

# *Audience Participation*

BY LIZ LYDIC



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Josh pulled over at Long View High School's main entrance to check the note from Ms. Jensen. Follow the signs along the long driveway (be careful, a little bumpy!), and you'll see a large parking lot. Across from that is our humble theatre. You'll have a ticket and clipboard waiting for you at Will Call. We are SO happy to have you join us!!!! Carla Jensen, LVHS Drama Teacher. Josh put the car into drive. The parking lot was mostly empty, save for two SUV's and a Prius. There was movement near the building marked **Music & Drama**, where some adults were setting up a concession stand. Josh was early, which meant there was time to walk the campus.

He'd first heard of *Broken Easter Egg* when it came to Salt Lake City on tour a few years ago, but hadn't seen it. The plot was a satire riff on *The Great Gatsby*. Josh had been told by many of his theatre friends that he was 'born' to play the show's villain, The Buke, a mustache-twirling, vaudevillian version of Tom Buchanan. His preference would have been an introduction to the show other than from Long View High School, but he was dedicated to the Utah Drama Academic Society, affectionately referred to as U-DAS, from which he'd been a product of decades ago. Now he served as a coveted, long-standing judge. For high school seniors to move through the U-DAS adjudication cycle guaranteed ease as a college theatre program freshman.

The matinee of *Egg* was the production's closing performance, and an unrelenting sun raged on this November afternoon. A handful of kids played basketball on a sizzling gray court. Around the corner, on a pristine track, a panting blonde girl ran drills at the direction of a coach or dad. Inside the theatre ten minutes later, in a reserved middle center seat labeled 'Judge', Josh was overwhelmed by the closeness of the packed house. He asked a slouching student usher for assistance in moving to an aisle seat. The girl mumbled her response quietly. "I can't do anything to help you with that," she said, her eyes void of opinion as they locked on his. At the parent-staffed box office, smiling, Josh said he needed to speak with Ms. Jensen. Moving seemed to throw her off; she stated twice that really, the best place for Josh was center, just a few rows back from the stage. Explaining that he could not note-take without a free armrest helped Josh get resituated on the aisle of his row.

*Broken Easter Egg*'s start time came and went, the delay due to a cycled shuffling of cast family members, staff and LVHS Board members. Ms. Jensen personally attempted to relocate audience members so they could remain grouped together. Bodies packed tighter, voices rose, and the air stiffened. Women, a sea of shiny faces and heeled mules and flowing light-colored tunics, used show programs to fan themselves. Josh struggled not to stare at the crowd. He busied himself with reading the cast bios in the program. His concentration was null, though. The audience noise was increasing. Words like 'weather,' 'Netflix,' 'attorney,' 'Junior,' 'Thanksgiving,' 'Belize,' and 'specialized' popped out and landed on Josh. Laughter was deep or sharp, sudden and aggressive.

Ms. Jensen as she entered again, counting seats as she stood at the foot of the stage. The front row was set on the same plane as the apron, and Josh, two rows back, sensed thrill in the proximity. A fast-walking dad in cargo shorts and an 'Old Guys Rule' t-shirt brushed Josh's leg. "Hey, man, I'm glad you made it!" he said to someone in a row or two above

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Josh. The dad's voice was booming. "No, this is Morgan's sixth show," he was saying. "...his last." The other man's response was audible but the words indistinct. Morgan's dad went on, the information coming in pieces. "...lot of options, but he...Carnegie Mellon." Josh's head popped up. Ms. Jensen was asking for attention, the crowd hushed, and the dad returned to his seat. The color of a nearby grandma's scarf gave way to the image of an acceptance letter from Carnegie Mellon University. A single slip of paper with Josh's name and address on the upper left recalled an existence at a moderate apartment. The college's red, green and purple commanding seal. 'Dear Mr. Noland....' How his parents could tell him 'no' to anything after that - no to additional time with his private vocal coach, no to an acting workshop in the city, and unfortunately, no, but Carnegie Mellon was simply too expensive - after being desired by the school so strongly that he was addressed as Mr., was unimaginable.

