

Who Will Sing the Fox's Aria?

Fourth-Graders in a Brooklyn Public Arts School Create an Opera Infused with the Sounds and Soul of their Brownsville Neighborhood

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AH, the opera. In putting on humorous airs while talking about “the opera,” one might tighten up the voice and feign a purposeful British accent, or howl out a remembered aria from *Madama Butterfly* with Italian ferocity. One might even yawn. But of the operas you may have heard, which do you really remember? I saw *Aida* with my father in New Orleans when I was a kid for my 11th birthday. I remember singers singing unstoppable notes that rose higher than the grandiose burgundy curtains that hung from the rafters and a clunky monitor for the English translation that roosted high above all the operatic conflict and drama. An opera is a grand and monstrous creation, and you either remember it forever, or you fall asleep. And with its many characters, its composition, rhythm, emotion, and musicality, all an opera really wants is to be remembered. The arias must go deep; the score should want to make you cry.

And so it was with our opera—*I'm Searching the Universe for a True Friend: Brownsville's "The Little Prince"*—an original, groundbreaking production built from scratch during the spring semester I spent with the fourth-graders at P.S. 156K, an elementary school in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, as an artist-in-residence with Teachers & Writers Collaborative. The Collaborative has a longstanding partnership with the school, which has an arts-centered curriculum and was headed, until his retirement last June, by award-winning principal Oswaldo Malave. The opera, adapted from the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and through-sung and through-composed with a brilliant musical score by the composer and T&W teaching artist Janice Lowe, was a memorably moving experience of the opera—rich with magic and classic lyricism, but also possessing an indelible funk infused with the slant, sounds, and soul of Brownsville. The kids I taught, with their wonderful fourth-grade profundity, easily grasped the deep philosophical messages about true love and friendship offered by Saint-Exupéry's small book, and through a labor of love that employed the written word, dance choreography, artwork, and vocal performance, made these insights come alive on stage. It was a task that created many goose bumps along its tuneful way.

The goose bumps started with Ms. Reyes' class where astute brown faces of every shade faced me, eyes gleaming with curiosity. The vast majority of students at P.S. 156K, also known as the Waverly School of the Arts, are African-American and Latino. The school, housed in a new light-filled building with a state-of-the-art auditorium and walls covered with art and tiled murals, rises up like a beacon from the modest neighborhood surrounding it. There they sat with their pigtails, hands crossed, telling me their ideas, scratching their corn rows while trying to think of a specific word, eager to create an opera—as if it were as easy as crossing a *t* or dotting an *i*. And I knew that although I had a slew of children's scripts and productions under my playwriting and directing belt, an opera was something I was going to have to wing and master by muddling blindly through.

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But blind muddling was easier than I thought because of Ms. Reyes' class. These kids possessed such skill as learners, writers, and philosophers that it was easy to forget that they were in fourth grade. Each time they would tackle one of Saint Exupéry's simple truths you'd have to stop and adjust to remember how young they were, and then the goose bumps would appear. You'd seen it! You'd seen an actual moment of learning and truth sharing. Then they would turn these truths into music, so they could howl and croon and belt them out into the

world. The kids dutifully analyzed Saint-Exupéry's description of a bunch of "empty roses," which, in the story, is one of the first things the little prince sees when he lands on the planet Earth. At first the little prince is brought to tears by the thought that the beloved flower he left behind on his planet is not at all unique, as he had always believed. But he soon comes to realize that his flower *is* unique because of the love he has for it. The kids saw the roses as a way to show the significance of recognizing what is unique about those we love. During workshop we decided that these roses, though "empty" could ironically sing a song that teaches others valuable lessons about love: "Love can heal your heart," one student squealed out. "Love is not a game," said another seriously. Sooner or later rhyme, rhythm, and melody made their way into the classroom and then, seemingly by magic, the melody and lyrics for "We Are All Roses" came together. The song simultaneously mocks, mourns, and instructs, and goes like this: "We are all roses/ we are all the same/ we are here to tell you/ love is not a game./ We are all roses/ we have the same parts/ we are here to tell you/ love can heal your heart." And the goose bumps commenced and kept coming.

Two kids from Ms. Reyes' class, Marisa Williams and Delaney Mcleish, showed a genius for accountability, keeping notes throughout the process. They became lead writers on the project as well as my stage managers. They flit, flopped, and followed me around the campus with notebooks, suggestions, and questions: "When are we going to see the whole opera from beginning to end?" asked Marisa while we were hanging up poster-sized musical sheets of the libretto and its score as it was coming together. "Do

you think we can enter like we're searching for love during "Object Of My Affection"? I mean, aren't we all searching for a true friend like the pilot is anyway?" asked Delaney, a discerning fourth-grade Descartes with two pigtails pointing left and right. "Who will sing 'The Fox's Aria'?"

As we began to create the libretto, it became clear that we would need to bring on board a composer. I had seen the luminous work of composer Janice Lowe and knew that her brilliance with kids and breadth as a composer could accommodate the project. I trusted that she would be able to give us the Brownsville we were looking for, and I also knew Lowe was the kind of musician who could maneuver through the process of composing, teaching, and performing an opera with children in a short amount of time, while making sure, by hook or by crook, that it would be exceptional. We discussed the length of the project and Lowe decided to keep the recitatives and arias "bite-sized" so that they were more manageable and effective for our fourth-grade storytellers.

