LIVE ART: A Positive Change in this World

Phillip Vollmer
Virginia Commonwealth University

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LIVE ART: A Positive Change in this World

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Phillip Scott Vollmer  
BFA Theatre Performance  
Virginia Commonwealth University 2009

Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University  
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Abstract

LIVE ART: THERE AND BACK AGAIN/ A TEACHING ARTISTS JOURNEY

By Phillip Scott Vollmer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013.

Major Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre

LIVE ART is a program for students with special needs and students who are typically developed. They work collaboratively, with integrated forms of performance and visual art, culminating in a live performance. LIVE ART sought to use innovative methods of pedagogy, peer support and artistic influence to create a new curriculum where all students, regardless of ability, could grow. Along with this account, this thesis illustrates the experience of one teaching artist and his growth and journey through the program. His personal struggles with previous educational systems are mirrored in the struggles of the students, with their successes leading to his own. The thesis culminates in the revelation of teaching as a necessary mode for his own growth.
LIVE ART:

A Positive Change in this World
Foreword:

Journey from the Dark Side

Where I started

Learning is my greatest joy in this life. However, my greatest joy is offset by my most difficult challenge. I have been diagnosed with a strong case of ADD and mild dyslexia. I have struggled with reading, writing, math and many subjects, all of my life. Retaining information once it has been processed is not a problem. I was the child in class who would ace the tests, but almost fail the class because I struggled with being able to focus on my homework in an unstructured environment (home versus school). This has always been my challenge, my greatest burden. Ultimately, it was my determination to keep learning that kept me motivated despite the challenges. This is also the reason I am still in academia today.

I never thought that I would become a teacher; I hated them, for the most part. I bet, however, that all of us have had a teacher that surprised and inspired us. Mine was Mrs. Skinner. She was the teacher who helped those of us who were behind in their reading level in my middle school. She was incredible. She was the first teacher I ever had that listened to me. Mrs. Skinner saw my love for learning and how smart I really was, before I could see it in myself. I thank her from the bottom of my heart. Through her guidance I found a renewed sense of worth in a place that I felt had already deemed me unworthy.
Then I kept finding teachers who inspired me. I made sure I found them, jumping from mentor to mentor, until I made it to graduate school. Then the game changed. In my younger years of education, school was different. Teachers seemed to pull you along. They forged the path ahead while students simply followed and memorized. In graduate school however, there is an expectation of self-leadership and motivation. This paradigm shift was unexpected for me, and I struggled. When I first saw myself falling behind and slipping, I said nothing. Other obligations, unrelated to school, seemed more important and my schoolwork suffered. I was embarrassed. Then, I saw myself slipping even further, so I decided to try and drop hints, a joke here and there. Someone would ask, “How are you?” I would say “Great. If you’re not counting the Graduate School part.” I would half-heartedly laugh, then they would do the exact same thing and we would move on to another topic. It was only in the twilight hours of my darkest day when I realized that I needed help, so I decided to call upon those mentors that I had ‘collected.’ By that point, however, it was too late and there was nothing they could do from the backseat.

I became angry when the reality of the situation finally hit me. It was at that point that I was asked, very nicely, to step away from school for a little while. I was more than upset. This is what I thought I was supposed to do, my purpose. I believed that I could have been a great teacher. However, in the face of all of this, I couldn’t believe those voices in my head anymore. I left school, with no intention of returning. I had every intention of starting a new life, with my new fiancée. It was only two months later that my bride-to-be came to the conclusion that she did not want to be anything to me
anymore. This was a very low point in my life. However, even in the darkest of times, there is light. My brother was that for me. He took me in without hesitation. Those were days that I will always remember. Late night sessions of writing funny scripts, watching bad movies, discussing life, and laughing so hard even while I was hurting so much. He got me back on my feet and held my chin up. He was the one who I really believed when he said, “Everything is going to be okay.”

I was ready to leave Richmond as soon as possible. Unfortunately, there was a major hitch in that plan. I was in a show called “The Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare, and we were in the middle of a run at a new local theatre that had just opened. It was housed inside one of the oldest premier acting schools for children in Richmond. SPARC is its name; it stands for School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community. I had no idea how much this place was going to change my life. Over the course of our run at SPARC, I met a girl. I had grown in strength and confidence while I had been alone, and I was ready for someone to take my hand and walk the last few steps of my rediscovery with me. She was that amazing person who gladly did. It was her influence on my life that led me to “LIVE ART”, the source material for this thesis. “LIVE ART” is what renewed my love for teaching. So it was this girl that helped me see why I was in graduate school in the first place. She is the reason I didn’t run away.

I have been there, and now I am back again. My passion for learning and teaching is back in the forefront of my life. Colleen Wilcox said, “Teaching is the greatest act of
optimism." I am an optimist and I believe in a brighter future for this world and I believe my small contribution to this concept is teaching theatre. I want to teach theatre for the rest of my life, and for this I credit LIVE ART. By experiencing this program alongside the amazing student body of LIVE ART, I witnessed the transformative power of performance.
One of the major hurdles in this project is the question that inevitably gets asked, “What is LIVE ART?” Most people have no idea how to respond. “It’s awesome!” is the first thing some shout when asked. Then their rational mind takes over. They take a moment and attempt a short, concise response that the person is looking for. “It’s a program for students with special needs and students who are typically developed. They work collaboratively, with integrated forms of performance and visual art, culminating in a live performance.” Then, the person who asked usually has a confused look on their face. The frustrating part of being involved in something so new and innovative is that there is simply no precedent to reference. One can’t say it’s a concert, because students are dancing and singing throughout the whole show. One can’t call it a musical, because there is no storyline being told. What LIVE ART is, is the sweat and tears of the students that are creating works that they never would have been able to create otherwise. The audience also gets to witness all the children’s work set to the backdrop of live music. These musicians, along with the staff, students, and parents, give their time and energy to something that changes their lives as much as it changes the lives of the audience. That is my answer. LIVE ART is “life changing.” However, one can’t just say that to someone casually in conversation.
The purpose of this thesis is to share the conception of LIVE ART, discuss the program overall, describe specific examples of transformative impact on those involved and how this experience has shaped my own theories and practices as an arts educator. LIVE ART is nothing short of a life affirming and life-changing program and may have changed the lives of a vast majority of people involved including myself, forever. I dream of being a force for good and positive change in this world, and being a part of this program firmly places me at the helm of a vehicle for that change I wish to see.

In the following pages, I will outline how Erin Thomas-Foley, a graduate of the Virginia Commonwealth University MFA program in theatre pedagogy, conceptualized LIVE ART. Next, I will write about the preparation stages, discussing all the work it took to get the classes started. Finally, I will conclude with the execution of the classes, the show, and the challenges that the staff faced before the curtain rose on June 3rd.
Disclaimer: I will only speak from my experience. The ultimate authority on this subject is Erin Thomas-Foley. That being said, I wish to convey at this point that I was very close to the project and have been given full permission to write about what I observed in complete detail.
Conception

What existed before

It is hard to contextualize LIVE ART because there is simply no precedent to reference. There are some programs across the country that attempt to integrate students with special needs and those that are typically developing. This is often referred to as an “inclusion” classroom model.