During Ms. Jensen's curtain speech, Josh read Morgan Holmes' bio in the program.

***Morgan Holmes is a senior at LVHS, where he has performed in over 12 productions. When he's not acting, he enjoys golf, making short films with his friends, and snowboarding. Morgan is thrilled to be bringing to life The Buke, and for the chance to be in this incredible production. He would like to thank his mom and dad for always believing in him, the amazing cast and crew for being on this journey together, and of course, to the one and only Ms. Jensen for her vision and guidance. Morgan hopes you all enjoy the show, and don't forget to 'Close your bespeckled eyes when you see a green light, yous beautiful little fools.'***

Josh joined the round of applause as the lights dimmed, and welcomed a familiar stir. That moment at the beginning, always, always, beckoned him to believe in everything, to trust the endless possibilities that could unfold in two hours, his only job to sit and trust.

For the first few scenes, Josh made general notes, and eased into the tone of the play. A wispy kid played narrator Nikolini Bellini Fettucini Carroway, and Josh wrote Generous leader next to the student's name. The quirky, sketch-comedy design of *Broken Eastern Egg* was effective, and Josh noted that the kids committed to it with energy and focus. Nice balance, Josh scribbled for the student actress playing Bellis Perennis Buchanan - Daisy from the original story - his shorthand for an actor's ability to play realism and comedy equally. He actually laughed aloud, genuinely, when the actress addressed the crowd to cry "I was thrown over a telephone right after I saw beautiful shirts!" The appearance of The Buke seemed intentionally delayed: the characters spoke of him for several scenes where Josh felt the character should have been present. After a few beats, he recognized the building of tension, that the stakes were set by the character's attitude toward The Buke before the audience saw him. The payoff was huge.

Morgan Holmes was thin, but what he lacked in hulk he made up for in height. More than that though, and Josh took note of this, Morgan owned his body. Seemingly free from typical 18-year old self-consciousness, or overinflated confidence, Holmes stood, walked and delivered lines like a professional adult actor, grounded firmly on the stage naturally, and used perfect volume. Josh put the CarePoint Health work pen in his pocket,

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...esmerized. In his peripheral vision, Josh saw that throughout the audience, bodies were still, chins jutted toward the stage.

The entire cast was deftly handling a large party scene that required various conversations to pop out in rapid succession on top of music, staging, and the ensemble's background dialogue. *How are there so many?* Josh thought. These kids didn't need a personal summons from Ms. Jensen, or their parents, or an exchange of course credit to participate in theatre. Glancing discreetly at the crowd, Josh conjured an assumption: there were students here, watching with seeming actual delight, and even thrill. It wasn't clear if they were part of an entire movement of support for LVHS for drama, or if they had enthusiasm solely for the *Egg* production, which was a clever choice for this age group. The entire concept was unfamiliar to Josh, who, twenty-five years ago, knew not much beyond the series of Neil Simon and Agatha Christie plays he performed on the stage of a dank multi-purpose room shared with the girls volleyball team.

The first act concluded with a Gilbert and Sullivan style musical number, and then a final moment of dramatic tension between Nikolini, Bellis and protagonist Gatz B. Though the beat was utterly devastating, full of intention and authenticity in several unspoken seconds, the act close received only polite clapping, and Josh concluded that no one but Morgan had full command of the audience.

It was still warm outside, and Josh filled his lungs with fresh air. In the theatre courtyard, people unwrapped cheap packets of candy and chips and ate ravenously. Soda cans clapped open, followed by frantic gulping, intermission habits that baffled and disgusted Josh. He wanted to avoid overhearing any comments about the show or the performers, but couldn't ignore the hope that he'd catch something about Morgan. Without his clipboard, Josh didn't draw any curious looks, and he walked to the boys bathroom in a slight slouch.

