

Heather's: The Musical
A Note from The Dramaturg

“People are harder to hate close up. Move in.”
-Brene Brown, *Braving The Wilderness*

Heathers: The Musical first opened in the fall of 2013 with a limited engagement in Los Angeles at the Hudson Backstage Theatre. It then made its way to New York, playing off-Broadway at New World Stages in the spring of 2014. Though never officially on Broadway, *Heather's: The Musical* quickly became a “cult classic” in the musical theatre world. Created by Laurence O’Keefe and Kevin Murphy, the musical stayed true to the themes of the original movie that it was adapted from. Michael Lehmann's dark comedy *Heathers* is now considered one of the most culturally iconic films to come out of the 1980s. Starring Winona Ryder and Christian Slater, the film satirizes teenage angst in a deadly way, incorporating all the classic tropes of an 80's high school flick while throwing in a murderous twist. The movie touches on some hard-hitting issues that tend to plague high schoolers; bullying, eating disorders, suicide, and homophobia, to name a few. These issues all connect to the common thread of unrealistic social standards and the positive and negative effects they have on young adults. *Heathers: The Musical*, holding hands with the film, boldly pushes these dark themes into the light by fleshing out the characters and having them speak - or rather, sing – the deepest most personal and painful aspects of their lives. And in the musical theatre genre, we sing that which we cannot speak, and for many adolescents, those unspoken things can be dark and scary.

Heathers: The Musical wastes no time in exposing the horrors of high school and commenting on the social issues found within the walls of Westerberg. The play begins with students shouting insults at each other; some of the first lines we hear are “FREAK! SLUT! BURNOUT! BUG-EYES! POSER! LARD-ASS!” (15). Bullies run rampant on the grounds of Westerberg High. There is a chasm between the bullies and the bullied, the isolators and isolated. And as such, The Heathers are the leaders of the popular clique, seen as the epitome of beauty and treated as such; they, along with the jocks and the preppy kids, are untouchable, revered, “solid Teflon” (O’Keefe and Murphy). Those who fall into any other social category are seen as inferior. Students like Martha Dunstock and J.D. are harassed and isolated because they are not seen as pretty or cool. Martha is bullied almost constantly throughout the show. In her song “Kindergarten Boyfriend,” she laments over the loss of the simplicity of her childhood, when her classmates “didn't care if [she] was thin or pretty”; even today, girls like Martha are conditioned to believe that “certain girls are meant to be alone” based on what they look and act like, prompting many to try to change themselves in extreme and sometimes dangerous ways to avoid torment (O’Keefe and Murphy). High school boys, additionally, are also subjected to judgement. J.D., the new kid at Westerberg High, has spent his high school career trying to anesthetize himself against the pains of high school. In his apathetic anthem “Freeze Your Brain”, J.D. expresses that his “happiness comes when everything numbs”; he suppresses “the voice in [his] head” telling him that he is “better off dead” by bottling his negative feelings up inside (O’Keefe and Murphy). Regardless of whether or not he is numb to it, J.D. is seen as a freak and treated as such, which makes the loneliness already within him fester into a dark hatred for everyone around him, leading him to make brash and harmful decisions that drastically change the lives of everyone around him.

The plights of Martha and J.D. are two very extreme examples of the negative effects of bullying. In the year 2017, there have been more than 30 school shootings in the U.S (everytownresearch.org). And, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide was the cause of 5, 491 deaths for people aged 15 to 24 in 2015. These statistics speak to the relevancy and urgency of issues like teen suicide, bullying, and eating disorders that *Heather's: The Musical* challenge us to look at, further asking us the question: Where does Westerberg High end and our world begin?

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Works Cited:

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