

## WHY PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE?

by David Ceccarini

**“How much do we owe** the teachers who care that we learn? Our educational system is not without its challenges, but the playwright encourages us to root for those engaged in the struggle and who teach us that the most important thing is learning itself.” –Next Act season brochure, 2020-21.

Since the writing of my season brochure comments about *PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE* by Joe Zarrow, we know that the challenges in education have only become deeper. Remote learning, hybrid classes, safety protocol, internet access or lack thereof, and so many other hurdles have truly put our teachers through a battery of tests as they attempt to maintain connection with students and administer tests of their own. It is a wonder and a testament to the determination and resilience of educators that our kids are still engaged in school.



### FAVORITES

My daughter Miranda was tuning into her Advanced Physics class the other morning, taught by “Mr. G.” He was taking his students through calculations to

determine terminal velocity, that is, the speed at which a moving [usually falling] object will no longer accelerate – no easy task. I asked Miranda, “Do you like the class?”

**M** Yeah, I do.

**DC** “Why?”

**M** “I like Mr. G. He makes it interesting.”

**DC** “How so?”

**M** “He’s enthusiastic about the subject. You can tell he likes it and wants to share that enthusiasm.”

**DC** “Apparently it works.”

### BACK IN THE DAY

My mind flashed on Mr. Polley, my high school Physics teacher. He was like Miranda’s Mr. G, truly embodying that oft-used textbook title, *Physics Is Fun*. Then there was Diana Doerfler, whom I’ve credited more than once with stimulating, or more accurately, challenging my writing skills. Same with a Creative Writing prof at Purdue in 1972 [I can’t believe I attended class at 7:30am!], or a real interesting, offbeat guy who taught Persuasion in second semester. He opened my eyes to an entirely hidden world of influence peddling, propaganda and advertising, constantly churning beneath the threshold of cognition. Finally, there was Professor Kaufmanis, my Latvian Astronomy professor at the U of Minnesota. Besides his tremendous command of the subject matter, he was a delightful story teller. And if you want to get someone’s attention, tell a good story. After all, that’s our game in the theatre profession:

### To engage. To challenge. To create interest.

Coincidentally, I happened to catch a radio interview with MIT Professor of Education, Dr. Sanjay Sarma, just before tucking into this assignment. He was talking about what’s essential for learning, and his answer resonates with my daughter’s perspective.

### ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT

Sarma says, “Curiosity is essential for learning. Human beings are, by nature, a curious species.”

*Continued, next page*

### Inside This Issue

Doug Jarecki	2
In Memory of Tom Gauthier	3
Bravo, Next Act	3
From Good to Excellent	4
Next Act (Home) Theatre	6
The Gauntlet Was Thrown	7
Board Spotlight	7

Well, yeah, people are a pretty curious bunch, that's for sure; as the saying goes, "It takes all kinds." But to the Doc's point, he says that curiosity is a form of hunger – intellectual hunger.

And while bodily hunger generates saliva, curiosity releases dopamine, a natural hormone that can stimulate executive brain function and motivation. In our case, then, curiosity does not kill the cat, but inspires us to take interest, to inquire, to wonder – to learn.



Raymond (Kyle Curry) challenges biology teacher Ms. Kelly (Deborah Staples) in NAT's 2015 production of *10 Questions to ask your biology teacher about Evolution*

Another thought of Dr. Sarma's which caught my attention was the contrast of learning for exams versus learning for life. Clearly, when we understand why the knowledge is relevant, how it manifests in daily life, the context, the use, or even better, the joy of knowing something not known before, we are learning for life. The act of learning is released from

its perceived bonds of drudgery and compulsion to be its original, natural, built-in-as-original equipment human impulse.

### PASS IT ON

Now granted, there is a lot of basic knowledge that's necessary for students to learn so as to be successful at navigating our current civilization. Speaking, writing, numbers, history, civics and science – by all means science: procuring a foundation in this broad knowledge base is essential. And, unlike the *Phun of Physics*, Fundamentals often don't seem like Fun. Yet, most teachers are committed to finding their way into a student's mind in hopes of tickling awake that innate curiosity in us all. They strive to pass on the knowledge.

But even more: I count myself fortunate that I have been touched by so many hard working, dedicated, professional educators who have persisted in showing me that their passionate belief in learning was, and will ever be, their supreme gift to share.

*PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE* is a brief but insightful glimpse of the many considerations, aspirations, machinations, successes, failures and challenges faced by educators on a daily basis. Joe Zarrow's play invites us in as a guest of that world, to monitor, to appreciate, to learn something that perhaps we didn't know before. I hope that you'll find the learning fun.

