



Jessica Winingham conducts a group shake-out amongst the "Puffs" cast and crew. Winingham always made sure to begin rehearsals with some form of exercise. "Warm-ups are essential for the cast and crew in order for them to prepare their minds and bodies for rehearsal," Winingham said. "It also serves as [a] transition from school into the sacred space of rehearsal." (Photo by Ella Braig.)

From Stage to School

Jessica Winingham talks diversity and inclusion in Ladue's theater department

STORY BY **ELLA BRAIG**,
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FOR DRAMA TEACHER

Jessica Winingham, every professional development day, every meeting and every school-wide event at Lindbergh was the same. While the roster of attendees may have varied from function to function, they were always completely, undeniably white. Many of Winingham's coworkers brushed her off as an "other," or simply ignored her entirely. But when a question was brought up about inclusivity efforts, everyone in the room would turn to look at her.

Winingham spent 13 years as one of the few people of color teaching at Lindbergh High School. Now, as the new head of Ladue High School's theater department, she is taking steps to ensure that no student experiences the same level of isolation.

"I never want anyone to feel

marginalized in my room," Winingham said. "I always want people to feel like they can be their authentic selves. And that comes from a place of being in positions throughout my life where I was not encouraged to be that way."

Winingham grew up in a household that embraced the performing arts. In fact, some of her earliest memories involve watching film adaptations of popular Broadway musicals.

"I was in a play for the first time when I was 8 or 9 at a community college, and then I was in *The Muny* when I was 9," Winingham said. "And then after that, I was kind of obsessed. So I just did theater forever after that, and then all throughout school."

Winingham pursued the dramatic arts long after high school and graduated from the University of Missouri with a Master's Degree in Secondary Education in 2011. As of 2020, she is in the process of earning a second Master's Degree in Theater

WHAT A RESUME!

Roles portrayed by Jessica Winingham include:



CORDELIA
IN "KING LEAR"
AT THE
ACTOR'S STUDIO



MULTIPLE
LEAD ROLES
IN "BEAUTIFUL RESISTANCE"
AT
PLAYBACK WORKSHOP THEATRE



CRESSIDA
IN "TROILUS AND CRESSIDA"
WITH
SLIGHTLY ASKEW THEATRE COMPANY

Studies in Production and Design at Southern Oregon University.

Before Winingham knew she wanted to pursue education, she was a professional actress. Most notably, she headlined the feature film "Four Color Eulogy" in 2014. However, she describes her transition from exclusively acting to teaching as "really organic."

"I enjoy watching students grow in their art form much more than I need the validation of being in it," Winingham said. "I love performing, don't get me wrong. I'm a performer. I love attention. We all do. But my cup is filled much more from watching students than from me."

Winingham's potential as an educator was first discovered in 2004. At the time, she was performing in William Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida," with SLIGHTLYaskew Theatre Company, a program that she co-founded.

"Two women, who were seniors [from the Yale theater department],

came to see our show, and then came up to myself and Meryl, who is the other woman that created the company with me, and said, 'We would like you to teach a workshop at Yale,'" Winingham said.

The course in question covered a form of South American theater technique, which Winingham led in winter of 2004 when she was in her 20s. Since then, she has lent her wisdom to performing arts departments such as the Center of Creative Arts and University City High School.

After over a decade spent at Lindbergh, Winingham was hired as the director of Ladue High School's theater department in 2023. Her first production at Ladue, "Puffs," is set to premiere Oct. 26 in the Performing Arts Center.

Winingham cares deeply about creating an environment in which students can feel comfortable. The cast of her most recent play is composed of 25 students, including junior Madison Davidson, who plays various roles that mirror well-known characters from the "Harry Potter" franchise.

"I feel that Ms. Winingham

strives for diversity," Davidson said. "She makes it clear that she wants a comfortable space for [everyone] and doesn't want anyone to be [discriminatory] against people."

For many cast members, it was their first time auditioning to be a part of a theatrical production. In order to curate a supportive space for newcomers to let go of their nerves, Winingham acted as a warm and encouraging presence in a cold, black room.

"Going into the audition, she made sure everyone felt like they did an amazing job," senior Jessica Steinberg, who portrays Sally Perks in "Puffs," said. "That was something that I haven't felt ever before from a director."

A lot can change following a show's final performance, but one factor will forever remain consistent in Ladue's theater department: under Winingham's jurisdiction, the curtain will never close on community-building.

"I love how theater is so ensemble-based," Winingham said. "I love [how] every show you make a family, and you invest in that family, and then it disappears." ^{1P}



ABOVE: Jessica Winingham leads the "Puffs" cast and crew in warm-ups. The students practiced vocal and physical exercises in order to create a smooth transition between school and rehearsals. "Warm-ups help me separate school from rehearsal," Reis Lourie (10), who plays Oliver Rivers, said. "It really helps me relax and unwind from a stressful day at school, and really feel comfortable in a safe environment here in Ladue theater."

Words of Win-sdom

Jessica Winingham's advice on promoting inclusivity in the classroom

"Focus on **human dignity**. We all have it innately."

"When someone gives you feedback about their identity, **thank them**. That means they **care** enough to trust you with that information."

"Don't make assumptions about **anyone**."



SCAN FOR
an interview with
theater teacher
Jessica Winingham



ABOVE: Jessica Winingham directs the opening scene of "Puffs." During rehearsals, the rest of the cast watched the actors on stage perform. "[Winingham is] so accepting when [the cast is] making mistakes," Sarena Singh (11), who plays multiple roles, said. "And she's super laid-back. She made me want to audition." (Photos courtesy of Audrey Roberts.)