audience, and a fairly wide one at that, hungry for theater kid nostalgia. Perhaps because most theater kids go on to become, well, pretty much anything but theater adults. And lately it's seemed as if theater kids — the clichéd underdogs in high school — actually run the world. Everywhere you turn, there's a former Annie or Gertrude McFuzz in charge.



Molly Gordon and Ben Platt in “Theater Camp.” Searchlight Pictures/20th Century Studios

Well before being appointed to the Supreme Court, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson participated in theater and improv as an undergraduate at Harvard, and was once paired with Matt Damon — then a student, now a Hollywood actor — in a drama class. (Mr. Damon did not recall this but thought it was “so cool,” The Associated Press reported.)

Senator Ted Cruz has been known to talk about his high school drama days, including playing Bill Sikes, the villain, in “Oliver!” (“It’s a fun role, and everyone cheers when you’re killed at the end,” Mr. Cruz said of the character, who beats a woman to death in Act II.)

Other former theater kids include the governor of New Jersey and the editor of New York magazine. The Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations. Prime Minister Justin

Trudeau of Canada taught high school drama.

All of these power-adult former theater kids exist in a moment when the very things that used to make drama-loving teenagers an easy punchline have become strengths. Today, performing an outsize version of oneself is often rewarded. The rise of remote virtual meetings has almost certainly favored people who like, or at least know how, to perform for an audience. They know how to do a slightly more exaggerated gesture, and have a willingness to energetically monologue into a silent void of faces staring back from boxes.

And a world increasingly mediated by tiny videos on platforms like Instagram and TikTok? Washed-up theater kids shine there, too.

“There’s a big moment for cringe happening right now, and say what you will about the theater kids, but we’re very good at cringe,” said Zoelle Egner, 34. Ms. Egner, who was the 11th employee at Airtable and now does marketing for the online safety start-up Block Party, was fired from her first role, as Cindy Lou Who, after she stopped midshow to tell the Grinch he was off his blocking. (She was 4.) ▶ Her peak came in eighth grade, when she played the titular role in “Hello, Dolly!”





Clockwise from top left: Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, Senator Ted Cruz, Chris Hayes and Gov. Phil Murphy — all of whom just might leave their jobs if they were offered a part in “West Side Story.” Erin Schaff/The New York Times; Valerie Plesch for The New York Times; Robert Caplin for The New York Times; Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

“I don’t think it’s like the awesomest personal quality that I have, that I want people to pay attention to me,” said Chris Hayes, host of “All In With Chris Hayes” on MSNBC. “But we live in a culture that really rewards thirst.”

Mr. Hayes was hooked after performing in a seventh-grade production. “I forget the joke, but I said it and the whole place laughed and it was definitely like, ‘Ah, that’s the good stuff!’” In college, he directed John Krasinski in a musical spoof of action movies — “like ‘Die Hard’ the musical, basically,” he said.

“‘Pick me, look at me’ is the dominant cultural ethos,” Mr. Hayes continued, adding that theater kids’ joining the professional world is “like releasing an apex predator into an ecosystem.”

Mr. Hayes drew a direct line from his younger theater endeavors to his current work. An obvious line, perhaps, but he isn’t the only one. Many former theater kids describe a pipeline from the extracurricular activity to certain professions: journalism, public radio, law, public relations, politics.

Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey credits his time in theater — as King Arthur in a Needham, Mass., production of “Camelot” and as a member of the Hasty Pudding Club at Harvard — with giving him some of the skills he needs to do his job. “I still get butterflies occasionally, but it’s rare that I have anxiety about standing up and speaking in front of people,” he said.

Theater gave him a certain amount of equanimity, he said: “When a piece of scenery would fall to the ground or somebody in the audience would get sick or somebody onstage would forget their lines, I learned long ago to go with the flow, as they say.” Another useful political skill: He learned how to tap dance, for “No, No, Nanette.”

(Mr. Murphy also recounted seeing three productions of “Hello, Dolly!,” one with Carol Channing, another with Ethel Merman and the third with Bette Midler. “Hard to argue with Channing, but they were all good,” he said.)

