From my very first performance in my fourth grade class's modified version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I knew I loved the stage. I enjoyed and then craved the adrenaline rush that comes when hundreds of eyes are watching my every move.

I entered high school knowing that I wanted to perform in school productions, and I’ve been fortunate to do that and so much more. I began as a member of the ensemble, taking on increasingly larger and eventually leading roles: King Edward IV in *Richard III*, John Proctor in *The Crucible*, and Bela Zangler in our soon-to-open *Crazy For You*. Recently, as student director, I led a one-act version of David Mamet’s *Oleanna* to competitions and accolades across Virginia.

One role I didn’t expect to play was presented to me at the beginning of my sophomore year. After noticing my commitment to theater, my teacher invited me to become a theater critic as a member of our school’s Cappies Critics Team. Although I had attended many plays in the past, I was about to see the stage from a completely different perspective.

**Through a Critical Lens**

Cappies—the Critics and Awards Program for High School Theater and Journalism—is devoted to uniting and recognizing high school theater departments across the country. Our school belongs to the National Capital Area chapter, the original chapter founded in 1999. There are now 17 Cappies chapters across the United States and Canada.

After I went through a training session to learn the rules and guidelines of the program, I was assigned, like the other critics on the team, five shows at other area schools that I was required to attend throughout the year. We were also encouraged to volunteer to see and review additional performances.

Each high school designates a certain date for its Cappies performance, so there are Cappies critics from other schools at each show we attend. There might be as few as 20 or as many as 100 other critics, but typically the number is somewhere in between. Before the show, we meet as a group in a separate room to discuss the history of the show. During intermission, we discuss the performance so far and what we
would like to see in the second act. After the performance, we gather once again to offer our final opinions of the show. Once our discussions are over, we each choose from the slate of performers possible end-of-year nominees in categories such as Comic Actor or Featured Vocalist. We record our selections, scoring them using a rubric that includes merit, quality, and degree of difficulty.

At home, shortly after viewing the performance, we each write a review outlining what we enjoyed most about the production, emphasizing the positive comments even as we point out any weaknesses. Sometimes, as was the case for one school’s recent production of *Lord of the Flies*, the positives are so numerous that I struggle to contain them within our strict 600-word limit.

We submit our reviews to a mentor, usually a theater teacher from another school, assigned to each show. He or she will select up to seven of the best-written reviews to send to local publications and websites, such as the *Washington Post* and *ShowBizRadio.net*. Of the 46 reviews I’ve written, 24 have been published. The exhilaration of seeing my words in print never goes away.

**Starry Night**

At the end of the school year, each critic votes for his or her choice for the best play, musical, actors, actresses, sets, lights, costumes, and other categories from all the performances he or she attended. The nominees are announced online; and then about 2,000 students, teachers, parents, and friends gather to honor the winners in each category at the annual Cappies Awards Gala, which our chapter holds at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Over the last two years, I have been honored to receive four awards at the gala: Rising Critic, Returning Critic, and Critic Team (twice). Although I have not won an award for performance, I have been honored to be nominated as part of a group of performers.

Last year, my school swept the awards gala at the Kennedy Center with a record-breaking 21 nominations and 10 wins for our critics and our production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, including Best Returning Critic, Critic Team, Ensemble in a Musical, Lead Actor in a Musical, Choreography, and Best Musical.

**Lasting Benefits**

Cappies has helped me grow as both a performer and a writer. There is no greater writing teacher than experience, and there is no greater acting coach than observation. As I have reviewed my peers’ plays and musicals, I have experienced the hilarious, the spectacular, and the amazing potential of high school theater. Watching diverse performances has helped me understand some essential principles of acting and production, and whether it is in my work as actor or director, I often think of what has worked best in the plays I’ve seen.

There is magic in theater; it is the ultimate combination of language, song, dance, expression, aesthetics, music, and emotion. I am proud of my involvement in theater—onstage, backstage, and as a critic. This may be my last year participating in the Cappies, but I know that I will continue with both theater and writing in college, and hopefully beyond.

Joseph Biagini is a senior at Westfield High School in Chantilly, VA. He is an award-winning director, actor, and critic recognized by the Cappies, the Virginia Thespian Association, and the Virginia High School League. Joseph hopes to study dramatic arts when he begins college in the fall.