

Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen

I am a very theatrical person by nature. My mother sometimes calls it “being overdramatic.” My sister usually calls it “Lilith oh my god can you shut up for five minutes *please*.” But I like to call it “whimsical,” because euphemisms make everything sound nicer, as a rule. It was when I was a freshman in high school, a baby-faced fourteen year old desperate to make friends and find her niche, that I discovered theatre, the perfect creative outlet, and I absolutely fell in love with it (even if I did tend to get cast as the adorable younger sister types, because, let’s face it, I look about twelve.) We were a team, a family, and every moment of the rehearsal process and the performances was so much fun that I decided to participate in every single show.

During musicals, however, things changed; our close-knit little group was disrupted by the invasion of the choir kids, and every girl who had a semi-decent voice came out of the woodwork to sing her heart out to the panel of casting directors, desperate for the lead role, as everyone was. My senior year, our musical was “Catch Me If You Can,” a fast-paced, witty comedy about real-life protagonist Frank Abagnale Jr. and his teenage misadventures as a check-forging man-on-the-run. Immediately upon learning the name of the show, as a lot of theatre nerds will probably relate to, I went on Wikipedia and began the intense, months-long process of learning every single musical number note by note and researching all of its characters, because, of course, I wanted to play the lead, Brenda Strong, an intelligent, shy, nurse-in-training who, rather predictably but no less romantically, falls in love with Frank. I loved her from the moment I stalked her character’s IMDB page, and I knew that I could play her, knew, as a senior who had done so much for the club and who had proved to my director that I was dedicated and passionate about our program, that I had a really good shot of being cast as her. I was desperate

to show the audience a complex, beautiful Brenda Strong that they'd never seen and would never see again.

I wanted that part more than anything else I'd ever wanted before, loved Brenda, more, even, than I loved chocolate, felt confidence surge through me when I belted my audition song in the shower - and then I ran into a problem. Let's call her Abigail. She was a senior, too; a choir student favored by our teacher (and nearly everybody else), thin and blonde and of average height which was possibly *the* most annoying thing about her. She was the perfect leading lady, at least in appearance, and I quite literally paled in comparison. When I found out that she was auditioning, a panic gripped me, slithering into my stomach and curling up there, whispering doubt. I started to get afraid that she was going to get Brenda over me, which was terrible; Brenda had meant something to me, something important, but when I was facing competition, something in me took over that made her into a prize, an accomplishment. Suddenly, my need to play her became a *need* to play her, an unhealthy, materialistic obsession with getting the lead role *over* Abigail instead of getting it *for* myself. I pushed myself even harder, practiced more, even dressed to look like Brenda on the day that I auditioned, but in the end, none of that mattered, because Abigail got the part. And I still remember the devastation I felt when I saw my name on the cast list, not next to the words "Brenda Strong," but next to "Understudy." Understudy. Second best. Better luck next time, when there was no next time.

It would be an understatement to say that I freaked out; I couldn't believe that I'd put in four years of hard work just so some pretty, popular girl from choir could waltz in and steal the part I'd been waiting for right out from under me, and I couldn't believe that my director had let her, had given her all the beautiful complexity that was Brenda Strong and basically said "do whatever you want with this." It felt like the entire world was crashing down, but in reality, I was

having an allergic reaction to not getting what I wanted, and mostly I was just jealous that this girl I didn't like had gotten something that I felt I deserved, something that I had worked extremely hard for. I started talking about her to anyone who would listen, ranting and raving about what a nasty human being she was and how she didn't even know how to act, how she was going to ruin Brenda's character completely the moment she opened her mouth to say the lines, how she had somehow tricked the directors into giving her the part and also, why should she get everything she ever wanted? And of course, people got tired of hearing it. But I never got tired of saying it, saying the same mean things about her over and over again to anyone I could back into a corner, convincing myself that she deserved to feel the way that I was feeling, that she needed to understand how badly I had wanted this and how much it meant to me and that the only way that could happen was if everyone knew what an awful person she was, which was selfish and really, really stupid of me. Rationally, she was not to blame for anything; Abigail hadn't bribed the directors, and there was no way to cheat at auditioning, but I didn't want to accept any of that, because to accept it, I thought at the time, would be to admit that she was a better actress than me, more talented, and I didn't want that to be true.

Then, she got mono about a week into rehearsal.

