

Performing Arts

A Call to Humanity: Transforming Education Through Performance

By Betsy Barricklow and Pamela Shaver

In 1994, motivated by the belief that serious involvement in music and drama is a force for the development of compassionate and purposeful individuals, Laurel Fisher, Greg Fisher, and Betsy Barricklow co-founded the only performing arts focused Waldorf high school in the world (as far as we know). They discovered that their approach enlivens thinking and interest in serious academic work. Tara Performing Arts High School students and alums are enthusiastic about learning—and about life itself.

Tara, in Boulder, Colorado, has the objective to use the performing arts as a means of transformation. Our purpose is immersion in the process designed and developed through the genius and creative power of Laurel Fisher, and the result is more than just a good performance: something has been created that remains within the students for the rest of their lives.

The performing arts are collaborative and social in both process and presentation. An important part of our approach—in drama, choir, and festival offerings—is building and maintaining a cohesive and supportive ensemble built on respect and honest interaction. We are teaching individuals how to be leaders within a group and how to sacrifice, contribute and collaborate toward a greater goal.

Through drama, students explore the full spectrum of the human experience: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Tara's carefully designed process of developing and becoming a character has the potential to create an awakening, allowing students to see and experience the world from a perspective other than their own. Students often find themselves (intentionally) cast in roles opposite their dispositions, and our approach provides the opportunity to study human nature and universal and contemporary human issues.

One of the critical distinguishing factors of our method is the recognition of drama as a spiritual substance that allows students to find new dimensions of their very beings. After each run-through, right up to the closing performance, the students gather and are asked to reflect on what went well and what still has room for growth. It is not perfectionism we are working toward; it is an expansion of the spirit; the power of true, compassionate interest in the world.

"Through drama at Tara, I was given the chance to experience the vulnerability of letting everyone see emotion deep inside of me and asked to empathize with a person who fictitiously lived long ago in a different culture....I learned about universal truths

that never change; I learned about what makes us human. And then I had to show an audience the truth of the character and write about it in a journal; I had to make these ideas concrete and tangible. This has given me opportunities to excel in all areas of my life."

—Cameron Coupe, Class of 2012

Time—at least two weeks of all-day rehearsal—is dedicated to delving deeply into this process, preparing not only the semi-professional productions that Tara is known for but, more importantly, fostering the remarkable personal growth this work can inspire. Through challenging yet deeply satisfying work, self-discovery is reached. We strive to find the balancing point where asking any more of the students would be too much, but any less would dilute the experience.

"Being in a Tara production pushes you to places within yourself that you never thought you could reach, and when you get there, and you think you have done everything you can, there is still one more performance to go, and you have to stretch even further. It is in that place, after crossing over the threshold, that you discover new things about yourself."

— Connor Moss, Class of 2009

Given Tara's focus, each grade has a play, each seasonal festival is enlivened by performance, and each school year ends with an all-school musical. The shows are chosen to meet many criteria, including alignment/reinforcement of curricular and developmental benchmarks, the specific challenges/strengths of each group of students, and learning opportunities provided by the text and its context.

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ROW 1: Tyler Smith and Tara Moghbel in Tina Howe's *Pride's Crossing*, 2020; *Newsies*, All-School Musical, 2019.

ROW 2: Adrian Emmett-Mattox, Jay Toole and Mikayla Simoneau in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2017; Kiri Booth, Mozart Mass soloist, Christmas Candlelight Festival, 2020. ROW 3: Emma Simoneau and Chorus in Sophokles' *Antigone*, 2017; and *Guys and Dolls*, All-School Musical 2018.

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PHOTO BY FLAVIO DE PINA SOARES DE CARVALHO, CLASS OF 2019



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Mikayla Simoneau and Hannah Rudman in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, 2017; *Les Misérables*, All-School Musical 2022; and Tara's Bell Choir, Christmas Candlelight Festival 2020.

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The Grade 9 play is drawn from commedia dell'arte or showcases commedia-like themes. Inhabiting these larger-than-life characters, acting out the extremes that they feel inside themselves perfectly meets the ninth graders' state of being.

In the spirit of community that is such an important part of our school, Grades 10 and 11 work on a play together. In alternate years, this is Shakespeare, so that by graduation all students have experienced Tara's concentrated exploration of language for sound and meaning. Every other year, the play is usually drawn from classic historical literature, inviting the students to live into a time and place apparently quite different from but, in human terms, quite similar to our own.

Twelfth graders begin their theatrical year with scenes that underline the Michaelmas theme and are offered as a focal point of that festival. Their class play is usually a modern work—like *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Noises Off*, *The Fantasticks*—that allows the students to synthesize all the dramatic skills they've learned over the years.

The all-school musical is the dramatic celebration that rounds out the year. Academic classes end in mid-May, and we have a full month for the rehearsal process. In “ensemble thinking,” all roles serve the whole; hence, challenging and engaging chorus roles are critical in our musical choices. Additionally, we ask: Is the music of high enough quality to warrant a semester's worth of work and attention? Is the story worth telling? Are its themes thought-provoking, transformational, will they speak to our higher natures? A few favorites are *Les Misérables*, *In the Heights*, and *The Secret Garden*.

All Tara students participate in our choral program. Under the inspired guidance of our musical director, even those who believe they can't (or won't) sing eventually (and joyously) add their voices to the harmony, and even perform solos. The choral year begins at Michaelmas, when beloved African songs and seasonal music ring out into the crisp air. After that, the fall semester is devoted to preparing music for the Candlelight Festival, and in the spring, choir focuses on the all-school musical. At graduation, choral selec-

tions from throughout the year are offered as part of the ceremony.

“I have come to understand that the things that make singing at Tara so powerful – awareness, dedication, enthusiasm and warmth of heart – permeate every aspect of this education. As our voices blend together, we become greater than the sum of our parts, and it becomes quite clear to me that, together, we can change the world.”

—Phoebe Carter, Class of 2012

During Tara's classrooms-without-walls travel, our students have spontaneously exchanged music with members of an indigenous community in Kino Bay, Mexico, and elders on a Hopi reservation in Arizona. Tara students' voices have echoed in great Gothic cathedrals in Europe and off mighty cliffs along the San Juan River.

Greg and Laurel Fisher have stepped back from day-to-day operations, and Betsy Barricklow will also do so sometime in the next few years. But their vision of what Steiner's curriculum enriched by the performing arts could offer young people shines on as this unusual and compelling program continues to thrive.

“Though I didn't leave Tara knowing all life's answers, I did leave with a prop box full of everything I needed to succeed: courage, knowledge, wisdom, passion, creativity...Tara gave me a foundation where I could write my life into being, in any way I chose.”

—Genevieve Kemp, Class of 2020

Betsy Barricklow began her Waldorf teaching career in the kindergarten at Highland Hall Waldorf School in Northridge, California, where she worked for 20 years as a class teacher and then administrator. In 1997, she co-founded Tara Performing Arts High School, with Greg and Laurel Fisher

Pamela Shaver came to Tara as a ninth-grade parent in 2007 and has been working there ever since in a variety of roles including head costumer, enrollment coordinator, and chief editor. Currently, she is Tara's Outreach & Marketing Coordinator, Alumni Liaison, and History Through Art teacher.