Education is another field that rewards skills acquired in theater. “Teaching to me is just a theater performance,” said Jessica C. Harris, an associate professor of higher education and organizational change at the University of California, Los Angeles. “I kind of get this high of ‘I’m about to go onstage’ before I go into the classroom. And it doesn’t mean that I’m inauthentic in the classroom. It just means that I really come alive.” (In high school, she performed in a postapocalyptic production of “Macbeth.”)

After putting out a call on social media, I heard from theater kids around the world in every profession imaginable — working at the Department of Justice, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and Goldman Sachs, and as doctors and lawyers. The tech world is quietly lousy with them, at Apple, Salesforce and Google (the chief executive of Figma is also a theater kid). There was a wine educator, a strategist for a tonic water company, a man who owns a “hot dog joint,” so many marketing professionals I lost count. And influencers, journalists and an adjunct professor who also runs a business selling backpacks to carry cats. (Theater adults are, unsurprisingly, very good at self-promotion.)

Ms. Egner likes seeing theater on a job candidate’s résumé. “Everybody’s obsessed with hiring athletes,” she said. “I get especially excited when I see people who have the stage management side of things.”

“If you can get actors to show up on time and do what they are supposed to do, you can do anything,” she explained, adding that former actors are particularly good at reading and reacting to situations on the job.

“There’s an empathy I think most theater people have,” said Laura Miranda-Browne, the

chief executive of a sustainable development fund. To put yourself in someone else's shoes to get in character, she believes, builds "a lifelong skill set."

Some researchers have also found participation in theater, among other arts, is good for developing minds.

A 2022 study conducted in middle and elementary schools in Houston found that children who participated in arts education programs (not limited to theater) improved their writing skills, were more empathetic and engaged in school and had lower incidences of disciplinary issues. In a recent study of New York City schoolchildren conducted by the New Victory Theater, children who watched and participated in performing arts over a multiyear period were more creative and hopeful than peers who did not.



Anna Cockrell competed in the Olympics, but do the Games pale in comparison with the thrill of the middle school stage? Andy Lyons/Getty Images

Anna Cockrell, 25, is now a Nike-sponsored professional track athlete, but as a middle schooler in Michigan, she thrived in a program she described as "basically competitive acting."

"I don't perform onstage anymore, but I feel like the theater kid lives on in me," said Ms. Cockrell, who recalled for this reporter her stellar work in "Honk!" as a child. In both theater and track, she said, you "have to believe so aggressively in your talent while you're chasing this seemingly impossible dream."

Ms. Cockrell, who competed at the Tokyo Olympics, added that she performs “significantly better” at big competitions than she does the rest of the year. “I think a big part of that is because I love a crowd,” she added, which she said “directly stems from being a theater kid.” “Waiting for Life,” a song from the musical “Once on This Island,” was her anthem during the 2020 Olympic trials, she explained. “Like, *tell me why, why am I here,*” Ms. Cockrell said, paraphrasing the lyrics. “I’m trying to make this thing happen.” She then burst out, briefly, into song.

Ms. Cockrell was not the only one to do this. Christopher Taylor, the mayor of Ann Arbor, Mich., sang a few bars of ▶ “Brigadoon” on the record. Tori Dunlap, a content creator and finance educator with more than two million TikTok followers, joked that she could still remember every color of Joseph’s amazing technicolor dreamcoat — a boast she ▶ backed up.

Mr. Hayes sang lyrics to a musical he directed as a student at Hunter College High School in Manhattan, ▶ a debut work from a classmate named Lin-Manuel Miranda: “Pig. I am just a fetal pig/I am not very big/So why did you cut me up in bio class?/Is getting a good grade worth me getting slayed?”

But while theater kids might quietly — or, actually, loudly and with elaborate choreography — run the entire world, the whole world has not necessarily moved on from the stereotypical dunking.

Consider a thread from Reddit’s Unpopular Opinion subcommunity titled “Theater kids are some of the most annoying people you will ever meet, no matter what age.”

“I don’t think hating theatre kids is an unpopular opinion,” reads one representative comment.

In her work on social media, Ms. Egner said, she still regularly notices “totally out-of-pocket and very strange threads from people complaining that theater kids are annoying.” High school, as they say, never ends.

And being a theater kid is a permanent condition. One we are unwilling to let go of ... or stop telling people about. By the way, did I mention I was also Dolly in “Hello, Dolly!”?

Theater Kids

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