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What My Teacher Gave Me: Portrait of the Artist on a Wrestling Mat

Garner Simmons · Wednesday, April 23rd, 2014

It was the winter of my discontent – mid-February of my Junior year at a suburban high school northwest of Chicago. Slate gray skies. Penetrating rain that turned to snow as the temperature tumbled. The sameness of the days piling up like snow against the window panes. English, chemistry, trig, Latin, and history before escaping to wrestling practice in the gym after school, the air stifling with sweat and analgesic.

Until that point in my life, I had always defined myself through athletics. Fall was football. Winter was wrestling. Spring was track. This particular winter, however, the drama teacher, Douglas Murphy, whom I had never met, decided to put on Shakespeare's *As You Like It* as the spring play. To attempt a play written in 16th century Elizabethan English and cast with teenagers more interested in hot cars and fast music was more than audacious – clearly Murphy had lost his marbles.

But then, it wasn't my concern. Or so I thought until Murphy showed up one day at wrestling practice. He had been invited by a teammate named Jerry Greer. Jerry preferred drama to football. And he had no plans to run track because he was going out for the lead in the spring play, a character named Orlando, which was why he introduced me to Murphy. You see, in Act One of *As You Like It*, Orlando must take on the Duke's wrestler, Charles. And in a stroke of brilliance, Murphy had decided to cast a real wrestler.

Cornering me after practice, Murphy asked if I'd be interested. I declined. Undeterred, he pulled out a copy of the play. "Look," he said, "Nothing to it. Charles only has one line. Talk to Jerry. You really should try out." Unconvinced, I made my way through wrestling season while Jerry continued to prod me. When tryouts began, he dragged me along.

To be honest, a one-line reading doesn't take much time or talent. I knocked it off and started to go. But Murphy stopped me. The female lead, a character named Rosalind, had a number of candidates. Selecting a scene, Murphy handed me a copy of the script and asked me if I'd read with each of them. Totally unprepared, I butchered my first attempt. Embarrassed, I apologized. But Murphy ignored me and insisted I do it again… and again… and again. Then he asked me to come back the next day.

Mortified, I went home and read the play cover-to-cover. To my surprise, I actually liked it. I

started reading it aloud in my room. Over the course of that week, I found myself looking forward to auditions. As I soon realized, everyone read for multiple parts as Murphy slowly settled on whom to cast. The following Monday, he posted the list. As I approached, I ran into Jerry who gave me a one-finger salute of congratulations. “Nice going, asshole.” As he walked away, I checked the list. Murphy had cast me as Orlando and Jerry as a lovesick shepherd. Both elated and terrified, instead of one line I had hundreds. Murphy was even crazier than I thought. But as rehearsals began and Shakespeare’s poetry reached out to me, a rope of words to cling to in a darkened theatre, I soon lost myself in the play itself. And I began to realize what a miraculous gift Murphy had given me.

Image: Francis Hayman, “The Wrestling Scene from ‘As You Like It'” 1740-1750.

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