PERSONAL ESSAY

Thank you, Wanda June

A reflection on theater at Yale.

// BY REETI MALHOTRA

The first time I heard Wanda June's name, I was standing in the warm blur of a mid-September pregame in Davenport.

A former class-friend who was slowly turning into a friend-friend, Sofia, pulled me aside in her common room, brimming with excitement. She had stumbled upon a play in a secondhand bookstore: a satirical, forgotten work by Kurt Vonnegut that she hoped to put on during the spring.

"It's a retelling of 'The Odyssey,'" she explained. (We met through Directed Studies.) "I thought of you when I read Penelope's part. Please audition if it happens."

I tucked away her words and responded with a distinct maybe.

I had decided to take a break from theater. My first year at Yale had been crowded with it: I was cast in three shows although only two were staged. I loved the art form so much that I was certain that I would be a Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies major when I arrived at this university. But loving it that intensely had hollowed me out.

Each show was a marathon event. During tech week for my first play at Yale, "Top Girls," my days cleaved in two: six hours spread thin over classes and the library, racing through readings and essays, and another six hours spent under stage lights, learning cues and quick costume changes. At midnight, I stumbled to GHeav for dinner, contented but physically undone, humming with a visceral exhaustion I didn't even have the energy to articulate.

And yet, I loved it. I cherished the magic of strangers becoming castmates and dear friends. I savored the pang of fear cutting through my gut in the dark wings as I waited to make my entrance. I delighted in hearing a line land, through the sharp intake of nervous breath or loud burst of laughter from the audience.

When "Top Girls" closed in December and the spring semester arrived, green and impatient, I found myself back in auditions despite my vow of restraint and recuperation. I landed the first-year show, "Miss Molly: A Marital Deceit of Honest Intentions," a bright farce that flung me against the walls of my comfort zone.

The same process repeated itself. I met a new slew of people, learning their cadences and rhythms on stage. By opening night, we felt close — bound together by inside jokes, mutual anxiety and shared exhaustion.

And then our show ended.

We received our flowers, struck the set, and our group chat went quiet. I remained good friends with a couple of my castmates and waved to the rest when I saw them in passing on Cross Campus. This was a part of the rhythm of theater, after all: an inherently transient and consuming medium. You audition, rehearse tirelessly, let the production overtake your life during tech week, perform, dismantle and audition again. Some connections last and maintain their closeness — most fade into memory.

I told myself I could manage the cycle — that the enervation and mourning were the tax I paid in exchange for having the opportunity to actualize a passion and create art. Yet, come summertime, I felt that I was being dragged under by the medium rather than buoyed by it. I took a sabbatical: my sophomore fall, at the very least, would be one without shows.

So, when Sofia mentioned "Happy Birthday, Wanda June," I nodded and tucked her words away for a later date, if I were ever ready to reignite my affection for the stage.

The fateful moment arrived a month later. I stood in the room below her suite — the Davenport armor room — as my itch to perform overtook my reservations.

It was the strangest audition slide I had ever read. Penelope, the character I wanted to play, recalls a memory of her husband pulling a hook from the throat of a fish. Soon after, she declares that she does not wish to ever be scrogged. I didn't know what scrog meant. I barely understood the significance of the fish. By the time I finished, I was certain I had tanked it. Worse still, I began to doubt whether I could act at all. Perhaps slowing down had dulled whatever made me sharp and compelling to watch. Maybe the verve I once relied upon had been diluted into watery self-consciousness.

I was unsettled to find that all of this upset me. I had wanted distance from the theater. This audition was supposed to mean little to me. Yet, as I walked out of the armor room, I realized I wanted this — this play, this role, this experience — urgently and overwhelmingly.

When Sofia called me on casting day to offer me the role of Penelope, I was stunned speechless.

I couldn't help but smile. Relief overcame me, but nerves just as quickly supplanted that delight. I oscillated between yes and no — between caution and want — as the deadline to make my decision approached. In the end, I conceded.

I said yes.

A whirlwind four-month rehearsal process thereafter began in earnest.

We closed "Happy Birthday, Wanda June" last Saturday. As our cast of seven bowed to a roaring crowd, I burst into tears — laughing and sobbing all at once — as Tali, our producer, and Sofia, our director, raced down to the stage and pulled us all into a single, sprawling hug.

My heart felt impossibly full — not just because each show went well, though they had, nor because our audience was cheering with raucous applause, which they were. It was full because sometime between that first, terrifying audition and closing night, theater stopped pulling me under and instead became an anchor, a fixture of my Yale experience that I fell in love with again. And I owed that change to all of the people I stood beside on that stage.

It is rare to find yourself among a cast that you not only admire, but deeply care for and trust. Over the course of four months — through late-night rehearsals, winding conversations, and highly imperfect stumble-throughs — I formed friendships with every member of our production. Sofia had promised it would be so from the outset. She declared that we would be a family: a troupe, as she likes to say in French.

I, who was accustomed to theater as an ephemeral and efficient exercise, did not understand, let alone believe her, at first. Theater had been something to give my all to and then leave behind, to immerse and then detach from — the same approach applied to the friendships I formed within it, with few exceptions. But Sofia, subtly stubborn and well-meaning as ever, resisted that culture of theater-making I had internalized.

Rehearsals still stretched long. Tech week remained exacting. But I was no longer diminished by the process, a machine pushing herself to the brink of collapse. I clung to the ripples of laughter between taxing scenes. I lingered after rehearsals instead of rushing out, content to just sit and talk with every person involved in our show. I even excitedly scheduled an alarm to wake for strike at 8:15 a.m. the morning after we closed — the sign of true affection and commitment.

Standing shoulder to shoulder beneath the stage lights, my heart strained with gratitude for the people I had undergone this production experience with, each of whom had made me feel respected, trusted and appreciated — not only as a performer, but as a person. I loved our play, I loved our work, and I simply loved everyone involved in it.

"Happy Birthday, Wanda June" breathed new life into my love for theater. Pursuing my passion at Yale was no longer punishing. Devotion no longer required depletion. I did not lose myself in this production, either, subsumed by ardor and drive. Instead, I met a steadier version of myself within it: a person open to the patient, unfamiliar and intimate work of making something that mattered, and being changed by it, especially as it ends.

So, happy birthday, Wanda June. Thank you for everything.

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