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Emma-Jane: Back in the Spotlight

From the age of seven, Emma-Jane Huerta knew exactly what she wanted to be.

“I remember saying, ‘I want to be an actor,’ and the grownups rolling their eyes like ‘Yeah, typical’. But I did,” Huerta said.

Growing up in London, Huerta was exposed to the theater scene from a young age. She remembers going to see her godmother in a production of “Chekhov’s Three Sisters.” Her mother couldn’t find a babysitter for Huerta and her brother the night of the performance, so she brought them along. 7-year-old Huerta was enraptured by the performance, and even more so by the energy present backstage after the show.

Huerta said, “The room was packed with people just stripping off, taking off makeup, talking excitedly, laughing, yelling, throwing deodorant around at each other.... I thought it was the greatest thing I’d ever seen.”

From that point on, Huerta was completely dedicated to perfecting her craft. She attended as many summer camps, workshops, and plays as she possibly could. When she graduated secondary school, she was set to go to the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London, one of the best drama schools in the U.K.. However, plans soon changed.

“It’s very common for them to say, ‘Take a year and live’,” said Huerta. “So I went to India to fill a year and have adventures, which I did, but then I ended up staying there for nearly four years.”

Not long after her time in India, Huerta moved to America. She didn’t act at all for her first five years in the U.S. Finally, she saw an advertisement for a theater workshop, and felt

ready to get back into it. While it just turned out to be an adult education class, that experience got Huerta back into acting.

“I ended up being in a play and being sort of secretly relieved that I can still do this, because here’d been this five year gap. Then I went down to LA and just started doing one play after another,” Huerta said.

Eventually, she landed a job teaching drama at Peabody Charter School. She worked at Peabody for 20 years, and created a theater program, Upstarts Youth Theatre, that students could participate in.

“The whole idea of me at Peabody was that they brought me in as an Artist-in-Residence,” Huerta said, “It was the era of the California Arts Council giving grants.”

However, funding soon dried up, and Huerta found herself having to defend the drama program against other departments like the library. She remembers being terrified when having to face off against the librarian who had brought a delegation of parents to speak up on her behalf.

Part of Huerta’s pitch included talking about the communication skills and self-confidence students gained by attending a weekly drama class. Apparently, the principal at the time, Kate Ford, agreed, because she decided that the school would keep just the drama program.

“There was uproar,” Huerta said. “In the end they caved in and they kept both of us. But there was always this thing of drama being good enough to be kept in the school system.”

For the time being it was, and Huerta’s drama classes and theater program continued to thrive. When you were a third grader at Peabody, you could audition to be a part of Upstarts.

Huerta even wrote and directed her own plays for it, including interpretations of “Oliver Twist,” “Macbeth,” Clue, and “Frankenstein.”

This wasn’t her first foray into directing, but her first experience working with such young actors. The first thing she learned: she had a whole second cast to deal with — their parents. While working with divorced families proved tricky, she had many parents come up to her remarking on the effect she had on their children.

“They’d use me as a threat. Like, ‘Oh, I’ll tell Emma-Jane you can’t do the play’,” Huerta said.

Sequoia Chamlee, who acted with Upstarts for all four years, took a look back on her time in the program, and the skills that she gained.

“A part of my personality is probably formed based on that, because it definitely taught me a lot about myself,” Chamlee said.

She also shared a fond memory from the rehearsal process of “Ghostbusted,” a suspenseful play based on Clue, and her favorite that she was in. Because Huerta wrote the plays herself, Chamlee shared that she would sometimes be tweaking elements up until the last minute. They would get the scripts in little chunks, as Huerta finished writing them.

Chamlee said, “One day right before Thanksgiving break we got the final part of the script where we were going to have the reveal of the whole Whodunnit aspect... that was just a wild surprise.”

Another former Upstart, Arnav Wadhwa credits the experience as having developed his public speaking abilities and presentational skills, but recognizes the unnecessary stress it put on his younger self.

“That was something that we all did very happily and willingly, and I’m glad I did that [Upstarts]...but it was a huge time sink, and I think that it is not something that 90% of us continued at all,” said Wadhwa.

Huerta attributes part of this to the perception of theater in America, and in modern times. Though they had a handful of songs, the plays she wrote for Upstarts were never what she would consider musicals.

“People now, especially younger actors, associate, ‘Oh it’s live theater, therefore it must be a musical’,” said Huerta. “It’s just, there’s always been space for other theater too.”

Huerta is still an actor and performer in her own right, but as she’s gotten older, there are less roles available to her. But, the good thing about being a director is that she can create them for herself.

“It’s a good thing that I can direct, because I’d be heartbroken if I couldn’t work in the theater,” said Huerta.