See you at the virtual theatre.

## And now, here's the host of BRAVO, NEXT ACT 2021, actor, playwright, arts educator & bonafide goofball – DOUG JARECKI



**Next Act Theatre is thrilled** to announce that Doug Jarecki will be the emcee of Next Act's virtual Bravo event on March 13, 2021. Says Jarecki of the honor, "Even as I type these words, it still doesn't seem possible. Or even advisable. But when David's first few choices were unable to accept the role, he knew what he had to do."

[which premiered on the Next Act stage in 2015]. He has appeared on stage in numerous Next Act shows (*UNSILENT NIGHT, MOTHERHOOD OUT LOUD, 7 STORIES*) and for several years was an instructor in the Next Actors Summer Theatre for Teens program.

"I have had so many great experiences with Next Act over the years," Jarecki said, "whether it's on stage, in the classroom or in the audience. It's a special place for the local theatre community, and this will be a great opportunity to showcase that."

Jarecki added, "I am so excited! There are going to be a lot of laughs, and maybe even some tears... but not from me because I don't have that kind of range."

Cecsarini, with a subtle sigh of resignation, agreed.

"Of all of the incredible performers who have been on the Next Act stage over the years, Jarecki has always been, by far, the most available," said Cecsarini. "Without question, it is his greatest skill as an actor."

Jarecki is the Director of Education at Waukesha Civic Theatre and the writer/producer of the holiday show *'Twas the Month Before Christmas*

## In Memory of Board Member Tom Gauthier



The theatre world recently lost one of its finest gentlemen, Thomas Allen Gauthier. Back in the days of live theatre, Tom could be spotted in just about every audience in town and around the state. He deeply loved and respected the art form and its practitioners,

mentioned one of Tom's signature traits, his love for spreadsheets. It seemed that almost any problem could benefit from an analysis by spreadsheet.

The Grace Lutheran pastor went on to describe Tom Gauthier's essence: decent, kind, generous, courageous and humble. Tom was a faithful adherent to the Church and carried his faith out into the community through his employment agency he called Adonai Employment Inc. [Adonai translates as "Lord."] He had helped over 1500 individuals connect with employers through his company.

NAT Board President Dave Anderson had invited Tom to join a couple of years back and in turn, Tom had recruited a new Board member just this past fall, so his legacy lives on. Dave Anderson tells the story of meeting Tom while working out at their mutual gym. Upon their habitual morning greeting, "How're you doing today?" – Tom's signature traits of optimism and good humor were expressed in his simple, enthusiastic response, "Fantastic!"

We miss you, Tom; thanks from all of us for being Fantastic!

a quest to see 100 live performances per year. If not for pandemic-darkened theatres, he may have reached his goal this season, too.

Next Act had been a recent beneficiary of Tom's presence, not only in our seats but sitting on the Board. After serving for a couple of years, he stepped into the officer role of Treasurer. He already had experience for the gig as he was also providing financial guidance for his church, Grace Lutheran in Thiensville. In fact, at Tom's memorial, the pastor

## NEXT ACT THEATRE IS WHIPPING UP A VIRTUAL EVENT!



Bravo Next Act 2021 will be a little different this year: Virtual, halfway through the season – and still a soup pot full of fun!

**Bravo Next Act: Now We're Cookin'!**  
**Saturday, March 13, 2021**

Beginning at 6:30PM with a special Happy Hour!

**Your Emcee and Auctioneer: Doug Jarecki**  
Next Act favorite – playwright, teaching artist and all-around funny guy!

**Complimentary Admission**  
**Live and Silent Auctions\* | Wine Pull**

**Curbside Dinners**  
from Featured Bravo Restaurant Partners  
Amilinda, Bunzel's Meat Market and Firefly Tosa

**Cocktail Pails**  
for Early Pick Up from Next Act Theatre

**Entertainment Includes**  
Chef "visits" | Culinary Songs and Scenes

\*Silent Auction begins Wednesday, March 10 at Noon

**There is a vast difference** between becoming a teacher and actually becoming good at teaching. I am sure that all of us can recall a specific teacher who moved us forward in our education process with skill and palpable joy. How to describe them? What makes the good ones stand out in our minds? In approaching the directing of *PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE* by Joe Zarrow, I found that I kept asking myself: What is a good teacher?

Well, at the most basic level, a good teacher is one who has a positive impact on those being taught. One who is able to break down the complexities of any given subject and simplify it in a way that creates a path for long-lasting and ever-growing understanding. A good teacher is one who teaches to the learner rather than to the test. Of course, every educator is different. These differences are partly responsible for the tapestry of humanity that we live in today.