*The inclusion classroom helps students with an IEP to be educated alongside non-disabled peers. This helps with socialization and ensuring higher standards. Students in the classroom have differentiated instruction. This means that students will learn at their level. Some students will have more academic responsibilities than others depending on unique needs. An inclusion classroom is not only good for students in Special Education. When implemented correctly it is positive for everyone.* (King)

For more information about inclusive schools and its benefits I recommend going to the website inclusiveschools.org. There they have a list of schools that are using this model and have educational materials so that you may better understand this concept.

LIVE ART also uses the idea of cross-disciplinary arts education along with the inclusive classroom. The idea for cross-disciplinary training, however, is not brand new, either; many colleges and schools around the country are seeing the benefit of exposing their students to multiple forms of art and art education. Programs can be found in Ohio, Kentucky, Utah and even VCU. With that being said, almost none of them include the performing arts and absolutely none of them include or even recognize the potential for special needs education. This is where LIVE ART has found its niche and fulfills a need that no other program can.
Key Players

SPARC, the School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community, is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that has been in service to the community for over thirty years. SPARC provides theatrical training for students ranging from three to eighteen years old. A woman named Jeri Cutler-Voltz, who saw a need for performance education in Richmond, founded the organization in 1981. SPARC’s motto: “Setting the stage for life,” brings home its core belief that theatre training is beneficial, even if a student doesn’t end up pursuing theatre professionally. SPARC teaches poise, confidence, public speaking and teamwork, all through the art of theatre.

The faculty at SPARC is led by the Executive Director, Ryan Ripperton, who oversees the entire organization. Very little happens inside the organization without his direct approval. Directly beneath him in rank is the Director of Education, Erin Thomas-Foley, the artist who created LIVE ART. Debra Clinton, also on staff, is the Director of Production and her responsibilities include the selection and oversight of production elements for SPARC shows. SPARC’S amazing staff consists of 3 lead administrative staff and 109 outstanding adjunct faculty and teaching artists.

The program manager for the LIVE ART program is Courtney Edwards. Serving as the assistant to the Director of the program, she helped with every aspect of the program from beginning to end. The role of the program manager is to oversee all aspects of the educational program and production with regular interaction with students, staff, parents, and community partners. Danaë Carter was the lead choreographer for the
project. A retired ballerina, Danaë is a beautiful dancer, but her talents extend beyond the stage into the classroom as a teacher of movement. These are just a few of the instrumental figures in the LIVE ART story.

Figure 2: Property of SPARC
Leadership

Just after the second full staff meeting, Erin and Courtney were sitting in Erin’s office debriefing, writing out what was discussed. They were jotting on a big bulletin board what they had written down during the meeting as primary action points that needed further consideration. About halfway through the list Erin turned and said something that would sum up their ambition for the rest of the project: “If we want something done, we are the ones that have to do it.” She wanted this to happen as much as everyone else and the people in that meeting had fantastic ideas, but they kept using the word “we.” “We need to get rolling on the costumes, we think the students are getting worried about what they are going to wear for the show.” Erin would talk about how, through no fault of their own, the staff would say these things without considering that ultimately it was on Erin and Courtney to make these ideas happen. No one else would take responsibility. Erin and Courtney were there to facilitate and implement the ideas that would ultimately get incorporated, but I would always note which ideas would be delegated to others. It was this delicate balance that showed me how to be a leader.

Erin was never bitter about her responsibilities; it was simply a reality. She would gladly give credit where credit was due when it came time. She would acknowledge that, yes, people have given her credit for LIVE ART, and yes, she was the one who put it all together, but she would refute this point by saying that she also did nothing. Erin would always say how it was truly about the students. “I had nothing to do with why this program was successful; I just got all the right people in the same room, at the right time.”
Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Show them that it is possible to take on life’s daily struggles and not complain, to lead by example. Erin took on these responsibilities with grace. She would gladly give audience to any concerns for the good of the students and the program, and handle each one personally. She maintained her interest in a concern brought to her attention until it was resolved. I have never heard her complain about responsibilities she has taken upon herself. Her strength is something I have observed and been inspired by, and I have heard others speak of it as well. She works very hard, all the time, and harbors no ill will or negative feelings about it.

These are characteristics that inspire me, which I attempt to emulate as much as I can. I think hers is an amazing type of pedagogy, to feel that connection to your students. It is that connection that pushes her to always do more. But never letting them see you sweat the small stuff is important too. Strength like Erin’s originates from exceptional leadership skills. Erin is a great leader because she knows the responsibilities that are hers to bear and the tasks that need to be delegated to her supporting staff. She trusts people. When Erin first trusts someone, they do everything in their power to keep it, even if it means stepping far outside of their comfort zone. To command that respect and devotion from just one or two meetings requires more than just a gifted teacher, it takes a skilled leader, one who is able to see in others the capacity for greatness.
Planning

Before classes got started there was an immense amount of preparation work. The whole staff met together and then each team of teachers met to discuss what each class was going to entail. Here is a journal entry from the first of these individual class meetings:

First Meeting-

We gathered together in Erin’s office, Danaë, Jenna, Josh, members from the Faison School, Megan and Trish, Abby and myself. We stood on the brink, just about to step over the edge. In a lot of ways that’s exactly what it felt like. We sat there and attempted to figure out what to do on the first day of classes. It came to light that we all had more questions than answers. Danaë and Jenna were the leaders and dance teachers for the class, Josh was the musician lending the score for the “Speaking Feet” class, Abby was the artist lending advice to Danaë for the actual painting portion of “Speaking Feet” and I was there as the technical advisor for the “Modern Movement” class. We all sat there and looked to the members of the Faison School, who were there to serve as our special needs advisors and would be in the class to help facilitate, dealing specifically with the students who have special needs. So with every idea we deferred to the Faison instructors. We soon realized that we were actually all in the same boat. The Faison members couldn’t give us any direct answers. It turns out that they had no idea what to expect with the students either.
For example, Danaë, at first, was very excited about playing a get-to-know-you game which she called “Interview.” She designed this game so that a student who is typically developed would be paired with a student who has special needs. They would then ask each other a series of three questions either made up or from a list that would be handed out. The student giving the interview would write down the answers and then they would switch roles. In the end, the partners would stand up in front of the class and introduce not themselves but their partners that they interviewed. “Hello everyone I would like to introduce my partner Scott. Scott likes popcorn... etc.” After explaining the game to us, we agreed that it sounded like a good idea. Danaë then asked the Faison instructors for their thoughts. They said something to the effect of “Sure, sounds okay to us.”

