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# **What Remains and Other Plays for High-School and Youth Theatre**

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# *What Remains and Other Plays for High-School and Youth Theatre*

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# Introduction

Growing up is hard. That's no secret. We've seen it in our own experience and we often see it in our students and student actors. Of course, some make it out of adolescence unscathed, but for most of us, adolescent conflicts of identity, morality and relationships challenged us as we carved out our positions in the world. Perhaps those conflicts never end, but during the teenage years there's a special kind of crucible. James Marcia, working from Erik Erikson's classic formulation of the identity crisis, proposes that there are four phases of that crisis—diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement. The dimensions reflect the degree to which an individual has engaged with and made commitments in certain areas related to interior conflicts. These conflicts might be regarding moral, religious or ideological commitments; they may involve sexual identity; and they may involve a commitment to vocation. Without, I hope, being too didactic, in Identity Diffusion, the individual is not aware of any particular crisis; those in Identity Foreclosure tend not to go through crisis because they inherit choices already made, often by parents. In Identity Achievement, the individual has gone through a crisis and has made self-chosen commitments. The really interesting phase is Identity Moratorium during which the individual is consciously working through conflicts of identity, morality and relationships. Conflict, of course, is the stuff of drama, and in this collection of Max Bush plays about teenagers written for teenage actors, we see young people struggle to define self in terms of romantic relationships and of relationships with parents and friends. We also see them work through external tugs at the self, and we see many of them in some degree of interior psychological conflict. We even see them worry about purpose and vocation. In short, Bush's plays capture the myriad dimensions of adolescents seeking their place in the world.

In his excellent adaptations of fairy tales, Bush digs deeply into the psyche. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, advocates the need for children to see and confront representations of their darker impulses. This is perhaps too Freudian, but, like Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Erich Neuman, Bettelheim sees the archetypal patterns of a collective unconscious in those tales. The collective unconscious is not shared knowledge. Rather it refers to the possibility of shared patterns of behavior with which Bush's plays in this volume echo; there is a similar sense of archetypes. *Wildboy* uses archetypes explicitly. Here, Jamie works out his sense of self in relation to his alcoholic father through a dream, theatrically embodied on the stage. Less obviously, in *Voices From the Shore*, Joel's experiences of schizophrenic episodes, in which the Ghost, the Demon and the Dying Girl tug at his sense of reality, achieve a kind of archetypal status. As Joel struggles to regain or maintain a unified sense of self, the audience sees other characters with various shades of sanity, anxiety and psychosis. We're left to understand that identity is a continuum, and we all have our own demons to contend with. (This is not a facile understanding. Bush's affectionate portrayals

of kids in the psych ward are a result of his significant experience in a psychiatric hospital.) Whether it is Maggie in *What Remains*, who struggles to make a commitment to vocation, or Kara in *Kara in Black* and Susan in *From Every Mountainside*, who work through commitment to an ideological/political stance, or other characters in several of the plays who strive to determine what role a romantic relationship has in respect to these other commitments, Bush makes vivid the archetypal patterns of adolescence, which the audience shares.

This vividness comes from exciting dramaturgy that presents young actors and their directors with abundant opportunity for play and experimentation. Characters' interior psychological states are often projected onto the stage: Jamie's dream in *Wildboy*; Sarah's dead sister Molly and Urna, a manifestation of Sarah's impulses, in *Sarah*; Cliona's past in *What Remains*; Alex's brother, Charlie, who is in prison, in *Looking Out*. The technique is not just expositional. It is integral to establishing the symbolic language of the plays. It is also ancient. In many cases the exteriorizations comment, like a Greek chorus, on the action, not directly, necessarily, but by correspondence. There's a resonance—a relevance—in these scenes that help create depth for the performers. In *What Remains*, aspects of Cliona's past are gently revealed. She looks lovingly and critically on her past. Meanwhile, Maggie faces similar dilemmas. In the play's final scene, Cliona sees her younger self, and, at the same time, Maggie acts out her decision as to whether to pursue her art. It's a poignant moment and the audience, too, is asked to share in a reflection about our own decisions.