In my twenties, I wanted to be a good teacher.

**I have been trained to teach as far back as I can remember.** My mother, an award-winning high school History, English and Art History educator, was also a single mother with three small children to care for. For practical purposes, this meant that my siblings and I were with her during all aspects of her professional career. I went with her to the school where she taught, to prep her room long before the students arrived for the first day of classes. While she taught night school, I sat under her desk and read the stories I found in the textbooks. I recall being enthralled, while eating donuts and drinking heavily creamed coffee, during some heated school board meetings. Eventually, my mother and I co-taught at multiple seminars for educators during my first years of college at San Diego State University, where I was working toward my degree in Secondary Education.

After several years of working as a facilitator for San Diego Unified School District, I chose to veer from the path that had been laid out for me. Much to my mother's chagrin, I abandoned the notion of following in her footsteps. There simply came a point where I decided I did not want to teach grammar and sentence structure to a never-ending stream of reluctant learners with the occasional hungry mind thrown into the mix. I did not want the monotony of writing lesson plans, grading papers, answering to the administration and constantly engaging in a system that, in my eyes, took the fun out of teaching and learning.

**Years later, having set my teaching career to the side,** I would graduate from UW-Whitewater with a degree in Performance Theatre and Philosophy. My alma mater offered me the opportunity to study at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Arts. My time there (which, included a rigorous re-training on how one effectively teaches) was eye-opening for me. My colleagues and I were introduced to the notion that for a student to demonstrate an understanding of any given subject, it was not necessarily true that this could only be accomplished through testing. Furthermore, allowing students to show that they understood, in their own unique way, was far more effective for the creation of positive, inventive, and learned contributors to society. This approach to teaching ensured that all of the students would receive the same level of support and energy regardless of their ability to memorize information for a formal examination, thereby creating a culture of learning that reduced anxiety and leveled the playing field for demonstrating knowledge. I was beyond impressed with this new-to-me philosophy on education, particularly because in order for it to work effectively, it required the use of my own skills as an artist as a jumping off point.



*Ms. Sun (Marti Gobel) explores the education system in NAT's 2015 production of NO CHILD...*



*Next Actors alumna Tomisha Jackson presents in front of a group of students from area high schools during ACROSS THE VIADUCT, a 2018 Community Project led by Marti Gobel.*

I left the Kennedy Center for the Arts armed with several Residency Plans that had been meticulously reviewed and approved by the brilliant staff there. And, I went back to teaching. This time not because I wanted to be a good teacher but because I wanted to be an excellent teacher.

**What is an excellent teacher?** An excellent teacher is one who is deeply committed to the act of imparting knowledge. One who is aware of the tremendous power they have to influence their students and reserves no effort in developing intellect, but also the character and life skills of the student. One who has not the primary goal of answering to an administrative designed rubric but rather wishes to contribute to the crafting of a mind.

Now, when I enter a new situation in the capacity of teacher, I begin with telling my students, be they 5 or 25, that they should not fear being wrong when they engage in class discussions because the wrong answers will lead us all to the right answers. I inform them that I will be teaching them Socratically; that is, through discussion. I tell them that we will discuss, move and develop our time together, together. I tell them that they will have time to work alone, in small groups and as one community. I remind them that they already know so very many things and that I simply seek to add to that. Then, I warm them up. Always included in the warm up are key elements of what I need them to learn during our session. On paper, it looks like this:

**ME:** When I say Civil, you say Rights... Civil

**STUDENTS:** Rights [3x]

**ME:** When I say Bus, you say Strike... Bus

**STUDENTS:** Strike [3x]

**ME:** Now, when I say Justice you say Law... Justice

**STUDENTS:** Law [3x]

**ME:** And when I say Voting, you say All... Voting

**STUDENTS:** All [3x]

**My warmup is based on the West African tradition of Call and Response.** It requires that I "call" something and that the students "respond." It is a full body exercise designed to address all of the learning styles found in

a group of students at once. I can manipulate the calls I give to increase the difficulty in how they respond. I can add new information. I can adjust quickly and seamlessly should they need more time with a topic. We are together. I do the call from the center of a circle made up of the students. Because of the rhythmic pacing of the call, the students cannot *not* pay attention while they listen and respond. Soon they begin to move with abandon. This means they are learning with abandon. It is a sight to behold.

If you were a fly on the wall during one of these sessions, you would see what I feel. As they move through the exercise, the students tighten the circle, closing the distance between teacher and student. They move to me. They move to the source. From the center of that circle, I can kinetically experience their willingness to learn. I have proof that they are actively engaging in the lesson. There is no test anyone can give to come to that conclusion. We all just feel it.