This seemed a strange response, and after probing more, we discovered that even though these teachers from Faison had significant time devoted to the growth and education of children with special needs, their school is governed by very strict rules. Their rules are put into place to allow for as much of a controlled environment as possible. They explained that, under the circumstances that LIVE ART is constructed, there was simply no way of predicting how any one student was going to react to anything happening in class. All of the children with special needs, just like the students who were typically developed, handle and respond to external
stimuli differently. There was just no way to predict anything and since no one, to our knowledge, has ever attempted anything like this before, there came a moment in that room that I will never forget. The moment when we realized the risk involved in attempting to put together a production such as this. We wanted to put together the best classes we could, regardless of special needs or not, and just trust. We all decided to trust one another, to take ownership and responsibility for whatever happened. Even Josh and Abby, who were really only there as respective artistic advisors, jumped on board and said that not only would they be there every week, but show up with movement clothes on, ready to be a part of and help in any way possible. It was the first of many examples where I would see of the work taking over. Everyone realizing that this process was bigger than they were and that helping in any capacity was paramount in the success of our students.

The meeting concluded, after much deliberation, with a lesson plan for the first of each of the classes. Erin’s introduction to the students and parents would start with expectations and information. Then she would move to information about the class itself and the importance of LIVE ART, emphasizing, truly, how new it was. She would stress how none of us, not even the instructors, could possibly see all that was about to be revealed. Throughout each of these speeches she would encourage questions, comments, and concerns from parents. She would often reiterate the point
that fear and uncertainty were going to happen, but it was okay and that the students and parents could openly talk to her or any one of the SPARC instructors. With all the questions answered, Erin would release the parents and let the class begin. At the end of our first meeting we decided that we would play a name game to begin the class, instead of the interview game for fear of social restrictions, then a movement based warm-up and a few movement exercises, confident that this would be all the time we would have. We broke for the night, the next morning we would meet again, none of us knowing what new hurdles we might have to overcome.

That night, I didn't sleep. The excitement from the day's events gave way to fear of what was to come early the next morning. “What if none of this works?” “What if none of what we planned can actually be done?” “What if the students who are typically developed don’t respond well being in a class with students who have special needs?” “What if I can’t handle being in a class with students who have special needs?” I became calmed by the realization that so far all this has happened as if by design; from Erin’s conception of this idea, to how she met challenges but found solutions almost instantaneously. It feels like this was supposed to happen, in this place, right now. With this thought easing its way into my psyche, eventually the exhaustion set in and I drifted to sleep.
After that first day and night, I realized that all of the instructors were in this together. None of them had any idea what was going to happen, from the special educators, to the teaching artists, down to the support staff. I believe it was Dr. Tawnya-Pettiford Wates who always said that the most exciting parts of life are the transitions. The grey area, the unknowns, that is where life truly exists.
Staff Anticipation

Before the process started, Erin proposed a challenge to the staff: to always keep going. She never claimed that this process was going to be easy. The staff knew, going in, that there were going to be a few unpaid hours. For most it didn’t matter, whatever the cost, whatever the time, they were there. They made it happen, for the kids, and for themselves. The entire staff wanted to see the program be successful and wanted to give the students the best experience possible.

When the first day of classes arrived, the teachers were overcome with anticipation and excitement. No one had any idea what was going to happen. Every adult in the room was ready for any eventuality, be it meltdowns, fits, tears, or laughs, the instructors were ready. Despite uncertainty and fear, it was their preparedness and awareness from the get-go that laid the foundation for the success of the program. The staff had gone over all the possible scenarios to prepare for the first class. When the students arrived, however, and they were kind to one another and had a great time, the worry of possible fits and tears seemed distant. It was fear, coincidentally, that put the teachers in the best possible place to create the ideal environment for those students, because it allowed for beautiful creation to happen. With the hands-off approach to students with special needs, a culture that fostered a freedom of creativity began to form.

Here is a journal entry from the night following the first day of classes:
We all stood there... with bated breath, as if waiting for the great wave. We had prepared as much as our minds allowed. There were so many unknowns, so many unpredictable factors. Will the deaf and hard of hearing students be able to understand what is going on when they can’t hear the music? Will the kids have fun? We had done everything that we could, from making name tags for all the students and teachers, to cleaning the floors twice to make sure that the place smelled nice. Now we were all waiting for the first student to arrive. I think I can safely say that all of us were scared. The unknown is truly terrifying.

The students did in fact arrive. They came in droves. Happy, smiling droves. The students gathered with those who were like them at first, not easily mixing with the others that were noticeably different from them. However, as teachers and facilitators of this process, this was something that we were able to foresee. We did our best to change the environment by introducing some of our students with special needs to those who were typically developed. However, it was not the most brilliant scenario. The kind of idyllic scene where everyone just instantly clicked and became friends was more of a dream than a reality. Their interactions were a bit forced at first. Everyone was very cordial and polite but no great friendships were fused in those minutes before class began.

Class started with a rousing speech from Erin. She talked about logistical
items; where to park, how to drop off the students, what to wear to class, how to behave in class, but she ended her speech with a kicker; the importance and magnitude of LIVE ART. Some understood, with their eyes wide, full of joy and anticipation to begin the journey. Other students did not understand, listlessly looking off into space, lost in a daydream not long after Erin had started talking about parking. I had to laugh because I was wide eyed and excited but related more with the daydreaming student.

However, once class began, the game changed. It was one of those times where you have planned things to go one way, but, in fact, they go the opposite. There was a moment where all the observing teachers and administrators realized something. It was... well... I don’t want to tell you yet. I feel like I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m not surprised that I’m getting ahead of myself, because it was such an awe-inspiring moment."

Despite the incomplete state of this journal entry, the sentiment speaks volumes. Going into that class on the first day, no one had any idea what to expect. Beyond all things, everyone in that room was starting at ground zero. Everyone was on the same playing field, being both scared and excited for the work to begin. Whether typically developed, special needs, instructor or parent, the feeling of the room could be summed up in a word: hopeful.
From these two journal entries, it can be seen that everyone involved was at a disadvantage in some way. The students with special needs had their unique challenges to overcome with performance, along with the students who were typically developed. Not only that, but the instructors had to overcome the unknown factors regarding each class. As parents the obstacles would be, for some, great, and for some small. Each parent had a journey to take with their child as they encountered social obstacles. However, their experiences weren’t unique. Children with autism often have trouble engaging in social interactions with new people.

*Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors.* (Autism Speaks Website)

The deaf students had a unique social interaction barrier as well: they spoke a completely different language than the rest of the class. The students who were typically developed were charged with the task of breaking down barriers to connect with their classmates, many of whom had never interacted with a student with special needs before. With this, the students who were typically developed had their own unique challenges as well. This was the goal of Live Art, though, to encourage growth and progression on more than just an artistic level. Live Art sought to create connections that would extend beyond the stage and classroom, a daunting task.
Classes kept moving right along. Saturday classes held at SPARC went from 8:30 AM until about 6:00 PM. Some Saturdays were easier than others. In the beginning, it was easy to say, “Yes! I will give every moment. I can sacrifice all my ‘days off’ to these students and this cause.” That attitude works for a while. Then life starts to catch up. One’s home starts getting neglected, family and friends start to wonder if they’ll ever see you again, and then soon, one can start to feel crushed under the weight of it all. Like a runner: at the beginning they are prepared, ready and excited to get started. In the middle of a marathon everything hurts. They feel they are sacrificing parts of their body and they start to weigh the pros and cons of just throwing in the towel because it may not be worth it. However, the love of running and feeling so good when they finish makes quitting not an option. Like that marathon runner, who willingly sacrifices his body for something he loves, the staff chose aspects of their lives to be sacrificed in order to achieve the goal. Social gatherings were no longer an option, and late nights watching television disappeared for a while. Times such as these can teach someone a lot about what they need in order to be happy. It turns out I didn’t need more than a project that I am passionate about, someone I love by my side, and my juggling balls.
Overview of the Program

“Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. Peer support is not based on psychiatric models and diagnostic criteria. It is about understanding another’s situation empathically through the shared experience…” (Mead)

LIVE ART starts in a classroom that has two key groups of students: those with special needs, ranging from autism to deafness, and those who are typically developed. These students then learn something new, something outside of everyone’s comfort zone. That ‘something new’ is the keystone of the program. Each of the classes is based on the incorporation of a type of art, whether performance or visual. This places a wide spectrum of students, with a wide spectrum of abilities, in a classroom where none of the students are familiar with the subject. Each class has components that make it completely unique and new for everyone involved. For example, the “Speaking Feet” curriculum, where students would dance with paint on their feet, coupled an ordinary activity, painting, with choreography. Where some of the students had experience in basic painting, none of them had experience painting with their feet. The idea is that all of the students are now discovering together. Realistically, they are all discovering and learning at different rates and levels. However, this sense of learning and discovery fosters a group aesthetic that promotes peer support. If one student understands the material, it is their responsibility to help those that are struggling. Some of the greatest stories that you hear from the LIVE ART classroom center specifically on the moment where one student reaches out and helps another.
At any given moment there are at least eight (8) adults present in a class that ranges in size from 20 to 30 students. This ratio is what sets LIVE ART apart from any other educational theatre program. The instructors all play different roles, but there are typically two head instructors. Their role is to lead the class. They are, for the most part, the ones who plot the course for the class. Much like our students, our teachers approached the work differently based on their own abilities.

Figure 3: Property of SPARC
Specific Examples of Significant Impact

Speaking Feet
One of the teachers allowed for complete collaboration amongst the instructors. Danaë Carter, our instructor for “Speaking Feet,” felt a collaborative approach was necessary, as none of the individual instructors could accomplish the various layers of teaching expectations within the curriculum. The LIVE ART curriculum was designed so that each class offered education in multiple art forms and types of learning, thus the need for multiple teaching artists of all skills.

Abby Bland, the visual arts expert, was an aide for the class because Danaë and the rest of the team had little knowledge regarding painting. However, the instructors did everything in their power to make themselves as knowledgeable about this subject as they could. The team together for a night to try the foot-painting before having the students try it. What a sight. It is an amazing experience dancing with paint on one’s feet as a fully-grown adult; it is humbling and exhilarating. One’s heart begins to race when feeling the sensation of putting one’s foot in a tub of paint. This was the first thing the teachers noted. Putting your feet in paint can be a little scary and weird, even for those that are typically developed, but even more so for those with autism. “Many people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulty processing everyday sensory information such as sounds, sights and smells. This is usually called having sensory integration difficulties, or sensory sensitivity.” ("The Sensory World of Autism.") The awareness of this allowed us to take some precautions, to make the proper
preparations for students with special needs. We then allowed the students to try it long
before it ever came to show time, to see their reactions, but a sensory overload never
occurred. Every student loved it and eventually became completely comfortable
painting with their feet.

Figure 4: Property of SPARC
Willie Hinton, a dance teacher that works primarily with the Richmond Ballet, was the lead teacher of the “Human Story” class along with his co-teacher Marc Langelier, a musician specializing in improvisational music. Together they created a class where the students, led by Willie, would dance to music that was being created in the moment by Marc.
Willie’s approach to collaboration was distinct from Danaē’s. Whereas Danaē’s approach centered on instructor collaboration before and outside of class, Willie’s collaboration occurred inside the classroom with very little outside preparation. Willie did his best not to talk for the first few classes. Using some sign language, common gestures and only a word or two, he would lead the students through an entire two-hour class, barely speaking at all. Even without words, those classes were far from quiet. Marc’s drums would kick in, with a hard-hitting bass that the deaf students said they could feel. “Human Story” was constantly in motion. In the big, loud moments, the room would be filled with laughter, and the quiet moments filled with tears. Though the
students cried, it was the witnesses that found themselves the most emotional. “Human Story” was an incredible class to watch. The students danced multiple times per class and every time something inspiring occurred. At points, one would not be able to tell who could hear the music and who couldn’t. Regardless of their ability, everyone thought as one and became a unified community, unlike anything anyone in the room had ever experienced.

![Image](image-url)  

Figure 7: Property of SPARC

The beat of Marc’s drum in “Human Story” was the rhythm of the heart of LIVE ART. As the word kept spreading about how amazing this class was, it just kept getting bigger and bigger. The students would talk during lunch, “Oh, you’re not in Human Story? You
should come, it’s a lot of fun.” That afternoon we would have a new student. It was never hard for anyone who was new to participate because Willie used so few words and, most of the time, the objective was simply to follow Willie.

Beyond the scope of the instructor collaboration, student collaboration seemed to flourish in “Human Story.” The struggle to communicate, between deaf students and students who were typically developed, was on our minds from the beginning. How would they communicate? We could teach the students a few words, but we didn’t want the class to turn into a course in sign language. We hoped that the students would take it upon themselves to teach one another; however, none of us could have predicted what actually happened.

The Deaf Community

It was our deaf community that always arrived first on Saturday mornings. A majority of the LIVE ART staff took personal initiative to learn as much sign language as possible over the course of the program. Most of that learning didn’t come from books or from videos watched at home, but was taught to them by the deaf students. The class as a whole learned a couple of key words so that the students could sign comfortably: words and phrases such as, “What’s up?” “Good morning” “Beautiful” “Amazing!” and “You’re crazy.” Despite some students’ lack of aptitude with sign language, the deaf students kept teaching. All of them were so patient with everyone who wanted to learn and especially with their fellow classmates. It helped that they were a little bit older; most of the deaf students were between the ages of 14 and 17. They ended up being some of
the major leaders in the community. Because of how popular they were, every student wanted to learn how to sign.

