When Biola’s Home School Music Club publicized a coming play of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* in 1997 my Mom quickly signed me for the chorus. Five years old and a lover of Aslan, I played a mouse and a flower with much cheer. That play made me want to make art, and is my first memory.

I grew up in BHSMC, played under the helm of Dana Morris (though I don’t recall him much), saw Lori Shanebeck inherit his post (she has a way of catching attention), and came by several good friends, most of whom stuck around for many dear years. Long rehearsals meant the company soon became my second home. By age eleven I had stuck around long enough to watch the company recycle shows it had performed five years previous, such as *Annie*, and perfect them. Now I was at an age where lead roles were attainable. I auditioned for most every show. Many bit parts ensued.

Years of good fun passed. But I had to turn sixteen, and a weird tiredness came on me. I began to fancy myself (perhaps melodramatically, as is wont with kid actors), to be a bit of a weather-worn veteran, a fairly tragic image. BHSMC had been rechristened as Biola Youth Theater many years previous. Ten years had passed since my mouse-and-flower heyday, and my best friends had moved away. Fast approaching my senior year, I began to consider, once an unthinkable notion, the idea of leaving the program early, to pursue some preliminary film work.

The play at the time, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, had posed a tremendous challenge. When I wasn’t botching soft-shoe I was trying to hold a bass-harmony, feeling very much on my own, which as a bass I sometimes was. Then would come my one-liner, glorious one-liner, for a bit part who was a frustrated husband of eighteen years, and according to the director, needed to project. The play had been fun but a tad taxing. An exit might be in order, I thought, especially since film, if it was to become a career, would take a fair bit of energy I didn’t have.

But there was, as part of BYT’s soul, a terrific godly spirit that would poke its head into most unexpected places. *Thoroughly Modern Millie* had begun at a rough time economically: the first rehearsals were in September of 2008, just a week or two after Wall Street’s hullabalo. Consequentially resources were eyed carefully. Less students were enrolled in the play and a strict costume budget meant that we had only one dancer’s cast that was shared between two lead casts. As things stood, *Thoroughly Modern Millie* was a Teen Players show, which meant more obscurity and a box office that was sure to feel the pinch.

But Mrs. Shanebeck and Co. were not much stirred. The philosophy of BYT had not changed and its mantra was not stirred: to “consistently demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ with a servant’s heart”.
Good theater is a servant’s work, said Mrs. Shanebeck, and we could serve the crowds, however small, by making them forget about their troubles (which in those days were largely economic) for at least a couple of hours, if we performed well. Inspiring notion. What happened at showtime was not, however, so premeditated.

A girl who had only just performed for BYT’s Mulan the previous fall had become very seriously sick. From what I gathered it was some sort of cancer, but there was damage to her immune system too, and she couldn’t remain in large crowds for long. But in BYT and Thoroughly Modern Millie, she had friends, and BYT’s staff had made her family an offer. She and her parents could watch us in a dress-rehearsal, before opening night, as a sort of private premier. The incentive to perform well dropped on us like a hand grenade. Making the sick happy is no small honor. I didn’t know the girl personally (I still don’t), and it wasn’t as if I had a major role I could embellish on for her sake, but the incentive to do my part in the company was strong. The biggest role I had was as an angst-ridden husband with about three seconds of stage glory, but by gosh, I was going to be the best three-second, angst-ridden husband the show could have. Again, melodramatic, but even melodrama can be performed to a godly cause.

Those three seconds found me nervous, but I think I did alright.

When the play was over we took our bows and blew the girl kisses. What with the intense stage-lights it was hard to spot her until the bows were done and the regular lights flicked on. I won’t lie and say that she was laughing, or crying—she may have been—but I know she was at least smiling, and when the cast congregated a couple nights later for opening night, Mrs. Shanebeck read us the girl’s thank-you letter.

That was a different experience. Perhaps the play’s merit was that it made the girl forget about what was wrong with her. I was struck, though, that BYT had done a very good deed, not for what it made her forget but for what it recalled, which was a communal sort of love. It wasn’t strong enough to knock cancer out, and it wouldn’t be enough to heal the box office, but for that girl at least we went a step further and, beyond removing the memory of her sickness for two hours, reminded her of the friends she had, even if she didn’t know them all, the many people who cared for her, even if they hadn’t met her.

Making our new audience merely forget the economy would not be the final goal. We had to show good things—being a Christian cast who loved its audience—to fully merit praise at the final bow. Acknowledge bad memories, I learned; but acknowledge the good ones too, and fondly.

For strictly practical reasons, I won’t be returning to BYT. But to have performed in Thoroughly Modern Millie, for that girl and the crowds thereafter, has shaped how I look at art and how I want to go about making it.