After fifteen minutes, the crowd reassembled with surprising urgency, and a crackle of energy flurried through the theatre. "I can't wait!" Josh heard a student across the aisle say to her friend. This comment seemed to ripple. "Is this it?" asked a female voice from a few rows above. "Oh my god, he is so hilarious. I can't believe his talent," a fast-talking woman was responding. Josh dipped his head toward the program in his lap and pushed his tongue roughly up on the roof of his mouth. He breathed out so that a static sound echoed in his head, and finally, he heard and felt only himself.

Soon, the lights dimmed to start of Act 2, and a few stifled giggles floated in the darkness. Josh shifted in his seat and coughed to cover for his jumpiness. The lights went up and revealed an elaborate yacht set piece. With blue trim and working lights, this alone garnered a round of applause, which then boomed as each male cast member began appearing one by one, clad only in speedos and skipper hats. The hip-hop style song they performed, 'The Boujee Fool,' described how Gatz B inherited his money from a virtual stranger. All the actors had superb voices and were committed to the performance, but it was Morgan Holmes' rap solo that sent the audience into euphoria. He was totally believable in an unbelievable scenario, managing to avoid generic trappings. Rap = actor

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“Saying his character telling the story thru rap, not just actor rapping for crowd and friends, Josh scribbled. The second act continued with soap opera-like vignettes parodying the story’s complicated romantic tangles. In the residue of the yacht scene, the ensemble was louder, faster, funnier. The audience followed suit, and the push and pull that Josh had experienced so seldomly as an actor was now something he was fully in, on the other side.

Without a sliver of slowed pace, the play shifted to a luncheon scene set on a hot day. During the cast’s repeating absurd exchanges about the weather, Josh wondered if the air conditioning in the theatre had been turned down. Audience members were again fanning themselves with their programs. A moment later, the cast was playing their scene at a fully set table in complete silence. Josh squinted his eyes as if that could help him verify if the script called for the exceptionally long period of quiet, or for real food to be eaten, both such bold directing choices. He could hear the tearing of bread and the scraping of a loaded fork along an actor’s teeth. Josh didn’t dare move to write a note, so he looped one in his head, though it was unlikely he would later - or ever - forget this moment. Absolute control. *Superb creation of tension.* The silence was broken by The Buke, and Josh felt with Morgan the responsibility of choosing the precise moment to begin the beat. His volume was low, at first. Bellis, Gatz B, Nikolini, and the minor players exchanged confused looks as The Buke repeated like a chant “Let’s go to town” until it was audible to all. Morgan stood, suddenly. Plates clattered, a knife fell to the ground, and the actors reacted in character. Josh gasped inaudibly at the pleasure of bearing witness to this moment, the fearlessness to ruin the table set-up and create unscripted noise.

“Said, let’s go to town!” The Buke was now shouting, having received no response from the other characters. Clown-like movements accompanying his suggestion offered only a tiny ripple of laughter from the audience, who knew that Morgan was knee-deep in a moment of The Buke’s mania. *Earned anger*, Josh wrote. *Justified. Believable though big.* The madman routine ended with a line from Gatz B, permitting the audience to release held breaths and laugh with renewed camaraderie. Josh was suddenly pulled from the pleasure of the performance, just a fraction, but the twinge was there. It probably had been there all along, and was just coming to the surface. He didn’t want it to be real or true, this envy, but once he understood that underneath all of this - these scribbled words in the program, his smile, the almost-erotic gratification of stellar theatre - was his own nasty selfishness, he could not return to the relaxed comfort he had found.

Morgan still had The Buke in an underlying rage, though he attempted to control it in the driving scene that followed. The Buke was bragging about his sixth sense, an ability to see things others couldn’t. Not getting the responses he desired from the other characters, The Buke was suddenly up and out of the pantomimed car, pacing the stage as he dove into a diatribe of his keen vision. Then, he stopped abruptly, and the other actors froze. A wedge of silence was followed by a question, too quiet for the audience to hear because The Buke’s was facing upstage, his back to the audience. Josh’s shock drove him to a frantic desire to know if this defiance of blocking rules was Ms. Jensen’s or Morgan Holmes’ doing: that brave, wrong move. The actors shook their heads ‘no’ at whatever The Buke was asking.

