

That week in Nebraska

Lives in the arts and an enduring friendship began at the Thespian Festival

BY JONATHAN RAND



*The author, at eighteen, in the Thespian Playworks workshop of his play *Hard Candy* at the 1998 Thespian Festival.*

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM tells us that teenage summers consist of nothing but beaches and surfboards and Katy Perry songs. That may be true for some, but for the theatrically obsessed among us, summer means Lincoln, Nebraska and the International Thespian Festival. And for two Jacksonville teenagers fifteen years ago, it started everything.

Just before graduating high school in 1998, I was among four student playwrights selected for the Thespian Playworks program, which meant

flying to the Thespian Festival for a workshop and staged reading of the first play I'd ever written, *Hard Candy*. Not long after I landed in Lincoln, it became clear I wasn't the only Jacksonville Thespian in town with stars in his eyes. It turned out my roommate for the week was an aspiring actor named Patrick Heusinger. We knew each other from back home, having shared the stage in some local musicals, but I went to Stanton College Prep and he was across town at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts,

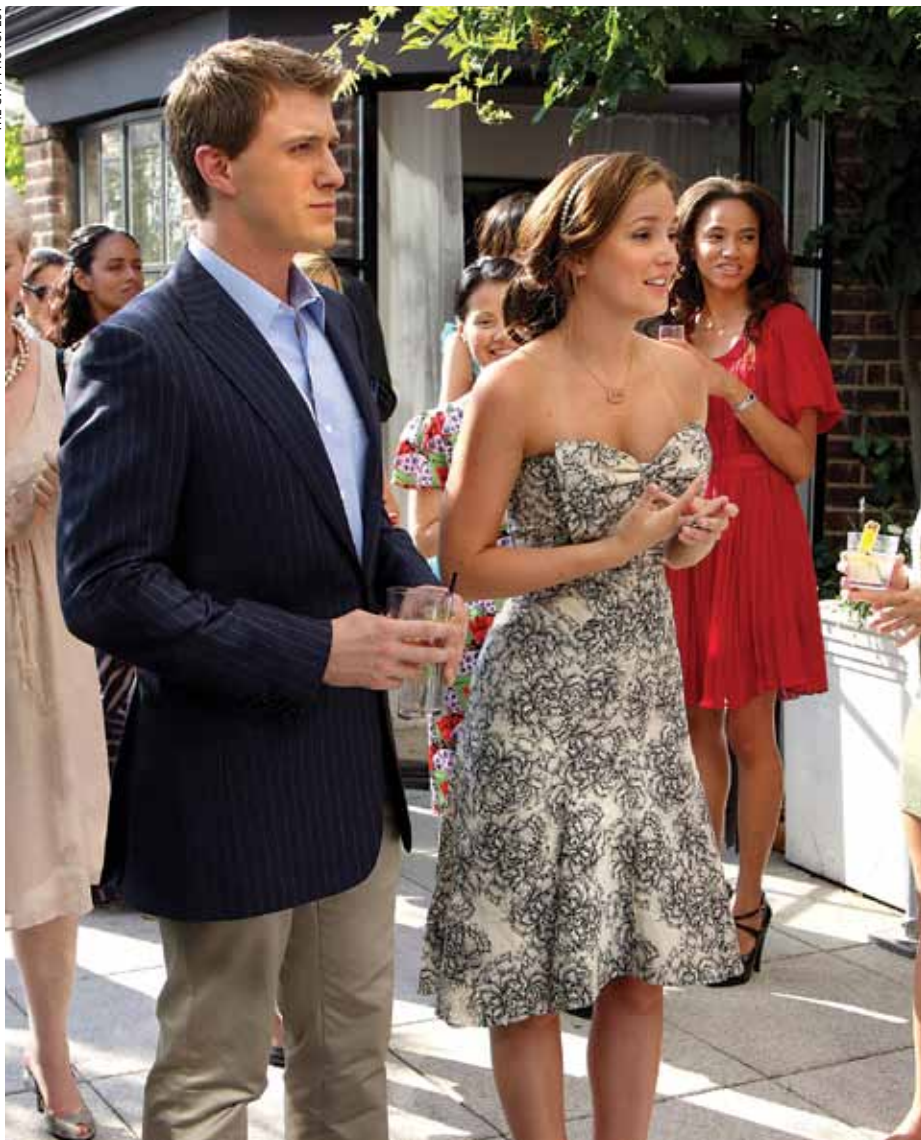
and we were far from close friends. Neither of us knew it at the time, but that was all about to change.

Throughout the week of non-stop workshops, auditions, rehearsals, and rewrites, Patrick and I were inseparable. We had instantly become not only friends, but collaborators. When we weren't in the cafeteria brainstorming *Hard Candy* dialogue tweaks, we were in the dorms honing Patrick's monologues for an audition. And in the audience of every single mainstage show, we sat side by side, soaking in each production with giant grins on our faces. How lucky we were to be a part of this once-in-a-lifetime experience. For us, this was Broadway.

Like all good things, the Thespian Festival must come to an end. After the Individual Events showcase (at which I proudly watched Patrick perform his top-rated monologues), the two of us went our separate ways—he back to Jacksonville for his final year of high school, and I to the University of Pennsylvania to start college.

As we moved on, there was an unspoken question in the air: would either of us attempt a career in theatre?

