

How Theater Has Shaped My Character

I was only a freshman in high school with little to no experience in theater. The upcoming production, however, interested me. The director announced that the musical for the following year would be Disney's classic *Beauty and the Beast*. I knew that, with enough effort, I could be a strong competitor for the lead. I was thrilled when I learned that in just a few weeks my efforts had paid off: I had earned the role of Belle. I learned many important lessons throughout the show, and this prepared me to become a much better leader in my junior year musical, *The Sound of Music*. Theater served as a significant learning curve for me in my high school years and helped shape my character.

I spent the summer after *Beauty and the Beast* preparing to audition for Maria in *The Sound of Music*. I repeatedly read the script and watched multiple productions, making note of Maria's mannerisms and line delivery. I imagined myself in her dresses and learned her songs by heart with encouragement from my vocal instructors. They told me my skills as a performer had enormously improved since my last audition. I auditioned for the lead with full confidence, knowing that I had worked hard over the summer. Despite my optimism, however, the judges preferred the style of a rising senior, and I was thrown into the role of Liesl von Trapp, a young, naïve girl with the responsibility of six younger siblings.

I was disappointed about not receiving the role of Maria, but Liesl's character intrigued me. I began rewatching productions of the show from a new perspective, focusing on Liesl's unique attitude and position. The more I studied the script, the more depth I saw in her character. She was not simply a young, naïve girl as I had originally thought. She served as a maternal figure to her younger siblings: a side to Liesl that I was eager to portray on stage. As I became passionate about my role, I learned how to become Liesl. Memorizing over sixty lines and cues made me more studious, shaping the way I approached scholastics and memorized material in my classes. I was discovering how to stay motivated in multiple aspects of my life.

It was strange to play a person so different from myself. I am the youngest in my family, while Liesl was the oldest. Due to my role, I had to learn how to relate to children at our school in a way that I had not previously done. This brought me closer to the younger grades and gave me motivation to find new ways to inspire them not only from the stage but personally. I became a leader to these students and a more responsible person, providing tissues for spills and zipping up the backpack of a second grader when her script would fall out of her pocket.

I was most nervous when I was faced with the famous dance in the gazebo to the song, “16 Going on 17.” It seemed nearly impossible to maintain breath support while singing and leaping around my partner, but my director taught me about a growth mindset. I could learn to push myself further every day and improve my stamina. I signed up for barre classes and stretched at home for months before the performance in hopes that I could make the scene a success. Dancing helped make me physically stronger, and it challenged me to be brave in front of an entire audience. I had to know how to care for my body when I would try something new, strengthening me mentally. By the time of the performance, I was able to do a partnered arabesque, a Vietnamese waltz, and a swan lift— three things I never thought I would need to accomplish in my junior year of high school. Theater was more than an art form for me; it provided me with opportunities to inspire others and face my fears. Although I did not act as the lead in *The Sound of Music*, I learned much more from showing leadership to the younger students as Liesl than I ever did in my larger role as Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*.



Swan lift, opening night of The Sound of Music (March 15, 2024)