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When the question "How stupid do you think I am?" was finally heard, it was stamped with Holmes' sincerity, and in drawing out the 's' ever so slightly, he managed to evoke a nuance of disappointment that lasted long enough to silence the room, before serving as a launching pad to repose the question again and again, on loop to the other actors, to the car set, to the air, into anything that occupied his universe. Particles of Morgan's spit suspended in air, lit by a soft wash as he turned slightly stage right to ask again "How stupid do you think I am?" Flicking back his jacket, lewdly exposing a pocket watch, he strode to center stage and looked at the audience. There was a twitch under his eyes before they widened, and then his lips turned down. His body paused and Josh recognized that it was not The Buke that slowed, but Morgan. As Josh leaned forward, unable to believe that Holmes had dropped a line, Morgan scanned the row until their eyes met. He walked toward Josh, and over the heads of the audience between them, Morgan's upper lip rose and exposed his teeth, pristine in color, and other than one stunning oversized incisor, magnificent in structure.

"How stupid do you think I am?" he asked Josh, and Josh knew in that second that Morgan had sought him out specifically the moment before, and that even though he had changed seats, Morgan still found him. "How stupid do you think I am?" Morgan repeated, this time cocking his head on the last word. Josh swallowed and breathed in, his mouth glued shut. Holmes moved a centimeter closer, his knees now directly in front of a grandma in the front row, who pulled her purse to her bosom and smiled over at her husband with delight. "How stupid do you think I am?" Morgan's eyes squinted. Josh's upper body jerked slightly to the right, as if stricken, and he resisted the urge to reach for his pen. Morgan breathed in slowly, and looked to the ceiling. He brought his head back down, and a new absurd smile toward Josh sent a ripple of laughter through the crowd.

"How stupid do you think I am?" Morgan did a little dance, and perched his right hand over his head, pretending to scratch it, like an ape. Josh opened his mouth, desperate to end all of this by a response, to give The Buke or Morgan Holmes whatever he wanted. But, the audience was now roaring at Holmes' vaudevillian moves: slipping on an invisible banana peel, miming brushing his teeth with a comb extracted from a breast pocket. Josh laughed too, certain that his participation could return his anonymity.

The audience was now applauding, and Josh released a breath, until The Buke was back, in front of him again. "How stupid do you think I am?" This time the question was lost in the scatter of residual laughter, but Josh's stomach reacted with a plunge. Morgan stood like a statue until the crowd quieted. Josh bit the inside of his left cheek, and his nostrils flared and ached.

His stance, he hoped, said enough. He watched Morgan's chest rise and fall, their breaths in sync. Morgan's mouth slid from a sneer into a straight line. And then, Josh was sure, Morgan's eyes began to glisten. There was a tingle behind Josh's nose, and he stifled a rising pull in the back of his throat. The tears came anyway, suspended at his lower eyelids, matching Morgan's. The two men stayed that way for another beat, the silence between them telling of familiarity and understanding, until Morgan suddenly swept his jacket flap back and opened his mouth and bellowed at Josh "How stupid do you think I am?" There

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...as nothing light about Morgan or The Buke then, only the red flash of his heating face, a spray of wetness dissolving into the bright lights, and his eyes, seemingly a shade darker now, black pools of fury. Josh sat up in a jolt, jaw clenched, his own head dizzy as if he had suddenly been cut from a dangling rope, and was hurling downwards fast. He gripped his chair, concerned he was on the brink of passing out. The mom next to him flinched and whispered to her seatmate.

