I Remember These Things

By Tommy Robertshaw '10

There's no accounting for the things wound up in memory's web. Sometimes, most often in the morning when my brain is up but my eyes not yet open, long-off images unspool themselves and surprise me with visits from those earliest days of learning—those lilting days spent in a red brick fortress, curling spiral staircases up and down in a line of blue blazers and khaki pants. Ten years of memories at 12 East 89th Street, New York, NY 10128.

Tartuffe in Moliere's "Tartuffe"

The address is a good example. One of the first things I ever learned to write down, its letters and numbers still are etched into the ear of my mind like a mantra. I remember all of my 37 classmates' names—many of their middle names, too—and can hear them recited in their own voices, suspended in a whistling pre-pubescent treble. The words to our prayer at lunchtime tumble into my thoughts before meals at long tables and when I occasionally wake in time for sunrise, I'll hear myself hum the tune to "Morning Has Broken," a favorite Chapel hymn. The Upper School dining room smelled like yeast, didn't it, like those squishy bread rolls we were always eating, like Muenster bagels; and the Eighth Grade hallway like power, refinement, and Ms. Iannicelli's perfume.

All these things I remember happily. But there are other memories looping around up there that aren't so nice. That prick at me, even now. To describe the category these usually fall into, I'll borrow a term from the great humanist George Saunders: failures of kindness. Moments when I could have helped but chose to hurt—when I might have soothed but instead, I snickered—when, so many times, I cleaved myself from that most important Saint David's signpost of good manners: respect.

So, I was glad when I read Dr. O'Halloran's letter announcing *respect* as the year's theme. It's what we need most of all at a time like this, I thought, when suspicion and resentment fill the spaces between words of disagreement. When the hardest gift for any of us to give each other seems to be the benefit of the doubt.

"I knew then as well as I do now that I'm gay. But it would be another six long years before anybody else did."

For the last 10 years or so, I've passed many of my happier hours making theatre. Even when I hate it, I love it: the challenge of getting a hold on the slippery truth of our lives; feeling electrically bound to another actor; the cleansing rush of what Robert Frost calls "a momentary stay against confusion;" and—I'll be the second or third to admit it—the spine-tingling thrill of applause. As with the rest of my sensibilities, this love began at Saint David's. (Suddenly I can hear the pipe organ chords of our Alma Mater: "All that we can be, all that we will be, all we are, began i-in thee-ee." Anyone remember the Latin?)

Seventh Grade. Mr. Kilkeary. Sophocles' *Antigone*. I played King Creon, the character left by play's end with a pile of

Astrov in Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya"

I rhapsodized on this theme for much of the week and, cruelly, targeted many of my joke-sheathed barbs at one of my classmates, who I'm sure remembers them just as well as I do. If you're reading this, old friend, I'm sorrier than I can say.

When we'd been back at school a few days, Mr. Kilkeary held me from Chapel, and I knew I'd been found out. He looked at me so quietly through his wide frame glasses. Just a few nights before, he'd been reading my cabin of boys to sleep from a legendary paperback of scary short stories. A few months later, he'd direct me in the play that would carve out the shape of my life. I could feel acutely that I'd let him down. After, while I sat on Ms. Peavy's bench awaiting judgment, I cried and cried. I knew then as well as I do now that I'm gay. But it would be another six long years before anybody else did.

Theatre begins with the premise that we can be pulled by the force of deep feeling nearer to understanding—that we might really be able to extend beyond the chamber of our own being to share in the pain, the joy, the rich interior life of another. I have to think that this is a noble goal, even as it seems harder to believe in of late, as identity politics—the organizing attitude du jour—yanks from Left and Right at our faith in a common truth.

corpses to mourn over (loudly). Not many schools have the cojones to do the Greek classics anymore—to do them with a gender-bending cast of middle school boys—I'd have to guess that's nearly unheard of. Here is a 2,500-year-old story about the responsibilities of family love poised against the demands of the State, the liberating individual in conflict with the restraining collective. A fashionable and growing distaste for the Western Canon notwithstanding, the play persists; it was dazzlingly revived by a Japanese troupe just last month at the Park Avenue Armory. Even in those days of peach fuzz and voice cracks I could feel the gravity of its timelessness. The echoes of something universal. And it would follow me like a shadow to my next two schools, this play, eventually to become the linchpin around which my understanding of theatre revolves.

What is it in the end that makes *Antigone* eternal? It dramatizes an irresolvable tension: it is right vs. right. There are no clear villains and no absolute heroes. The play reminds us that if we're honest, we're uncertain. And if we're rigid, that we'll break.

On my trip to Cape Cod, also in the Seventh Grade—God, do we ever really recover from being 13?—I did and said some things that I still have trouble thinking of with mercy. It started in Provincetown, with a flag.

The flag was a rainbow one, posted at the entrance of a white-clapboard colonial home near the Army Navy surplus store. Straddling my bike, I pointed it out to some friends and snickered and called it "a disgrace." With the kind of pseudo-intellectual language lots of us cling to before we've lived long enough to shed the pseudo, I went on and on about "the gay agenda."

Since I left Saint David's, I've been lucky to perform in, write, or direct over 40 plays. With other cast and crew members, I have navigated stories of sexual violence, American slavery, and anti-black hatred—sashayed for laughs in the comedies of Oscar Wilde—embodied rapists and villains, kings and jesters, doctors and priests—have died at least a dozen times and been resurrected once—given my voice to fathers, sons, and, once, Marina Abromavich. In all this work, if it has hopes of being any good, there is no choice but to move through it with respect. With a listening ear and heart. With the solemn acknowledgement that every player on the stage of the world, more often than not, believes they're in the right.

Respect, as I understand it, is awareness that my fellow human being feels his life as deeply as I do mine. That there are worlds familiar and yet, in so many ways unknown to me in the deep folds of his soul. That in this life, we don't just live with each other, but magically, for each other too. There, another memory: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

On my way from the pharmacy some recent October afternoon, I walk a few extra blocks uptown to watch the old dismissal train pull out between Madison and Fifth. Turning the corner where the Lower School gym used to be, where I learned to play kickball and met my first best

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friend, I run into Ms. Clark. We talk about the Chamber Singers and theatre and my new life in Brooklyn. She pulls over Mr. Morales who remembers that he knows me but can't quite place the name. "Robertshaw," I say, and his face curls with friendly skepticism, a look well known to me and my younger brothers Fred and Frank. "One of you guys," he says, and we laugh.

We stand there for a moment before parting, while boys strapped to red backpacks weave around us, and the same man as always thwacks out Italian ices under a white and green umbrella. I shake his hand and notice grey in his beard and wrinkles between his eyes. "You're so old!" he says to me, smiling.

I walk up the street against that rushing current of boys bound for afterschool snacks, for homework, for family dinners. I wonder what parts of today they'll remember in 10, 15, 20 years. And, of course, I think of those bobbing among them who are struggling in the silent confusion and shame of feeling different. It'll be alright, I want to tell them. Hang in there.

In all their faces, I catch flashes of my old friends and of myself and of our sunny, complicated origins. And when I turn left at the Guggenheim I know that I am grateful for the memories of the little boy who I was, and for all those 89th Street voices forever in my head, still sounding out the way of the good man I am trying always to become. ■

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Slim in Sam Shepard's "Cowboy Mouth"