Lest I leave the impression that these plays are all seriousness, a delicate humor weaves its way through the narratives and provides actors with additional opportunities for play and discovery of character. There are smart-asses, like Doug in *Sarah* and *From Every Mountainside*, Kimi in *What Remains* and Coby in *Voices From the Shore*, who help drive some of the fun of the plays, but the humor tends to grow easily out of character and situation, so it's fun to discover. It does relieve the serious nature of the action, but it's not simply comic relief. For instance, Lucas, Joel's best friend in *Voices From the Shore*, uses humor to diffuse tense situations and also to protect his friend. His romantic pursuits are also pretty funny as he awkwardly pursues a girl who is dating someone else. Bush's humor provides actors with another way to discover and to identify with the characters.

Art is a central motif throughout this collection. I don't think that's accidental. In a way, we see the playwright's ruminations about the relevance and power of theatre and the other arts. The characters are actors and dancers and musicians and visual artists. Characters use their art to make sense of, to form, to pattern their experience. Trisha dances to relieve her anxiety in *What Remains*; Matt draws to express his longings in *From Every Mountainside*; Sarah externalizes her grief in her clothing and her butterfly make-up. This patterning, again, becomes symbolic. Music, too, is not merely a soundtrack. Rather it is integral to the action and to the development of character, theme and mood. The songs

of Urna in *Sarah*, Gayle in *Wildboy*, Holly in *Voices from the Shore* and Nan in *From Every Mountainside* all resonate importantly with the action. And music plays in the lives of the characters as it does for teenagers of any era. The arts aspect of Bush's work is particularly appealing to student actors who recognize themselves in the characters. But it also speaks to the generative power of the arts in student lives, for me a particularly relevant dimension of these plays.

The outlier in this collection is, of course, *The Three Musketeers*. It's a period piece; it's an adaptation; its language is somewhat archaic; its characters are not primarily teenagers. It's fully appropriate to the collection, though. As Steers points out in the play's introduction, D'Artagnan is "exploring the larger world" of love, religious conviction, political commitment and morality. Plus it's darn good fun.

A special word must be reserved for *Sarah*, the first play in the collection and the first one published. Sarah appears again with several of her friends in *From Every Mountainside*. She appears once more with Karen, and with Trisha from *Voices From the Shore*, in *What Remains*. That Sarah haunts Bush's imagination might be a little strong, but it's clear he has difficulty shaking her. Bush crafted Sarah from a real model with whom he conducted numerous interviews. He knows the character intimately and it shows in her complexity and language.

Sarah gives us a glimpse into Bush's method. He is meticulous in developing real people. I directed *Voices From the Shore* during the development period, prior to publication, and Bush came down to see the show and refine the play. My stage manager intrigued him by her speech patterns and energy. He interviewed her extensively (with parents' permission of course) for a character in *Kara in Black*. He also spoke to Vietnam vets for *Kara in Black*. In his own introduction to *Looking Out*, he reports conducting multiple, in-depth interviews. Language and character in *From Every Mountainside* was based on interviews, too. My school has commissioned two plays from Bush. For both, he was terribly interested in my students' feedback on language: Do people talk like that? The characters that populate this collection are authentic teenagers. The crises they experience may be heightened, but they represent real struggles that real teenagers go through. As brilliantly drawn as Proctor may be, it takes a huge leap for an adolescent to understand him. There are all sorts of reasons to produce plays from the classic repertoire. I do it all the time. But it's also vital to hit students where they live. They really respond to the characters and their conflicts. This collection of plays *for* adolescent actors *about* adolescent experience provides an invaluable resource for high-school drama programs across the country.

I want to thank Bush's collaborators for their thoughtful introductions to the plays that follow. They all reinforce in some way that Bush's plays are relevant to the lives of students, and that they engage students in the theatrical process and in the world around them. These plays have an important role in a balanced high-school repertoire.