Outside the classroom, the deaf students spent a majority of their lunch hour with different small groups of their peers, teaching them letters, words and phrases in American Sign Language. They lived outside of the 'cliques' of students that form in all classroom environments. Even the students with special needs wanted to learn, and the deaf students would keep working with them until they understood. It was beautiful to watch them take the hands of a student who had Down Syndrome and help them to make the right shapes, without a modicum of impatience. Interactions like this created an environment where everyone looked up to the deaf students and respected them. When it got closer to show time, the deaf students would notice everyone being loud and rowdy and would take it upon themselves to quiet the groups. They would even help the younger students who were often scared and anxious. Everyone listened to them, and they became leaders without ever realizing it.
Not only did the students love the deaf students, but the instructors did too. The deaf students worked hard in and out of class on their choreography. They would meticulously memorize the movement sequences and rehearse all week. By the time they arrived in class on Saturday, they were so in step that, if you didn’t know, you could have sworn that they could hear the music. This, to the teachers, is one of the miracles of LIVE ART: giving deaf students the opportunity to dance as though they could hear.
**Overall Observation**

One can’t help but get pulled into a LIVE ART class; there is no way to sit on the sidelines and just be a casual observer. The teachers don’t demand this, the students don’t ask. Instead, it is something more, a need to be a part of something larger than oneself. Sitting on the side of a class one sees so much. Witnessing the joy on the faces of the students when, in a moment, it clicks for them. That movement or that section of choreography made sense to them. One can see anger in another part of the room: a student is struggling with that same bit of movement, but then a student is always there to help them through. Even though peer support was a primary goal of the curriculum, the staff was pleasantly surprised with the students’ ability to instinctually lift each other up without much need for instruction in this area. Without being told, the students were there to support one another. They were the ones that made the effort, who went the extra mile, and all with a smile on their face and a hand to hold.
Chapter II:

Personal Narrative

Beginnings

When I first spoke to Erin about being a part of LIVE ART, she didn’t know me at all. The way this story begins is with a meeting that I just happened to stumble into; that, coincidently my girlfriend, Courtney, was attending. It just so happened, that day was her birthday, and so I told her that I would like to tag along. This was the first meeting where Erin, and anyone at SPARC, would see the technology for the first time, the same technology that would be used in the performance. I watched as pre-selected members of the already forming LIVE ART team stepped up and danced with computer mice in their hands. As they danced, the computer could recognize where the mice were in a 2 dimensional space, along with how fast they were moving. It was enough information to make it look as though the dancers were, in real time, painting varying designs across a screen on the back wall of the theatre. I was hooked. I couldn’t catch my breath. I knew that I wanted to be a part of LIVE ART. If I could offer anything, I wanted my contribution to this project to be the understanding and operation of the technology I just witnessed.

It was later that day that Courtney and I ended up at Erin’s house to celebrate Courtney’s birthday. It was there that I mustered up the courage to tell Erin how I felt about the project. Erin, by divine providence, before I stated my desire to work the
technology, started talking about how she didn’t know anyone with the technological knowledge base to operate the computer system. Courtney swiftly provided a segue. “I do,” she said, pointing in my direction. Erin looked at me, curious and apprehensive. As I said before, she barely knew me at the time, but I seized my moment. With more confidence than I actually had, I said, “Yes, I believe that I can do this.” It took more than a few minutes of discussion to convince her that I was serious. We changed topics with Erin saying, “I have to talk to Ryan [Ripperton] about it.” The night carried on with drinks, socializing and celebrating another year of life. I, however, was lost in my own thoughts, dreaming of what could be in store for me. There was so much possibility and hope in the air that night.

This whole process taught me a lot about myself both artistically and professionally. However, my professional education up until that point, I realized, had been deficient. I had a lot of learning to do, very quickly. I was put through a rigorous series of interviews. Every time I left them with my head down, saying, “Well, you did your best. But, maybe its time to start looking for another job.” But they kept calling me back. My final interview was with the creator of the computer software that I was going to be running. David Wilson, taught at UNC for many years, and being one of the smartest men I have ever met, and was able to interrogate me in a way I had never experienced. He quickly ran through all of my knowledge in computers, which is pretty substantial, but within a matter of minutes I was drilled on aspects of computing that I had never even heard of. I literally began to sweat. As I was wiping away the glistening sweat building on my brow, Erin, once again led by divine providence, stepped into the room. I can
only assume that Erin read my anxiety immediately. She then said, “Phil, all I ask is that you are honest with Dave. If you don’t know, just simply say ‘I don’t know’.”

In the moment, that was exactly what I needed to hear. I’m not sure if that was her intention, but I believe it ended up being the perfect words for the moment and is another example of why Erin is an amazing leader. I took Erin’s advice and I was back in the game. Dave kept attempting to dig deeper into my computing knowledge and I was able to answer some of the questions, but for the most part I simply answered, “I don’t know.”

Despite my last minute rally of confidence and how good I felt in that moment, I realized this was the worst interview of them all. I couldn’t answer over half of the questions Dave asked, questions about java script and programming code, processing and networking. No matter Erin’s confidence in me, I was sure that Dave would simply tell her, “He doesn’t have the knowledge. You have to find someone else.” So I gave up hope, the lowest point for me throughout this whole process. I don’t give up hope. I am an optimist. There was something about this particular job. The passion I felt about the mission, the opportunity to work with this technology and a job at the premier youth theatre school in my city was too good to give up on. In my mind all the stars lined up, yet I was being let down. I lost my bright view during this waiting period. I felt that I failed myself, when I wasn’t able to be me in those interviews. It somehow seemed easier just to give up and move on; which not only contradicts my philosophy, but also that of the program I was about to become a part of.
Of course, I got the job. Erin would tell me later that Dave simply wanted to put me through the wringer just to see how much knowledge I had. Very few of his questions had anything to do with operating or maintaining the program’s software. When it came to my work with Dave, I was just supposed to keep up. He never slowed down for me. He showed me where to get the information regarding the programs I would be using, but he never had enough time to sit down and show me anything. It was never in him to slow down. This was the first hurdle for me during LIVE ART. I had no idea how much there was to learn. I was never aware of how little about programming and computer-image coding I knew. So I taught myself, something I had never done before. I usually learn best by example and I am a very quick study under those conditions, but for this, I was forced to not only teach myself something new, but do so in a language I didn’t understand. I kept saying, “What have I gotten myself into?” but I kept working, pouring over websites that broke it all down step by step. In time I was able to create little programs all on my own.

LIVE ART kept growing and expanding as the preparation for classes started. I originally signed on just to run the technology in one class, be there during the show, and to help Dave if he needed it. Soon, we found out that Dave might not be able to attend the show, so my responsibilities increased. The decision was made that I would set up and run the technology for tech week and the run of the show. That was an incredible level of responsibility, but Erin believed in me and I believed in myself. The scariest part was not having my time commitment increase, but that no one else in the
state of Virginia knew how to work the program. The ultimate success or failure of this technology was solely riding on me.
Classes

My contacted LIVE ART class was the first of three held on Saturdays at SPARC. I was only required to be there for the first class, which was called “Modern Movement.” After my class was lunch, where all the kids got a chance to hang out and socialize with each other for an hour. On the first day, I decided to stay for lunch. Then, I come to find out, they needed another teaching assistant in the next class. Erin named this class “Speaking Feet,” where the students were going to learn choreography and dance on a canvas with paint on their feet. This would be the class that would create a live, mural-size painting for the finale of the concert. Erin, thinking of me as a possible teaching assistant, asked me to stay, and I said yes. That class carried right into the final class of the day, called “Human Story.” Based in African ritual dance and improvisational movement, I went to see the first few minutes, but that was all it took; I was hooked. I asked Erin if I could stay on for this class too. She smiled and said, “Of course.” In this way, from the very outset, I went from being an auxiliary member of the LIVE ART team to a main staffer. My job title now included setting up, operating, and maintaining the technology, SPARC staff for one class, and teaching assistant for another two. This was just the beginning.