And so she took over, not only by steering, with great sensitivity, the composition of the melody and music for the opera, but also in regularly delivering the same goose bumps as the children did. She treated the fourth-grade soloists like Placido Domingo and Leontyne Price. In our shared vision, fourth-graders Mark Tong, Maassai Collier, and Cory McKen were no less important than Luciano Pavarotti and Odessa. Jazmyn Barrett was as pretty as Dorothy Dandridge and vocally she had the gumption of any professional. Lowe and I had the same expectations for the kids that we would have of the performers in the greatest opera house. The kids read their libretto from actual sheet music, warmed up their voices, hummed into each other's ears, and worked with the conductor.

But these kids were poised, really poised and prepared for this process because of the strenuous, strengthening, active, art-infused atmosphere that was already being supported by the teachers and administrators at P.S. 156K. Ms. Reyes, an avid organizer and creative teacher, was quick to become a costume and prop designer in a pinch. The opportunities and challenges of collaborating as educators on the opera were substantial. An opera is collaborative by nature, a creative junction where all the artistic strands meet. And Ms. Lowe wasn't playing! She composed an opera with the children of Brownsville that captured musically its grit, grandeur, soul, and diversity. The score has touches of R & B, salsa, dancehall, jazz, hip-hop, and funk. Did I mention reggae and reggaeton? Her score evoked the intense emotions necessary to tell the starry story of the philosophical and magical little prince who searches the universe for a true friend while remaining true to the good grit of our Brownsville interpretation. Lowe says the music was inspired by the children's exuberance and sense of whimsy. Her first class with them included a gathering of their musical ideas so that they could be used in the composition. The music they created together had a touch of melancholy but also jived, grooved, and reflected the musical roots of all the children engaged in the project.



Fourth-graders at P.S. 156K perform their opera.
Photo by Diane Sullivan.

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I remember calling Lowe fretting and curious about the next piece of music.

Over the cell phone, with the bustle and clamor of New York City behind her, she hummed for me the melody of the Wise Fox's aria, and even through the noise and static, the emotion in the music gave me goose bumps again. When she had fully composed the music and was conducting Ms. Reye's class in a rehearsal of "Will You Tame Me?" these fourth-graders singing Lowe's lush musical composition made me cry like a baby. Ms. Lowe and I had already worked hard with Ms. Morales' class to create the opera's opening song "I'm Searching The Universe For A True Friend." The song was built around Shaunette Singh's lyrics—"I opened a door to a star, a pretty, pretty, pretty little star to find a friend"—with a catchy melody. The kids and I were dazzled by this process—how one day in class we could think up words and lyrics, and the next day Ms. Lowe would come back to us having bent and arranged them into a beautiful song that we could read and sing aloud from sheet music.

When I heard the kids at the rehearsals, I knew that we were in the clear. Our grueling artistic process had paid off in a work of intense and startling emotional weight. Ours was a doozy of an opera and definitely one that would be remembered. Already you could hear the songs we were rehearsing for the opera being sung down the school hallways and hummed on the subways. Ms. Hall's class perfected their tableaux, and the kids completed their character study of the little prince by watching the sunset as many times as they could. Mark Tong, cast as the little prince, had learned and rehearsed every aria, recitative, and moment in the opera, while maintaining the character of a princely philosophical star traveler who wants to understand love. Ms. Sesto's fourth-grade class had hung stars, lights, and poems dedicated to our true friends, and Mr. Kirwan's fourth-graders had just finished painting "Crown Fried Chicken" on a cardboard set piece of a Brownsville building with art teachers Ms. Ames and Ms. Williams. Finally, the librettists were ready to assume their roles as singing stars, planetary people from Cool Cazoo, a magical prince, a vain and hilarious rose, a searching and crashed pilot, the buildings of Brownsville, and even sunsets. The staff and students of the Waverly School of the Arts were about to witness how all the arts in their varied arts curriculum converged masterfully in this one art form—the opera. Rhonda Phillips, P.S. 156K's opera strand coordinator was going to be granted her wish of seeing the Little Prince land in Brownsville in a show worthy of being performed in the school's extraordinary auditorium with its grand piano. Ah, the opera.

And so it went—the show was mounted and the kids handled the monster with ease. They worked the opera like they were manning an extra large puppet—voices sang, arms and legs danced, and the soul of the work shone through. They made their worldly audiences applaud and even made their principal Mr. Malave cry. The DVD of the performance reveals the small kinks which come with any kids' production, but couldn't possibly capture the magic we made. This complex art form was made readily accessible to a bunch of nine-year-olds in Brownsville. They created a real opera, a word derived from Italian and meaning "works" or "labor." And what did they learn? That being part of a great "work" of art is a dutiful, strengthening, inspiring experience that requires hard work. And like any great sunset, artwork, friendship, or moment—this opera was made to be remembered.

Will You Tame Me?¹

Your heart sees love and emotion
One moment is like the ocean
Time passes in waves of motion.

The time you spend with a friend
Is time that will never end
Memories you leave behind
Are movies in your mind.

Will you be my friend?
Will you tame me?
Create ties? Watch the sunrise?

Truth will make you wise—
Can you see this with your eyes?

¹Lyrics written by Ms. Hall's fourth grade class and sung by Maassai Collier, cast as the opera's Wise Fox. Music by Janice Lowe, adapted by Melanie Maria Goodreaux.



THE little prince went away, to look again at the roses.

“You are not at all like my rose,” he said. “As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. You are like my fox when I first knew him. He was only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But I have made him my friend, and now he is unique in all the world.”

And the roses were very much embarrassed.

“You are beautiful, but you are empty,” he went on. “One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passerby would think that my rose looked just like you—the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars (except the two or three that we saved to become butterflies); because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose.”

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, in *The Little Prince*

