

Bubble Trouble

By Wendy Wan-Long Shang



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Drama

Is it possible to fail drama, even when you're trying your hardest not to? I could definitely be the first person at Roosevelt Middle School to fail because I can't improvise. I like planning, knowing what to expect. But in drama, you're supposed to improvise and live in the moment. I don't see the point. I thought the whole point was that in drama you put on a play, which means following a script. Shakespeare didn't get famous because he was good at improvising.

Mrs. Alamantia was making us play a game where she

handed us an object, and we had to see how many things we could make up about it. Pretend, like we're little kids. My partner, Isabel Zhang, and I had been given an orange pool noodle.

Isabel pretended to write with it, struggling with how large it was. "Mom did say I was never gonna lose this pencil." She sighed. The whole class burst out laughing. Isabel is one of those people who can do anything—get good grades, look perfect, be funny. Isabel handed me the noodle and gestured for me to go.

I looked at the pool noodle and tried to be creative, although having to be creative under pressure is pretty terrible. If I'd had time to plan, I would have made a list of things it could be. The silence in the classroom seemed to stretch out for hours. "Just do something!" hissed Isabel. I did the first thing that came to me. I pretended to take a big bite. "So this is the big spaghetti, huh?"

I got a couple of claps, mostly from the really nice people in the class who will clap for anything. It wasn't imaginative,

though. *It's literally called a noodle*, Chloe, announced the little voice in my head. I handed the noodle back to Isabel and hoped that the exercise would be over soon.

Isabel put the noodle straight up on her head. "I said I need a haircut! Just the one hair!" she shouted, pretending to be an irritated customer. The whole class, including Mrs. Alamantia, laughed even louder than before. Isabel pretended to look around at the class, the noodle quivering upright with indignation. "What's so funny about wanting a haircut?"

Isabel gave the noodle back to me, her face flushed with happiness. Mrs. Alamantia said that improvisation is about being in the moment, about responding, rather than trying to create a planned moment. My problem was that I liked planning. Organizing and neatly ordering activities and things was how I relaxed.

I took a deep breath and tried to let my mind go blank. *Just respond*. The whole class seemed to lean forward and watch. I held the noodle up to my nose.

“I’m an elephant,” I said, swaying the noodle back and forth. “Honk, honk, honk.”

“Elephants don’t go honk, honk, honk,” said someone in the class. I was looking at the ground, so I couldn’t see who was talking.

“You can’t say that to Chloe,” someone whispered. “Be nice.”

Ugh—I hated being *that* kid, the one other kids felt sorry for. I looked for a way to recover. “I’m a rare honking elephant,” I said. “*Honkus elephantus.*”

“No criticism in the improvisation space,” said Mrs. Alamantia. “We are trying to let one another flourish.” Then she said that we were done, making me a very relieved elephant.



Improvisation exercises aside, I did like drama, mostly because of Mrs. Alamantia. She acted like she would rather be with us than do anything else in the world. Sometimes, she clapped her hands together and said, “Let me tell

you something!” and then dropped some tidbit like trivia about a famous actor or something that happened during a performance.

Today, Mrs. Alamantia clapped her hands and said, “Class! This is so exciting! You have an opportunity to go on a field trip to see not one but two Broadway musicals! The drama department and the music department have worked together to organize this trip so you can see the many amazing professionals who make up the Broadway scene. We’ll see one matinee and then one evening show.”

All my terrible feelings about improv melted away. I love musicals. It started with the movies, like *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King*. Then I saw a high school production of *Annie*, which is about an orphan during the Depression, with its showstopper number “Tomorrow.” Then Mom took me to see *Come from Away* for my birthday a few years ago. Lately I’ve been watching the oldie movie musicals: *West Side Story*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Oliver!* I love the way the songs make you feel, like you share all the emotions with the characters.

Based on the noises around me, everyone else was pretty excited, too. Isabel and her group of friends put their heads together, and I could hear snippets of their conversation. It sounded like they were already planning what to wear.

“I’m not going,” said a voice. “Those Broadway shows are so fake.” I turned to see who was talking. It was a boy in a blue hoodie. I didn’t know the boys in the class as well as the girls, but I thought his name was Harry.

“You don’t have to go, Henry,” said Mrs. Alamantia calmly. Ah, right. Henry. I was pretty close. Henry, in spite of his outrageous comment, smiled and shrugged. “In fact,” said Mrs. A, “this is probably a good time to mention that not everyone will be going. There are a limited number of spaces, and there is, of course, the expense of the tickets, the bus, and any extras.”

“How much is the trip?” someone asked.

“It’s actually a really good deal for getting to see two Broadway shows,” said Mrs. Alamantia. “It’s three hundred and seventy-five dollars for two shows, meals, and

transportation. We're going up and back in one day, to save on the expense of a hotel."

The rest of the class started chatting again. For a lot of kids, this was nothing. I lived in a pretty wealthy area outside of Washington, DC. Most parents would send in the money and think nothing of it.

Henry hooted. "I can think of *so many* things I'd rather do with that money! Musicals are so phony! Like, who gets up and just starts dancing with a group of people?"

I tended to ignore the boys in my class. They're kind of annoying, and giving them any kind of attention just made them misbehave more. But that kind of talk about musicals was not something I was going to stand for.

"You're right," I said. "So fake, unlike, I don't know—video games? Berets for cats? Flamin' Hot Cheetos?"

"Oh, come on," said Henry. "You're not going to go after the Cheetos!" He pretended to grab his hair in shock. Henry had thick black hair that he wore short on the sides and longer on top.

“Why not? They’re fake.”

“They’re good fake,” said Henry.

“If your point is that something is bad because it’s fake, then all things that are fake should be bad,” I said. *Yeah, take that, Henry Broadway-Hater!* agreed the little voice in my head.

Henry put his hands up. “Whoa, I didn’t realize this was a debate class, Chloe!”

I shouldn’t have been surprised that he knew my name—most kids had heard of me at school, for all the wrong reasons. Still, it was weird to hear him say my name out loud.

“Stick to things you know about,” I said. “Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, not musicals.”

Henry looked at me and nodded. Then he drew his fingers across his lips, zippering them shut, like we were in cahoots, which we definitely were *not*.