I was *ecstatic*, even though she was seriously sick, even though every day I walked into choir and saw an empty spot where she usually stood. And when she didn't come to rehearsal for the second day in a row and my director pulled me aside to explain that if she wasn't able to come back soon enough, I would get to take over and play Brenda in the shows, any conviction I might've felt jumped out the window. I was absolutely over the moon, and *then* I'd tell anyone who would listen about how excited I was, how I "didn't wish any ill on her" but really wanted to play the role, which was both a paradox and a total lie, because at night I'd lay in my bed and

look up at the ceiling and wish beyond all hope that Abigail would stay sick for *just long enough* that I would get her role passed on to me.

I convinced myself that that wasn't a bad thing for me to hope for, that I wasn't wishing for her to get hit by a bus or anything, that karma was a bitch and she was getting what she rightfully deserved for taking what didn't belong to her - all the while forgetting what theatre was really supposed to be about, forgetting my love for the drama club and my responsibility as a senior to be a good role model for the younger members. I think I knew somewhere deep down that it wasn't right for those thoughts to be floating around in my head, but when I got to fill in for her, I didn't care. And I hate that I didn't care, because the good angel on my shoulder (who I sort of imagine looks like Emma Watson) was saying a lot of "Lilith, that isn't nice" and "Lilith oh my god I know these are your thoughts and you're not saying these things out loud but you might want to calm down a little because *wishing for a girl to stay sick with mono is kind of a horrible thing to wish for.*" And the little devil on my other shoulder, who was, of course, much louder, was just shaking his head, one eyebrow raised, daring me.

As is the custom in these types of situations, Abigail came back to rehearsals just before I was about to land the role, increasing the amount of trash I was talking. I distinctly remember several friends trying to help me realize what I was doing, trying to convince me that I was still special and talented and that not getting that one role didn't make me any less of an actress or friend or person. And now I wish I would've been nicer to them, more appreciative of the fact that they were trying to make me feel better at a time when I was stubbornly refusing to let myself be happy, or to be thankful for the role that I *did* get, or even just to be grateful to be a part of something so much bigger than myself. And I wish I hadn't tried to bring Annika down with me; I was feeling low and wanted someone else to take the fall for it, but it wasn't fair to

either of us for me to act like she had done something wrong by being cast as Brenda. Being in a show had always been something so much more miraculous than my stereotypical teen angst, something that I enjoyed doing, but I let my anger morph it into a miserable experience.

After months of belting out solos and dancing till our feet were sore, opening night finally came. We waited with bated breath backstage, and the audience chattered excitedly until the lights flickered off and on, off and on, off. A hushed silence blanketed the auditorium, the band shifting with their instruments behind the thick blue curtain. Someone coughed. It was so dark we couldn't see each other, but I have a feeling that all of us were smiling. My friend nervously fidgeted next to me and squeezed my hand. And then a crew member pulled the curtain cord, the soft *swoosh*-ing disrupting the quiet, promising something strange and exciting. My stomach flipped over and the lights went up, warm and yellow, painting the first scene. I linked arms with the boy playing the pilot to my flight attendant and sashayed onto the stage, feeling hundreds of eyes on me. The opening lines were said. The gunshot sound effect went off right on cue, and I screamed like I had practiced. We ran off stage with thirty seconds to change into our outfits for the opening number, laughing breathlessly as we threw skirts around the room and tugged on sashes. The band started playing, fast and jazzy, and our heels clicked quickly as we rushed to find our places in the pitch-blackness of the wings, hearts thumping in synchronized nervousness - the first ever time we would perform the opening number for an audience.

My friend Matt blasted a note on his saxophone, and we ran into the light to cheers and clapping, wearing stage smiles, impossibly wide and glittering. Adrenaline surged through all of us; hands linked, legs kicked, and we became one with the music and each other, effortlessly reenacting months of rehearsal with grace and poise we had never seemed to manage before. The

end of the song neared and we rushed down the stairs, surrounding the boy playing Frank and yelling out the final note with the kind of life and intensity than only drama kids can truly create.

There was a moment, a tiny blip of time where nobody moved, all of us holding our final poses, waiting for the uproar. And it came - it came, and we didn't know what we'd been waiting for until we heard it, parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends shrieking and screaming different names, overlapping in the most beautifully human way. People were laughing, and people were crying, and the ensemble girls were sucking in lungfuls of air with rosy cheeks and the biggest grins I'd ever seen on anyone. Abigail didn't matter. Playing Brenda didn't matter. Nothing mattered except for the hot lights on my skin and the way my pink scarf was slightly crooked and the sound of hundreds of voices yelling our names.

I wouldn't have missed that for anything; not for a lead role, not for a thousand.