It was in these classes that I needed to implement the education that the staff had received before the program started. Most of that education revolved around interaction with students who had special needs. First and foremost, we learned about “people first language.” The idea that, when identifying anyone with special needs, it is always
person first, then their diagnoses, not an autistic student but instead a student with autism. Also, we learned about how to identify those without any recognized diagnoses as those students who were “typically developing” instead of referring to them as normal or regular. It was important that everyone was a person first and that no one group or person was ever marginalized.

In spite of the fact that I was originally signed on as a technical advisor, it was the role as a teaching artist that would produce the most profound change in myself. So much of my previous educational experience became synthesized while participating in this program as a teaching artist. Over 12 years of theatrical classroom experience in acting, directing, and pedagogy were summoned in the moments where I had to get up in front of the class and simply lead the morning warm-ups. My heart raced every time. I have been doing actor warm-ups a majority of my life now; there was no need for me to be nervous. During those warm-ups, seeing all those faces with expectant looks, I recognized my responsibility to them. They deserved nothing less then the best I have; like Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates always says, “Knowledge isn’t yours unless you can give it away.” However, where the teaching aspect of my job was cathartic and illuminating, the technical advising remained incredibly stressful. And when the technology repeatedly failed during tech week, it almost cost me my job.
In my mind, the memories of the weeks leading up to the show move by with rapid intensity. When I attempt to recall them, it can sometimes feel like grasping at wisps of moments or half memories. When I envision the actual performance, my memory is so vivid, it’s as if it plays on a large IMAX screen with surround sound. Every moment felt blessed or somehow preordained because every piece fell into place.

During the days leading up to the show, I did the best I could to be as helpful as possible. Courtney, Erin and now Ginnie, the Production Manager, were leading the ship and were stressed beyond measure. However, even when stressed beyond imagining, it was the power of these women and their female counterparts that led to the success of this program. I believe that these strong women, through their leadership, put compassion and a nurturing environment at the forefront of everything that we did, while putting the male ego and the ‘need to perfect’ second. I tried to be there for whatever they needed, even if that mostly involved manual labor; I was honored to sweat for the cause. I had met most of these people less than six months before, yet they had instilled full trust in me. That team of women worked tirelessly to foresee every possible need leading up to the first run-through. Unfortunately, the first run was when, for the first time, we all saw what this show could be, both the good and the bad.
That run-through was held at SPARC almost two weeks before the show. This was supposed to be the easiest run, without any tech. The only objective was to run each piece, in order, from the beginning of the show until right before curtain call. SPARC was the chosen venue, but it was not the most ideal. The building SPARC currently owns has seen multiple transformations: it was a taxi depot, then a blood bank, then finally a theatre school, which leaves some odd quirks regarding the building’s architecture. The main studio, for example, is placed in the center of the building’s first story. In order to get from one side of the building to the other, without exiting, you have to cross through the studio. Finally, the metal studio doors are windowless and heavy and when thrown open with too much force, they can become a real hazard.

The staff took note of this and precautions were taken. However, I managed to forget, and in a moment of frenzy, threw the door open. The large metal door flew into one of the choreographer’s, Danaë’s, hand. She was attempting to prevent a group of students from getting too close to the door when I came bursting through it. She was hurt, but okay. She forgave me almost instantly, although it took me a while to forgive myself. Both of us felt oddly blessed that she was hurt, not one of the students. Unfortunately, this incident was not the only thing that made this my least favorite run-through.

The run was particularly scary for me because I wasn’t sure the show would be as amazing as everyone predicted it would be. Not that the students weren’t incredible, they were, and they were doing the best they could. It was the staff that was struggling.
We were working on a system to call students together for each piece in the show. One thing we learned was that not every student was going to be able to remember all of his/her pieces this first time, and finding people who knew that information was nearly impossible. We quickly learned that our lack of communication regarding the numbers would become a huge issue during actual runs of the show. Only Courtney, Erin and a few others knew the master list of students in each number, information that would be hard to disseminate to staffers coming onto the project during tech week.

The movement of the students was the most challenging aspect of the entire show. During the first run-through, some students missed multiple pieces they were in because they were unsure of what exactly was happening. For the first time, we also introduced the members of Dreamer’s Theatre, a group of adults with special needs that Erin invited to perform with us, as well as the additional members of the Richmond Boys Choir. The learning curve was huge for this run and Erin did her best to play her role as director. She stayed in the studio with Ginnie while we, the support staff, worked as fast as we could to get these students where they were supposed to be. Despite our many challenges, we made it through and learned a lot.

The next run-through was moved to Richmond Ballet and that one went a little better. Then, over the next three days, with each run-through, we improved. Huge steps were made. Connections in the students’ mind about which piece comes first, also where they were supposed to enter and when, started to form. It also helped that the Richmond Ballet has an incredible building. The Ballet’s two massive studios had glass
walls and rooms full of sunlight. On our last day at the Ballet, we got through the entire show with almost none of the students missing their pieces and even staged a curtain call. That run-through left us feeling a little better about the show and ourselves, but we couldn’t forget all the work still to be done. The next step was translating everything to the Carpenter Center for tech week. We stood on the edge of a precipice that last day at the Richmond Ballet, the pressure was huge and it took all our will and strength to keep breathing and stay in the moment.
Tech Week

Tech week was going to be the week where I earned my place at the table. I was set to work a portion of the schedule devoted to “the technology” -- what it was referred to as throughout the entire process. However, I was humbled very quickly by this “technology” that I was supposed to know inside and out.

It was the first time that we were set to run the technology in its entirety, similar to how it would run during the actual show. Erin was watching from the house, Ginnie was back stage to call the show, and I was at a table hidden upstage of the screen. We were set to test three pieces of technology, first was called “Ribbons”. The computer picked up on the movement of the mice and translated that movement into ribbons of color that were drawn on the screen and it worked great. The second was called “Stardust”, the computer recognized the placement of the mice in the students’ hands and the program drew several starry clouds that slowly followed the mice where ever they went on stage, that worked without issue too. It was the third, “SeeSong” that I sat watching helplessly as the technology failed. Ginnie kept asking me questions over my headset that were relayed from Erin out in the house and I simply had nothing to say back. It just didn’t work and my knowledge base wasn’t large enough to give any answers. Landing on the side of slightly traumatic, I will never forget that moment. I apologized and promised that, although I had no answers now, I would get answers and the problem would be fixed.
In “SeeSong” there were two main components to the program. The visualization, which looked like paint splatter, was painted onto the screen by the students dancing with the computer mice. The next component was the sound input. When the computer registered a sound, the painted splatter got larger depending on how loud that sound was. If there was no sound, there was no paint. On the first day of tech, there was no paint. I was terrified. I knew that it had something to do with the sound input. The backstage crew hired to help us during the run of the show gave me a mini mixer to plug into my computer to input the sound from the band onstage. This mixer was new and I had never used anything like it before, but they were sure that it was not the problem, so we looked for other causes. Needless to say, it was this point during the process where my job was now on the line.