**I have taught everything from Method Acting to Fractions** with my Call and Response formula. How do I know they have increased knowledge? I ask them. Included in the Call and Response warmup is a great deal of repetition. They hear, and see, and move and process all at once. Everyone's learning style is addressed throughout the whole exercise. With just the warm up, I can introduce the themes of that day. With the text included above, I can go anywhere with the topic of Civil Rights: the Birmingham Bus Strike, Justice, Law, Voting and the concept of All. There is no written test. Only expressing and learning with abandon. And at the end of the session, they need no prompt to answer the call. It is an incredibly effective way to teach. I have seen this philosophy of teaching operate successfully time and time again.

I am now an adjunct lecturer at multiple universities in Wisconsin. The lessons from my mother, the program at San Diego State University, the many professors I had at UW-Whitewater and my training at the Kennedy Center for the Arts have all come together to create the type of teacher I am today. That is, a teacher who is engaging, energetic, empathetic and accepting. My reward? Not the paycheck. Not the test scores. Not the praise from my department heads. I am rewarded when a student follows me after class, wanting to learn more because they "got it" and because they enjoyed the experience of learning. I am rewarded when I witness students moving to the knowledge and are not forced to do so. That is excellence to me.

*"That which touches me most is that I have a chance to work with people. Passing on to others that which was passed on to me."*

- Sweet Honey In The Rock

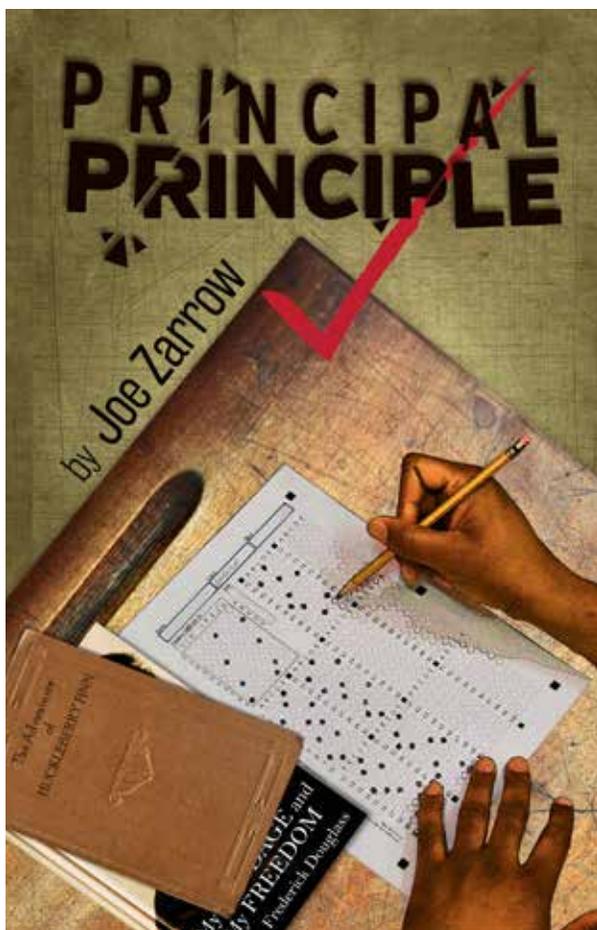




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## **PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE** by Joe Zarrow *A Next Act video presentation*

Kay Josephs wants to make a difference; she quits her corporate job and heads for Chicago's South Side to teach English. Her department colleagues run the gamut: old-hand Denise is near retirement, rebellious Shelley will cut any corner for her kids and Ola tries to keep everyone – and the dilapidated copy machine – happy. But this year will be extra tough. Principal Wei's dedication to the standardized test could put them all out of a job. Finally, a play that celebrates the resourcefulness, sacrifice and devotion of the best among us: our teachers.

**Directed by:** Marti Gobel

**Featuring:** Flora Coker, Megan Kim, Malaina Moore, April Paul, Malkia Stampley & Ericka Wade

Available for viewing

**February 15 – March 7, 2021**

Single Tickets on sale through the

Box Office [414] 278-0765 or online at [nextact.org](http://nextact.org)

*[NAT Subscribers will automatically receive online tickets as part of their subscription]*

*PRINCIPAL PRINCIPLE is generously co-sponsored by John Mahony & Evelyn Burdick, David Paris Dentistry, Jan Serr & John Shannon, and Sandra Zingler & Barbara Johnson.*