

Our excursion, “Staging *The Student Body*: Genesis of a New Play,” engaged students who love acting and writing. Students delved into the art of workshopping a new play, worked directly with the playwright, and experienced first-hand how a new play changes, morphs, and grows throughout a staged reading process.

In our first two days of the workshop, we met with theater professionals (writers and actors and producers) who have had their own plays workshopped through staged readings. They described in detail how feedback and “hearing the music of the play” helps to figure out what works and what doesn’t. Having actors at a playwright’s disposal like this, helps the writer see/hear if jokes are actually funny, if poignant moments are poignant, if the people sound like people, and if scenes are clear or if they drag. These professionals also passed on valuable acting tips to our students specifically geared for this unique type of production. In the second week, we had another theater guest speaker, Robert Hindsman, from the Alliance Theatre education department, share how plays are workshopped at the professional regional level (sometimes going on to Broadway!), and how the Alliance uses its education dept to supplement and deepen an audience’s experience with a play.

The play itself, which is *about* young people/*for* young people, deals with very serious issues: eating disorders, anxiety, body image, and the tough choices that teenagers (and adults) make every day. Because the script generously employs humor, the students got to see how a play can walk the fine line between comedy and tragedy. To help process the serious issues, we invited counselors from Galloway to run a unit on Choices, therapists from the Berman Center to talk about Control and how teens and adults handle control differently, and a teaching artist from EDIN (Eating disorder clinic) to lead us through a poetry exercise for an alternative creative expression. Using all of these resources and contextualization, students created a Study Guide: a resource for potential audiences or potential future actors of the piece that outlines the play and characters, offers resources for young people suffering from eating disorders, and invites audiences to participate in reflective activities, writing prompts and conversation starters.

In the midst of all of these amazing guests and activities, we STAGED THE PLAY!!! We set up in the High Museum of Art’s modern wing and each actor utilized their own phone to record their audio and we used one stationary camera and one handheld to film the video. Using music stands and yoga dots on the floor and character name cards, with some actors reading stage directions and some actors playing 4 different characters, we quickly blocked each act so that we could film it from a stationary camera. During a “staged reading” movements are limited anyway because the actors have script in hand, but movements were even more challenging because of COVID protocols. That said, actors still fully invested in the emotional arcs and plot lines of the play.

At the end of the two weeks, each student created individual journey reflections which encapsulated their learning and growth through the excursion. We are grateful to each actor for their patience, maturity, flexibility, and focus through these two weeks as we worked together to workshop a new play!