Over the next few years, we each began working toward an answer to that question. Patrick's high school career culminated in an acceptance letter from The Juilliard School, so he headed out to New York City to try his hand at acting professionally. Meanwhile, in Philly, I was overjoyed to find that my little Playworks play *Hard Candy* actually had legs. As a result of my own limited web marketing of the play during my freshman year, it landed more than a hundred productions in twelve countries. On the heels of that experience, my brother Doug and I founded the play publishing and licensing company Playscripts, Inc. (www.playscripts.com), and after graduating college, I too headed to New York City,



Jon's Thespian Festival roommate Patrick Heusinger performing a monologue in the 1998 Individual Events showcase, at left, and ten years later, with Leighton Meester in *Gossip Girl*.

to try my hand at a career in publishing and playwriting.

The Playscripts office (a.k.a. my tiny apartment) and Juilliard stood mere blocks apart, so in no time at all, Patrick and I resumed the friendship we'd begun in Nebraska four years earlier. We were once again collaborators, but on different turf. After a full day of writing and representing the playwrights in the Playscripts catalog, I'd walk over to Juilliard to watch Patrick light up the stage. Afterwards, much like our cafeteria conversations in Lincoln, we'd retire to our standby pizza joint to compare notes.

Even with all the excitement, our futures were still uncertain. A Juilliard degree can only take an actor so far, and Playscripts was still operating out of a ten-square-foot apartment. We were pursuing our dreams, but the new question became: could we succeed?

Fast-forward to the present day. Nearly fifteen years have passed since our friendship began at the Thespian Festival. And while a lot has changed since then, a lot has stayed the same.

We still regularly watch plays together, though instead of the Broadway-caliber student productions in Lincoln, the Broadway-caliber shows

are now literally on Broadway. (It should be said that we still rank the Raymore-Peculiar High production of *Broadway Bound* at Lincoln among our all-time favorites.)

And much like our monologue-honing sessions in the University of Nebraska dorms, I still lend Patrick a helping hand for auditions. Before he landed the juicy *Gossip Girl* role of Blair Waldorf's summer fling, Lord Marcus, it was my pre-audition line readings as Blair that surely made the difference.

I'm kidding, of course—Patrick's success is the direct result of his ambition, training, and pure talent. It's

what led him to plum roles on *30 Rock*, *Royal Pains*, and *Law & Order: SVU*, and to star in the Tony-nominated Broadway tour de force, *Next Fall*.

My own career has reached heights I could never have imagined while I was feverishly rewriting *Hard Candy* in a Lincoln computer lab. My plays have since become some of the most-produced in the world, with nearly 7,000 productions across all fifty states and forty-five countries. Moreover, Playscripts has grown out of its dorm room and into fully-staffed Manhattan offices, where it represents

over 1,800 plays by nearly nine hundred playwrights, and was ranked by *Inc.* magazine as one of the nation's fastest growing companies. And when Playscripts celebrated its tenth anniversary, guess which actor starred in the evening's performance of my play, *Check Please*.

Sure enough, after fifteen years, Patrick and I are still just as much theatrical teammates today as we were as a pair of teens roaming Lincoln, except now we're doing so as successful theatre professionals. There's no telling what's in store for

us as our careers continue to unfold; what we *do* know is that our time in Lincoln had a categorically lasting impact. It was a moment that not only ignited the theatrical careers of two wide-eyed students, but also an enduring friendship. In 1998, Patrick was my roommate for a week; a few months ago, he was a groomsman at my wedding.

So on behalf of a pair of lifetime Thespians from Jacksonville: a standing ovation for the International Thespian Festival. We can't thank you enough. ▼

Once Thespian chums, now they're boldface names

OVER THE YEARS, I've witnessed several friends from my Thespian days end up in flourishing artistic careers. Here are just a few examples.

Aaron Staton and I first met backstage at a Thespian festival. At the time he was performing a duet pantomime; now he plays account man Ken Cosgrove on the hit TV series *Mad Men*.

Ashley Brown and I each sang Critics' Choice songs at the Florida Thespian Festival closing ceremonies. We later reconnected in New York, where she played the lead in



Daniel Breaker as Donkey, with Brian d'Arcy James, in *Shrek*.

both *Beauty and the Beast* and *Mary Poppins* on Broadway—a role she originated.

Daniel Breaker was the quintessential Renaissance Thespian in Jacksonville, performing songs, soliloquies, Tony Kushner scenes—everything. He went on to receive a Tony nomination for his role in *Passing Strange*, and then starred as Donkey in the Broadway musical *Shrek*.

Lucy Alibar and I met in the cafeteria at the International Thespian Festival, and remained friends while working in New York theatre. She wrote a play that she later adapted to the screenplay *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, winner of top honors at both Cannes and Sundance.

Emily Swallow and I have been friends since middle school, and our original duet pantomime was selected among all performances to represent our Thespian district at the state level. Emily has gone on to make her mark in several TV series and on Broadway, and will star opposite Alfred Molina and Ving Rhames in the David E. Kelley hospital drama *Monday Mornings*, premiering next month on TNT.

Ryan Key and I met while we each performed plays and musicals at a Thespian festival. He's still singing today, but not quite musical theatre—Ryan's the lead singer for punk-pop sensation Yellowcard.

—J.R.



Ashley Brown in *Mary Poppins*.