
Storytelling: College Admission Essay Sample

When my mother read picture books to me as a child, I lingered in the world of the story for days after, demanding that we act out my favorite scenes over and over again. I dressed my sister up as characters from my favorite books, carefully draping costumes of gift wrap paper and scotch tape over her infant body. My parents typed out scripts for plays that I dreamed up, and I forced my family members to act them out with me at every reunion. I barely had an awareness of what theatre was back then. All I knew was that I wanted to explore all of the stories that captured my imagination, and as I grew older, I found that theatre provided form and structure for the stories that I wanted to tell.

In the summer before my senior year, I decided to study the storytelling traditions of the country where I have spent the last eight years of my life, by participating in a Beijing Opera program at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. I have always been fascinated by the art form that seamlessly combines dance, acting, clowning, singing, and acrobatics. But ten minutes into our first class, I felt hopelessly lost.

Our instructor began by teaching us the "front-squatting flip," one of the most basic movements in Beijing Opera that I just could not master. The instructor, a well-known Beijing opera performer about to leave on a tour of Italy, constantly corrected me. I was younger than the rest of my classmates, all of whom were foreigners attending acting conservatories or earning graduate degrees, accustomed to movement classes and able to pick up choreography much more easily than I was. I felt intimidated by their confidence, in awe of their knowledge of and experience with different forms of theatre, and jealous of their poise and grace when performing different movement sequences.

My knowledge of Chinese made the struggle all the more painful. I did not need the translator like the rest of my foreign classmates, so my teacher spoke to me directly. He called me "meiguodayatou" — a dig at my American passport, my age, and my clumsiness. Although I had lived in China since I was 10, I felt like I was the one most out of place in the rehearsal rooms. I dreaded leaving our government-owned hotel every morning to perform these flips, and even more the public mockery. When I was the only one left standing after our daily inspection, my teacher would critique me in front of my classmates. "What are these hands? Your American gang signs?"

I could feel my classmates snickering.

One day, my teacher gathered the class to make an announcement through the interpreter:

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"The meiguodayatou has finally done it!" I kept my head bowed while thanking our teacher, trying to be reserved and polite so as to not provoke any more criticism. But inside I was overwhelmed with relief and joy. All the hours spent in our hot, sticky classroom, attempting complicated movement sequences and singing songs that sounded like the cries of the feral cats outside my apartment, had finally paid off.

Looking back, there were some difficult and embarrassing moments, but I loved the experience. I enjoyed watching my teachers' demonstrations, their graceful bodies carefully performing the movement patterns and songs they had studied since childhood. I loved learning about the intricate costumes and different role types. I came to appreciate an entirely different approach to storytelling than I had learned in my high school drama class, one that relied on patience, precision, and persistence. And although the experience was more difficult than I imagined at the outset, I now feel better prepared to seek new challenges, find new stories, and explore new ways of telling them.

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