



Eleventh-graders Trevor Lee and Tyler Barringer create improvised scenes from two different locations while Lea Marshall looks on.
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

IMPROV FOR LIFE

Leon teacher's unscripted theater serves as lesson in coping

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

If there's anything we can count on right now, it's change. The ability to adapt to rapidly shifting situations has become critical as the world grapples with the pandemic. Leon High School theater students have an advantage in coping with life's current unanticipated reality, thanks to their theater teacher Lea Marshall. ● Improvisational theater celebrates all things unplanned and unscripted. When school shut down, Marshall designed distance learning offerings that focused on improv. The activities she presented encouraged her students to respond quickly to change, creatively integrate new directions, and seize unexpected opportunities. ● Taking things moment-by-moment and accepting the current situation are essential to improv. Not only are these helpful skills for theater, they're handy in a real-world crisis too. **See COPING, Page 2C**



Cecilia, John, and Theresa Malley play Five Item Improv along with their guinea pig. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Coping

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Marshall offered a variety of games to keep her students nimble. Using the online platform Zoom, she invited students and special guests to participate in “Five Item Improv.” With five random items from around the house, actors were asked to improvise a dramatic scene.

Special guests included local theater professionals and spouses Naomi Rose-Mock and Mike Mock. They devised creative murder mysteries, killing each other with weapons as unlikely as a bottle of mustard. “It was great for a married couple in quarantine to give them ideas,” quipped Marshall. In several instances, students’ parents and siblings got in on the improv action and created scenes using items like a bobble-head doll, a flashlight, and even the family guinea pig.

After realizing that many of her students were relegated to their rooms, Marshall created a scavenger hunt improv game. “Some of them had to be in their rooms because so much was going on in their home and their parents are working from the dining room.”

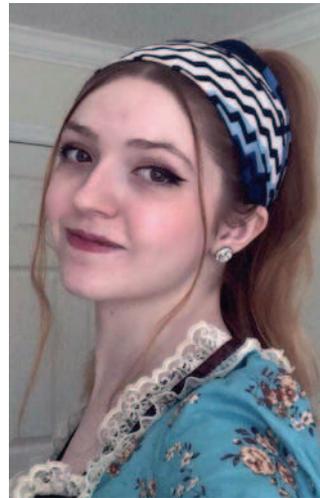
To get them up and moving, students were given a time limit to retrieve a specific item. When they were back on camera, they were asked to tell a compelling story about it. One challenge was to find a holiday item. “They were grabbing entire Christmas trees that were still out,” laughed Marshall.

Marshall’s costume challenge required students to use items close at hand to recreate famous artworks like Vermeer’s “Girl with a Pearl Earring” and Munch’s “The Scream.”

They had just one minute to gather materials and put things on themselves, their pet, or a stuffed animal. “Somebody dressed up a lamp every time,” Marshall recalled. These challenges started simply and got more complex. “We ended with Mondrian’s painting ‘Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow’ and one student held up a Dorito’s bag because it was red and rectangular.”

In addition to the improv games, Marshall’s students gathered on Zoom to study the play “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder. Marshall selected the play for its timely theme of appreciating the ordinary. Over the course of three weeks, students thought critically about the play, answered questions and compared it to their own lives.

In response to the play’s premise, “we all talked about what would we have done differently if we had



Leon 10th-grader Piper Greisl, costumed as Vermeer’s Girl With a Pearl Earring. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

known that last day before Spring Break would be our last day of school. Would we have wanted to know?”

Theater is storytelling and Marshall said, “I love a story because I love an ending. We don’t have an ending for what we’re currently experiencing. It’s like some absurdist piece, where the isn’t a proper denouement.”

Though resolution is elusive, Marshall is inspired by her students who have used this time to create.

Eleventh grader Alexa Schoffel took advantage of several online playwrighting classes and wrote three plays while in quarantine. One has to do with racial injustice and others deal with gun violence. “She has done what artists do,” said Marshall. “She’s used what’s happening around her and put it into these beautiful pieces of art.”

Marshall too has used her time wisely. She learned new technologies and took a virtual class about Broadway in America. “Now I’m taking a sketch comedy writing class. I’ve gotten hilarious.” She also wrote, workshopped, and published an original play while in quarantine.

Whether it’s wringing the most out of each moment, improvising to adapt to new challenges or reflecting on shared experiences, Marshall and her theater students are prepared to meet the world head on and with empathy.

“Kids have big feelings,” said Marshall. “They need theater to express themselves in a safe way. They need it to understand other people and their feelings. They need the arts now more than ever. The arts are how kids are going to process this.”

As part of COCA’s Creativity Persists collection, this article highlights how area arts educators have used distance learning to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).