Tech week kept cranking along, though, and the tech crew was swamped from the moment we stepped into the building. I did my best to help wherever I could, but I kept being told to concentrate my efforts on the technology. Load-in for the set took two days and was still getting tweaked and perfected hours before the show was set to go up. Joe Doran, the lighting designer, worked an unreal amount of hours in order to achieve the highest possible production quality. I remember Courtney and I being the fourth and fifth person to arrive and leave the Carpenter Center that week. Erin was the third and Joe and his assistant were the first and last.

An outside company called Sound Works handled the entire sound element of the show, which included at least a dozen handheld microphones, a few body mics, and
several omni-directionals. One of their sound engineers was positioned stage right, mixing the sound, live, as the show was happening. If you were backstage to watch him during the show, it was a performance all in of itself. Every tech element came together seamlessly over the course of that week, except for mine.

Then tech week was over. All the lights were hung and the sound set and ready. Everything was working great but I had not yet had a successful run of the technology. I had one more opportunity to fix it and if I couldn’t get the technology to work, Erin was going to be forced to cut it from the show. No one wanted it cut from the show because if I could get it to work, it would be one of the most awe-inspiring elements of the show. I simply had to get it to work.

It worked. The tech crew and I worked nonstop the morning of the show, checking every connection, trying every permutation of cords and cables. It was within the final hour, 45 minutes before the final run was set to start, my LIVE ART miracle occurred. Everyone attached to this project can speak to his or her own LIVE ART miracle and this one was mine. It worked and I cried. The weight had been lifted, my burden, my fear, my doubt of self was gone and I was so happy. All of the technology worked seamlessly during the run of the show. And on top of it all, I met Jason Mraz.
Showtime

It started in a huge circle that included every performer and most of the tech crew as well. Everyone stood in Rhythm Hall of the Carpenter Center listening to the leaders speak to the power of the program and the accomplishments that had already been made. They weren’t giving a football coach’s pep talk, giving a “No win, no glory” speech. Instead, they talked about how the students had already succeeded. Everyone spoke to the joy of performing; saying that if you mess up, forget about it. Enjoy every moment because though this may not be your one chance at success, this may be your one chance to do something this amazing, so soak it up and live in every moment, because it’s yours, you’ve earned it.

Everyone was equal in that circle, and when we screamed “LIVE ART!” and got our call for places, the quiet calm became a fury of excitement. I walked down that long winding hallway from Rhythm Hall to the Carpenter Stage with 45 students in tow, and the anticipation mounted with every step.

Preshow was prepped before the house opened. I made a slideshow that would run throughout the preshow featuring pictures of art done by NorthStar Academy students. Their images were the backdrop of the preshow entertainment, which also included a small band of some of our student musicians. The most heartening element of our preshow, however, was a boy who played the piano. He was diagnosed with autism at a very young age, and because of his severity, was unable to participate in the program.
Erin gave him an amazing opportunity to play solo for the entire audience onstage before the show began. No one was sure how he was going to react during the performance, not even his parents. When he looked up and saw the crowd for the first time, all of us held our collective breath but he just smiled and hammered on those keys, completely improvising a three-minute piano solo. He played his heart out, and the song resonated with the theme of LIVE ART: given an amazing opportunity (that may put one outside of his or her comfort zone), anyone has the ability rise to the challenge.

Figure 10: Property of SPARC, Photo by Ashly Covington

With the conclusion of his song, the opening short film started; a video documentary that gave a short description of what the students had already done and the efforts that got them to where they were that night. The short film was the answer to the fear that
the audience may not be able to understand the amount of work that it took. We wanted to show how hard the students had worked through the process. No one had ever seen anything like LIVE ART before; there is simply no precedent. Also, it was my job to play the film from a computer backstage. We were off to a good start because it worked, thankfully, and two out of my five responsibilities for the show had already worked flawlessly.

The film ended and the curtain fell. Boisterously out of the speakers came a voice, saying, “Ladies and Gentleman: LIVE ART!” and the opening number began. The mimes, a group of specifically selected students who had a strong aptitude toward performance, came out onto the stage. They performed their skit without speaking a word. The opening number was a song sung by Terri Simpson, a member of the Upper East Side Big Band, the house band for Live Art. It was a kooky, short little tune that invited the audience to join us for our show and set the mood. The show didn’t start with a bang, but showed the audience that this show was going to be heart-warming and fun. We didn’t want them to take it too seriously right from the start. We wanted them to be surprised.

Act One flew by. Two out of the three technologies were used in Act One. The technology called “Ribbons” and “SeeSong,” and I was already stressed to the limit. I was backstage constantly checking and double-checking everything before each number. There were two songs in the act before “Water from the Moon,” which the “Ribbons” technology would be used for. First, Virginia guitarist Jesse Harper played
his song “Porch Swing” with all the students gathered around his porch swing listening to him. That song then transitioned right into a song played by the Upper East Side Big Band, called “Paper Moon.” Students performed a choreographed dance to this song while the mimes wrestled with a giant paper moon they chased across the stage. Then it was my moment. As Robbin Thompson sang “Water from the Moon” the students danced with computer mice in their hands creating ribbons of color across a twenty-foot screen. It went off without a hitch. Three out of five of my technology responsibilities were now done, but up next was the most intense moment of the show for me. After “Water from the Moon”, the Human Story class was set to perform. The only issue with this transition was that the two technology pieces were back to back. Ginnie, the stage manager, had to cue me when the screen’s video was muted and within 30 seconds I had to shut down the “Ribbons” program and start up “SeeSong.” We had planned for me to get a test of the mice and sound equipment before we restored the projection on stage; however, I did not get the test. Unfortunately, the students got into places faster than anticipated. So, although I got the program up and running in record time, Ginnie made the call that we would go without a test and opened the shutter on the projector. I sat there for a moment in silence. There was no way to tell whether or not the program was working; it needed sound. Just then the band started to play and the screen exploded in color. It worked and I cried. Four out of the five technologies worked without issue and I felt the weight begin to lift. I was almost able to breathe again. I had one more technological responsibility to perform, but that wasn’t until Act Two, so I made my way to stage right and watched as Jason Mraz made his surprise entrance, singing one of his songs called “Live High.” This was the song that came before the
finale of the Act One. The finale was “Stand Up,” written and performed by Robbin Thompson, with a special arrangement by Samson Trinh, the leader of the Upper East Side Big Band. This was the ideal song to end the first act. The chorus alone says it all, it says “Stand up, don't back down, don't let anybody turn you around, you've got to keep on walking don't look back, don't ever let them tell you you can't do that!”