The Buke then sucked in a long breath through his nose, titled his chin to stage right and looked back at Josh. "Pretty stupid, eh? Well," and here Morgan, who had returned to a normal volume, raised an eyebrow and took a perfect dramatic pause, "I have a second sight." Before returning to the rest of the cast, Morgan stamped the line with a closed-mouth smile at Josh. The audience whooped and clapped furiously, some looking back at Josh, shaking heads, a few even pointing. A dad across the aisle leaned over to Josh, and said - not in a whisper - "He got you good, man." The neighboring audience members who heard this laughed, and Josh raised his eyebrows politely to say "Oh well," before pointedly turning back to the stage.

For the remainder of the production, Josh clapped and laughed and feigned focus by picking up the cues of the audience, but his mind looped on Morgan's eyes as he'd hollered, and the turn on his heel after that final outburst, when he had finally given up on Josh. After the curtain call, Josh gathered his items quickly, and left the clipboard on his seat. He squeezed through clueless clumps of families who were chatting in aisles. "Excuse me," he muttered, and flashed a polite smile as he was recognized by audience members, one of whom moved out of the way as if he were dangerous; one who laughed "So, how stupid is he?" and slapped Josh on the shoulder.

At the pre-twilight hour, the lingering warmth in the air was evident by bike-riders and walkers, all beaming and haphazard. Josh sped past houses with mailboxes enclosed in brick, boastful lawns, and imposing brass address numbers. A stop sign appeared out of nowhere, and Josh's car lurched to break at the last second, sending his messenger bag from the passenger seat to the floor. "Fuck!" he yelled, and reached down to retrieve it. A dad in the crosswalk who was guiding a son tentatively pedaling a bike, met Josh's eye. With one hand on the kid's seat, the dad used the other to gesture to the sign, then point back to the son, and mouth to Josh "Come on!"

At home forty minutes later, Josh went straight to his computer, skipping dinner despite a rumble that branched upwards from his stomach to the back of his head, drilling into his agitation. He clicked through the pre-ambling questions of his adjudicator's report: School Name, Production Title, Performance Run Time. He provided politically-correct and encouraging feedback on the set, lights, and directing. For the section requiring recognition of outstanding performances, he copied from the program the names of the students who had played Nikolini, Bellis, Gatz B, and a few other ensemble members. When the prompt for a narrative on acting was generated, Josh wrote without stopping until night fell in its entirety, and until the weather dropped to a temperature he recognized as that of a season change.

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While overall the ensemble of 'Broken Eastern Egg' is strong, there are places that require extra attention in order to elevate this production to excellence. One particular performance that stood out was that of Morgan Holmes. Mr. Holmes, tasked with the role of creating a multi-complex character (The Buke) who, on the surface, appears to only provide conflict for the main players, actually serves as the symbol of the changing times in which the play is set, and can allow the audience to experience peril in the friction between progress and greed. For many a young man, the role would be an opportunity to create a layered, rich world. However, in the LVHS production, it is debatable as to whether Mr. Holmes truly understands the inner struggles of The Buke on a deep level. Actors are tasked with creating backstory and desires for the character in order to elevate the individual into someone the audience truly cares for. While physical and language skills are key components to the success of a comic character, an authentic performance includes nuanced intents and motivations filled in by the actor. Unfortunately, Mr. Holmes failed to do this consistently through the performance, leaving the audience with a one-dimensional portrayal of The Buke, and ultimately, weakening an otherwise effective production.

I encourage the director to work with students to ensure that there is genuine effort to separate the student from the actor, so that whenever onstage, there is less concern about issues related to popularity or 'getting laughs', and to ensure that the acting is the precedence. This script offers the opportunity for actors to not only break a fourth wall, but also dabble in mugging to the audience. Most actors handled this delicately and stayed grounded in their character's intentions, but, unfortunately, Mr. Holmes tended to ignore the overbially line toeing and stood out in his efforts to gain audience approval. A more mature actor would hold a thorough and evident understanding of the privilege he has in performing this role.

While there are some fine and deserving moments in this production, I am unable to recommend it as a final candidate for this year's Utah Drama Academic Society Award or for showcase in the Festival.

Liz Lydic is a mom, writer, and local government employee in the Los Angeles area. She also does theatre stuff.

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