Well, that’s it—I’m officially registered for theater class at the Northwestern University Center for Talent Development (CTD). In the three-week Plays and Players summer class, students study plays, playwriting, theater, acting, and the collaborative creative process.

I’ve enjoyed acting in a handful of plays at school, so trying my hand at playwriting seems like the next logical step. Oh, I’ve written a few “plays.” My first tentative ventures, each about six pages long, were a blast to write, but I know they could be better. They were never performed, and for good reason: they’re self-referential and nearly plotless.

Since I was little, I’ve been drawn to the odd, the bizarre, and the otherworldly. I particularly admire the artistry in the movie Fight Club, with its off-beat perspective and honest dialogue, in the comic book series Bone, with its warm and believable characters, and in the novel A Clockwork Orange, with its deep themes and vivid energy. But the truth is that I lack the education I need to be able to produce the kind of writing I admire. I’m hoping the Plays and Players class will help.

July 17

Today my fellow students and I explored plot structure, which is the rise in tension and subsequent dénouement that make up a story. We learned that while a play can accomplish a life-sized examination of concepts, it can’t provide the massive imaginative scope of books or movies. We talked about who’s who in the world of playwrights: greats such as Tom Stoppard, Tennessee Williams, Neil Simon, and Arthur Miller—all of whom were new to me.

July 22

We’ve spent the week examining plays and film adaptations, analyzing their words, images, and meaning. The works have varied from The Princess Bride to Death of a Salesman, from one comedic script about Poles at a funeral to another dissecting the old grudges of fraternal jealousy between middle-aged brothers. For the first time, I understand the founding themes of the cowboy Western and the subtle nuances essential to successful characterization.

July 24

Through written assignments, our teacher encourages each of us to develop a unique voice. Then, via improv exercises, we try to put ourselves in the characters’ place, which allows us to go beyond imagining what they think and do to actually becoming the characters. To become a character—essential to both acting and writing—is to allow a constructed consciousness, another identity, to briefly guide your thought processes. You’re not choreographing, but rather intuiting and channeling the life of the character. A writer has to understand the mind and motivation of every character he creates and to color the world from these perspectives.

Instinctively I guess I already knew this, because even before taking this class, I created my characters by way of extended improv. I write based on what they feel, think, and do, which means that often, I have to completely change the plan of the story after...
realizing that what the characters wanted was not what I had wanted to write. Still, I believe it makes the work much more realistic (and it’s nice to know that I was on the right track!).

**July 26**

Studying character creation served as good preparation for the next part of the class: acting lessons. I love to act. I’m a limelighter. But in all honesty, I’m not the best. In fact, it turns out that I’m terrible at group improv. It’s always been hard for me to work with other students in creative endeavors, but I finally found a group here that I click with. There’s one girl in particular with whom I seem to connect. We share a sense of humor and a similar thought process, and when the two of us work together, it feels magical: the characters we portray become real people.

It’s actually a relief to be able to work with somebody besides myself. Even more shocking, it’s fun. I’m beginning to appreciate that to work in entertainment, the ability to collaborate is essential.

**July 28**

I’ve written several plays already, and I think each one reflects the knowledge I’m learning in class. The coyly winking, self-referential plays I used to create seem to have walked off stage like an opening act. What remains are the main events, gimmick-less stories of humanity in odd, but genuine situations. One of my plays, for example, is the story of a girl narrating her play, with her older brother interrupting and constantly talking to the audience.

Today we were given a new writing assignment: to read three plays by a playwright of our choice and write two pieces, one an essay exploring that playwright’s work, and the other a play based on his or her unique style. I chose British playwright Tom Stoppard. In his plays, common people are superimposed on the dreamlike: he combines opposites in such a way that seems both original and lifelike.

**August 3**

The comedic play I modeled on Stoppard’s style is possibly the best play I have ever written. The Fable follows the backstage conversation of children’s theater performers, one of whom refuses to perform because he believes that the performance contains consumerist propaganda. Through their simple banter, the characters show themselves to be subtle, rich, and funny, ultimately delivering a smart commentary on humanity.

**August 4**

These three weeks seem to have flown by. As I leave CTD, I have a new respect for and renewed love of theater, as well as a better appreciation of its depth—all of which make me want to write for it more than ever.

**Post Script**

This fall, I wrote a play about a writer in Afghanistan who was creating a century-defining novel. The play, Words Into Darkness, was performed by my school at the northwest Iowa district one-act play contest in January, and won a Gold Key in the regional Scholastic Writing Competition. The Fable, my “Stoppard-style” play, received a Silver Key award. I currently have two more plays in the works.

Taylor Geu is a senior at Bishop Heelan Catholic High School in Sioux City, IA. When he’s not writing plays and acting, Taylor cheers on his classmates as the school mascot, plays percussion in the school band, sings in the choir, and enjoys writing prose, reading, and riding his horse.