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INTERVIEW WITH TEACHING ARTIST JASON JACOBS

Posted on: **January 15th, 2016** by Abby Case



Jason facilitating a talkback after a Student Matinee of UGLY LIES THE BONE

Roundabout Master Teaching Artist (TA) Jason Jacobs has served students and patrons through Education at Roundabout for the past eight years. During the school day, Jason can be found in classrooms leading residencies and workshops. In the afternoon, Jason mentors and facilitates workshops for students in Roundabout's after-school theatre company, [Student Production Workshop \(SPW\)](#). In the evening, you may find Jason at one of Roundabout's theatres engaging audiences in a pre-show discussion. Jason also is a contributing writer for Roundabout's [UPSTAGE Guides](#), where he writes articles as well as teacher resources and activities.

In addition to his direct work with students and patrons, Jason serves in leadership positions. As a member of the Teaching Artist Advisory Group, Jason works with other teaching artists to better Roundabout's TA training. He also serves as Partnership Coordinator for Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis High School where he works with school leadership and educators to ensure that the school's partnership with Roundabout best serves their goals.

Education Coordinator Abby Case spoke with Jason about his career and work at Roundabout.

Abby Case: Tell me a bit about yourself and your artistry.

Jason Jacobs: I think I came out of the womb directing theatre. Certainly, as soon as I could walk and talk, I was bossing people around, telling them where to move and how to act. A few years later I saved my allowance and bought a used typewriter, and I started writing plays. My first production was my adaptation of *Snow White* performed by my third grade class. I kept thinking I would

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outgrow it and get "a real job." Fortunately I never outgrew it. I love directing and writing, so I consider myself a theatre-maker. I also am a nerd who loves theatre history and dissecting how dramatic structure works, so I have this dramaturgy sideline going as well.

AC: How did you come to be a teaching artist? Could you share your first arts education experience?

JJ: Through some friends in Long Island I was invited to create a project at Bay Shore High School, as part of the school's [Ethnic Pen Conference](#). I worked with a diverse, small group of students to adapt essays they had written in an English class. We created an ensemble-piece that explored these students' relationships to their own cultural backgrounds. All was good until one scary day when an administrator became alarmed about students telling their own stories on stage, and our project was almost shut down! It was my first introduction (as an adult) to the power dynamics of a school. But freedom of expression prevailed, and the students' show was a hit of the festival!

AC: What is your favorite part about working as a teaching artist?

JJ: I love bringing the theatrical activities and techniques that I use to create and direct theatre, and applying these tools to engage students. I feel like I expand my impact as an artist by working with students and teachers, and hopefully by bringing my own passion to create and learn into their world. When we talk about "turning classrooms into theaters and theaters into classrooms," I get very excited about all the possible ways we can do that. There's also a creative feedback-loop, because I find the experiences I have in the schools inspire the stories I am telling in my own work.

AC: What is the most challenging part about working as a teaching artist?

JJ: The NYC school environment is so different from my high school experience, which was at a public school in a much smaller district. The work has exposed me to the big issues our city (and nation) are struggling with regarding public education. I've seen the negative impact of the politics and power struggles on the teachers and administrators we work with. I've seen many great teachers leave the profession or move out of the city. Because of this, staying positive and creative in an indifferent or sometimes obstructive environment can be challenging. But, what makes it possible is the support I always feel from our amazing Education Staff and the peer-support from the other inspiring TAs on our roster.

AC: Could you share a memorable lesson or moment from your time as a teaching artist at Roundabout?

JJ: Some of my best moments have been collaborating with two inspiring social studies teachers (Alison Ritz and Debbie White) at Bronx Theatre High School. A few years ago, we were doing a curriculum connections residency with 12th grade government students, aligned with Roundabout's production of [The Winslow Boy](#). We had students reading and analyzing the official NYC Department of Education Rights and Responsibilities document to understand the rights students had. I remember one student being so engaged with the information and saying she wanted to take it home and read the whole thing. That kind of empowerment and engagement makes the whole experience so worthwhile!

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