For most of the staff and crew, intermission didn’t exist. The staggeringly long list of things that needed to get done before Act Two propelled all of us backstage to move with precision and speed. Most of our intermission responsibilities revolved around getting the theater ready for the students to paint with their feet. Once the loading dock was covered with a tarp, the hallway and backstage area had to be lined with durable paper and the stage covered with sturdy black photo paper, all on top of the Richmond Ballet’s Marley. After that was done we were set for Act Two.

Unlike Act One, which for the most part was light, happy, and joyful, Act Two maintained a slower pace to pull at your heartstrings. Act Two opened with a simple but rich acoustic tune by Josh Small, accompanied by Marc Langelier on the drums, with the Richmond Boys Choir adding some backup vocals. After that, students associated with The Colligate School, in conjunction with students from The Faison School for Autism here in Richmond, performed a spoken word piece about what art means to them. At the end, they posed that same question to the audience, “What does art mean to you?” This section concluded with Josh and Marc on stage, joined by a member of Dreamer’s Theatre who played the harmonica. They performed a song called “Knife in my Belly,”
written by Josh. Only this time there were four dancers on stage: three students and Willie. They danced a piece that moved everyone who witnessed it. Using movement and repeated gesture they told a story of two men guarded by their respective angels. The angels expressed that, no matter what, they would be watching over them, a message that resonated very strongly with me.

After that I had one more song before my final duty of the show, and then my own personal party could begin. The last song that I was responsible for running tech behind was a song called “One True Thing” by Jesse Harper. All the other pieces of technology were flashy and sometimes a little distracting to the performers on stage, but this program was never became the focus of the attention. The program perfectly matched the dreamy, slow-moving quality of this song.

It worked with out a single hiccup. And with that, I was done! I had succeeded at my job and I was overwhelmed with emotion. However, I wasn’t completely finished; I was on post feet painting clean up crew, so I still had to keep my head in the game for the songs still to come.

Jason was the guy to bring the evening home. He had two back-to-back songs that he sang while standing on the blank 25x15 foot canvas. His first song was called “The Sunshine Song,” which he sang with one of our students who wrote a piano accompaniment to go along with it, and he did an amazing job. Jason liked it so much that invited this student to play with him during a few performances on his up coming
tour. After that he sang “Details in the Fabric,” a sort of hauntingly beautiful song about how it doesn’t matter how bad life gets, everything will be fine. He performed this song and students came out and stood behind him and helped him sing, all while the mimes came onto the stage with squirt bottles full of paint. Jason sang in the center while the mimes squeezed the brightly colored paint all over the blank canvas. Jason was the first to make his foot mark on that canvas as they walked around the stage and finished his song by singing to the students who were there with him.

After his song Jason made his way upstage to be with the rest of the musicians and the students were invited onto the canvas. Erin wrote lyrics to a song she titled “Little Bird,”
but the music was written by Daniel Clark, and together they created a song that spoke to the central theme of the entire experience. It was a song about a little bird whose wings made it so he couldn’t fly as straight as the other birds, but he was proud of them anyway because they were his. We all are little birds with wings that aren’t straight and that message resounded the loudest that night as those students danced their hearts out on that canvas covered in paint. When they were done they stepped off stage and the canvas flew up into air and the audience erupted. Everyone could now see the finish line; we were so close to pulling this off in the most spectacular way, and the only thing left was the finale.

The finale was a medley of songs written by Susan Greenbaum, Robin Thompson and Steve Basset, all celebrating Virginia. By the end of the medley every single performer of the evening would be out on stage, even me. The song culminated in the entire cast and crew crying and smiling as we sang. We were all celebrating the work we had done together. We sang, danced and beamed with joy as we watched both the students give their bows, and the audience applauding in a standing ovation that lasted for minutes. When the curtain fell for the final time that night, quite a few people fell to their knees. Courtney and Erin fell into each other’s arms, overcome by the tidal wave of emotion that crashed upon all of us. It is a moment that stands alone in my mind and something I can recall in perfect detail, the moment just after the curtain fell on June 3rd, 2012.

It’s an incredible thing to see months and months of hard work manifest before your very eyes. To witness a genuine dream come to fruition is life changing. LIVE ART
was and still is life changing. In the end, the program was everything we could have hoped for, and a little bit more.

Figure 12: Property of SPARC, Photo by Ashly Covington
Figure 13: Property of SPARC, Photo by Ashly Covington
Afterword:

The Journey Forward

“Once in a lifetime opportunities” are usually defined by their title, meaning they only happen once in a lifetime. I am blessed with the opportunity to relive LIVE ART one more time. The LIVE ART program has been forward funded and it will continue on. Regardless of whether this is my last LIVE ART or I end up working on it for the rest of my life, this one, the first one, will always have a very special place in my heart. It was a transformational experience that shifted the trajectory of my life. Simply, I would not be here right now, writing this, if it were not for this program and the invaluable lessons it taught me.

It shifted my idea of what pedagogy could be, should be. It doesn’t have to be dogmatic rhetoric that demands students to regurgitate information. I believe a proper pedagogy empowers students to strive for goals they thought impossible to reach and still ask for more. It doesn’t look at a student and write them off as incapable. Real pedagogy sees every student as a vessel for change, both in the world and in themselves. It doesn’t tell a student they’re not smart enough. True pedagogy knows that all students, if they want it, can achieve almost anything.

I am a product of proper pedagogy. I am a testament that all things are possible even if they may seem insurmountable at the start. I thank all my mentors that never gave up
on me and were true teachers, instilling in me more confidence than I had in myself. I am the proof that pedagogy can transform, but I can’t help but think of those that didn’t have the teachers I had. I think about students who don’t have positive voices in their lives, and don’t know where to find them. For me, the opportunity to be that voice is what LIVE ART showed me.

From my experience in LIVE ART my pedagogy has added tenets to it that will now and forever be a part of my teaching philosophy:

1. Acknowledgment that every student in my classroom has the ability to learn and grow, and it is my job as an arts educator to nurture that growth.
2. My classroom environment will be one that fosters compassion and empathy for all, through my teaching and personal conduct.
3. Collaborative models of curriculum planning and classroom execution are invaluable and I respect them in the utmost.

This is why I want to be a teacher. These are the reasons why LIVE ART has changed everything. So many of these students come from homes and schools where positive voices are not the loudest. My life goal is to be a positive force for change in this world. I am an optimist. I feel that being a theatre teacher puts me at the helm of a vehicle for that positive change, and LIVE ART helped me see that.
Works Cited


Vita

Phillip Scott Vollmer was born in Virginia Beach, Virginia on the first of May in 1987 and is a citizen of the United States of America. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2009. He has worked at the School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community (SPARC) since January of 2012 and continues to work there now.