

Hinsdale South's 'Carrie: The Musical' gets whole school involved

Tale's triggers and traumas inspire lesson on bullying with help of social workers

By Zareen Syed
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When Hinsdale South High School's theater director Danny Yuska chose Stephen King's sci-fi horror novel, "Carrie" for the fall musical, he was hesitant to expose students and audiences to a show full of triggering themes.

"Something hit me when I dug into it, I got scared about how this could impact teenagers and our audiences and I didn't know if I made the wrong choice," Yuska said over the phone.

King's novel is about a teenage outcast, Carrie White, who is severely bullied at school for her appearance and shyness, while her mother, Margaret White, is mentally unstable and beats her daughter. The mother frequently throws Carrie inside a closet for "sinful" behavior.

"I was finding myself in tears while reading the [musical] script, this is way worse than I thought it would be," Yuska said. "It's very important stuff so we were going to trust the material, [but] I needed extra support when tackling it because I'm not a professional when it comes to social work."

One of the first things Yuska did was tap the school's counseling department to see if they could work together to incorporate the themes of "Carrie" into an already existing monthly schoolwide social emotional learning (SEL) lesson known as South Pride, as well as make social workers available for student actors in need of processing the heavy subject matter.

"Throughout the whole show you feel extremely bad for Carrie, she's a target of her classmates' bullying and her mother's abuse at home," said Nikki Jason, the Hinsdale South senior playing the

role of Carrie. "She doesn't really have a safe space where she can be herself, and the entirety of the show she's just so hopeless."

Those familiar with the novel might know that there's a scene where Carrie gets punished by her mother for having her first period and gets locked in the closet.

Jason, 17, said she likes to method act, using an emotion-oriented technique where actors fully inhabit the role of the character both on and off the stage or screen. But method acting for a high school performance has its limitations, Jason said.

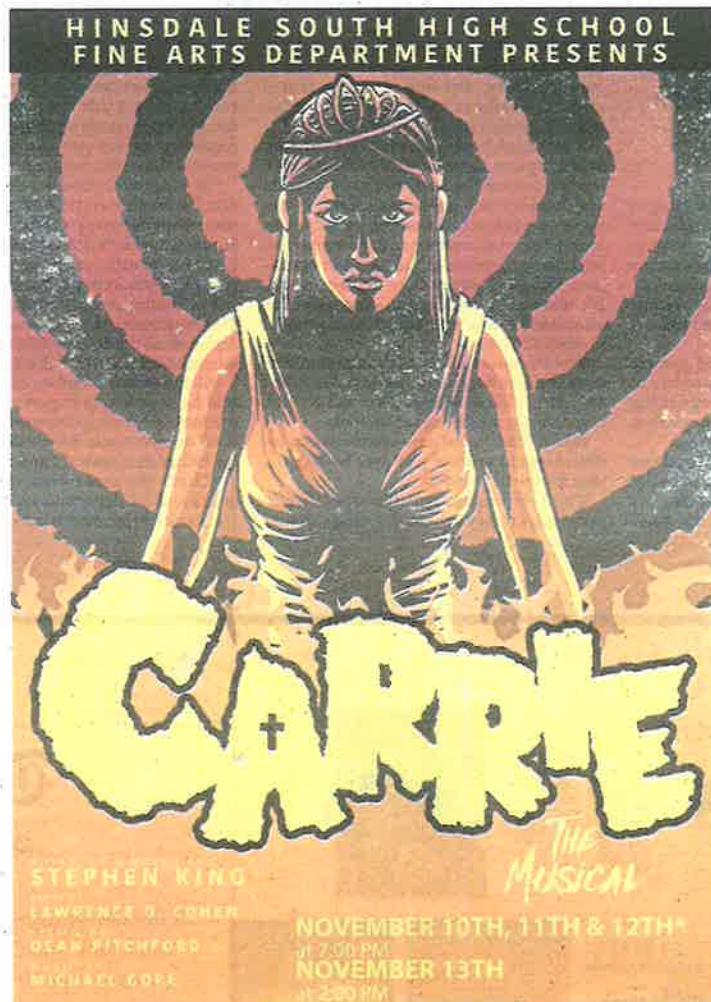
"Carrie is strange, she keeps to herself, doesn't really talk, and is very introverted — that's not really me, I like to be open and am very extroverted," she said. "She has all this past trauma and it's hard to dig into that and know fully how she feels."

Yuska suggested a hybrid form of method acting would be more suitable for Jason — staying in character only within the rehearsal space and throughout rehearsal hours.

The character of Carrie eventually gains some confidence after discovering she has telekinetic powers, Jason said, but then "even more tragic things happen."

Hinsdale South SEL coaches Megan Parker and Stephanie Fox helped create the lesson that all Hinsdale South students will go through before watching the musical preview. The 15-minute presentation will show students how to identify bullying and how to handle it, whether it's a personal experience or a situation they are witnessing, they said.

As part of the schoolwide initiative, some of the cast members are planning to create a short video using a scene from the play. Fox said the actors playing Carrie and the mother will come out of



The poster for Hinsdale South High School Fine Arts Department's "Carrie: The Musical" Nov. 10-13. COURTESY

character after acting out a scene and talk about how the situation could have gone differently had SEL tools been used.

"We don't want to highlight the negative, or for kids to be triggered by the lesson itself, so we really wanted to focus on prevention and modeling positive social behavior before negative outcomes occur, which

is what students are doing when they're coming out of character," Fox elaborated.

"[The characters in Carrie] need social-emotional skills for sure. If they had them, there wouldn't be the tragedy of Carrie," Parker added.

Every month, Parker and Fox work with students to build the South Proud initiative based on the Casel framework, which addresses five

interrelated areas of competence including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The cross-department collaboration is slated for the morning of Nov. 9 before English classes see a preview of the play. "The whole school will get direct instruction on how to be

an upstander before seeing scenes from the musical," Parker said.

Yuska noted that bullying in school continues to be a pervasive issue only worsened by the "sneakiness" of social media.

"Because of technology there is a lot of online bullying and of course, the rigors of fitting in — you see it every day in classrooms," he said.

Yuska said the school is planning for trigger warnings and disclaimers at the start of the shows, as well as mental health and anti-bullying resources available via QR codes.

Fox said experiencing unwanted, aggressive behavior leads to a host of mental health issues in teenagers, and oftentimes it isn't even identified as bullying.

"We think that bullying has to happen multiple times to be considered bullying but that's actually not the case," Fox said. "Basically it can happen one time where there is an imbalance of power — it can happen among friends and family. If there's an intent to harm, it's considered bullying."

Fox said during roundtable discussions, students wanted to highlight that there is a fine line between joking around and bullying in friend groups where it can easily turn into more.

Yuska said while the play portrays hard-to-watch situations, it's opened up discussions between students that might not have happened otherwise.

"Overall it's going to help make this school a safer place and show students that it's OK to feel triggered. Triggers are feelings and emotions that are all valid," Fox said. "We want our kids to know that, and also show them how to shift out of that space safely."

"Carrie: The Musical" performances are Nov. 10-13 at the Hinsdale South Auditorium; tickets are \$20 for adults and \$10 for students. The musical is rated PG-13.