





# RAGE

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PHOTOS CJ YOPP

## Play explores gun violence in schools and an author's remote role in it

After a tense exchange with his principal, a high school student marches back to the same algebra class he was dismissed from moments earlier. Incredulous, the teacher demands to see his hall pass. Instead of removing a piece of paper from his backpack, the young man draws a handgun and fatally shoots her in front of his horrified classmates.

This isn't a storyline from America's latest school shooting; rather, it's an early scene from "RAGE," a play produced this spring by Quinnipiac's theater program. Adapted from the 1977 novel by Stephen King, "RAGE" tells two stories: one of a disaffected teen who murders two of his teachers and coerces other students to share their deepest fears and insecurities; the other of an embattled author grappling with his sense of responsibility for several school shootings allegedly inspired by his book.

By the time of its February premiere, "RAGE" transcended the stage here in a way no previous production at Quinnipiac had, said Kevin Daly, assistant professor of theater and head of Quinnipiac's theater program. Its unconventional exploration of gun violence and school shootings sparked university-wide dialogues about these contentious issues and their root causes.

"The antidote to rage is connection and empathy, and participation in theater facilitates both automatically," said Elizabeth Dinkova, the play's writer and director.

"RAGE" skillfully frames the classroom action in King's novel alongside the second narrative of a King-like author

confronting his shooter-protagonist and his own past to understand the impulses that yield such acts of violence. For this element, Dinkova relied on King's 2013 essay "Guns," which describes his decision to allow his novel to fall out of print after several school shootings across the country.

Exploring the play's sweeping range of emotions—from anger to confusion, guilt and remorse—was both challenging and painful for the actors, especially theater major Kevin Cathey '23, who played the lead role of gunman Charlie Decker.

"Entering Charlie's headspace was an extremely difficult task," said Cathey, who channeled his own personal struggles to develop the character. "It was sometimes hard to get back into my normal everyday life."

The coronavirus pandemic spread rampantly a few weeks later, turning "normal, everyday life" into a distant memory. Don Sawyer III, vice president for equity and inclusion at Quinnipiac, viewed the play and the resulting interdisciplinary dialogues as proof that the university is becoming a "brave space" where volatile issues like gun violence can be addressed and unpacked through a lens of growth.

"In our current political landscape, it seems we have lost the ability to disagree in an agreeable manner," Sawyer said. "Art—in this case, theater—pushes us to engage and allows us to approach certain issues from different angles."

"RAGE" became the centerpiece of a larger framework of conversations, including a debate over the expansion of gun

Theater major Kevin Cathey '23 played the role of disturbed student Charlie Decker in "RAGE," presented by the theater arts program. Here he argues with Michael Pemberton, a guest actor who portrayed The Writer.

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— Elizabeth Dinkova, writer and director

control laws, a community dialogue about how to prevent mass shootings and the subject matter for “Behind Rage,” a documentary-style podcast series about the play’s development produced by the Quinnipiac University Podcast Studio.

“The connections outside of theater have been really exciting to watch,” Daly said.

Dinkova also was moved to see how Quinnipiac’s resources were coordinated to make such rigorous, interdisciplinary dialogue happen, calling it a model for other universities across the country.

A graduate of the Yale School of Drama, Dinkova first read “RAGE” as a middle school student in Bulgaria. She received King’s blessing to adapt it after the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. She contacted Daly about a possible collaboration in 2019.

Daly often invites freelance directors from Yale to pitch their projects. But this time was a bit different. The project that Dinkova proposed—an original play with music about a school shooting—initially gave Daly pause.

“My first inclination was to decline because I thought we weren’t ready for this kind of material,” he said. Dinkova argued that it was the responsibility of artists and educators to broach what has become an endemic social problem.

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Daly solicited the perspectives of several colleagues, including psychology professor Thomas Pruzinsky, to discuss the play’s content and ways that it could spur meaningful conversations across the university. Pruzinsky connected Daly with Scarlett Lewis, whose 6-year-old son, Jesse, was killed in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut in 2012. Lewis also is the founder of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement.

“I knew that Scarlett would provide a big-hearted, deeply informed and very wise perspective on this process,” Pruzinsky said. Lewis has spoken at QU during the annual Social Emotional Learning Awareness week hosted in partnership with the School of Education.

Lewis threw her full support behind the project. She believed “RAGE” brought the conversation about school violence to the forefront in a creative way that moved beyond an oversimplified “good guy/bad guy” narrative.

“Conversations don’t cause school shootings; pain, isolation, disconnection and suffering cause them,” Lewis commented. Lewis also told Dinkova that, while some critics might respond contentiously, she needed to be steadfast in pursuing her vision. “Getting Scarlett’s stamp of approval gave us the extra confidence to push forward,” Dinkova said.

Dinkova’s sense of purpose resonated with Daly. He said

her unwavering commitment to the project reflected what he felt was the ethos of the theater program.

“We want our students to engage with artists who don’t take no for an answer, despite all the challenges that come with making art,” Daly said.

A play of the complexity and size of “RAGE” marked a first for Quinnipiac’s theater program. In addition to a live band, it engaged fight, movement and dance choreographers as well as local professional actors working alongside students. “Our typical productions are probably one-third of this,” Daly said.

“RAGE” leveraged all of these resources to tell a provocative story and spark necessary conversation. Music, in particular, becomes a vital tool for exploring the play’s dark, yet relatable themes. Songs move beyond gun violence to cover intense loneliness, bullying, sexual assault, racism, physical abuse and other unpleasant subjects experienced by the play’s teenaged characters.

“Music in theater doesn’t always imply levity or cheekiness,” Dinkova said. “It helps us achieve a certain intimacy as though the lyrics are our own inner voice speaking to us.”

Cast members devoted nearly 40 hours a week to the show for a month and a half. According to Frank Scott ’22, a student in the accelerated dual-degree film, television and media arts/computer science (3+1) program, that grind often took a toll on the cast.

“We were definitely taking our characters home with us,” he said.

Scott portrayed Ted Jones, a privileged, self-centered football player and bully. Scott had to focus on any unsettling traits he shared in common with Ted in order to relate to him.

“I was the first person to embody Ted Jones, so I had to build him from the bottom up,” he said.

Therapists were available throughout the production when needed, and the cast was guided through regular mindfulness exercises. Castmates also supported each other and got together frequently offstage. According to Cathey, this helped them develop genuine stage chemistry and lasting friendships.

“The whole process of putting on this incredible show has built unbelievably strong bonds with the entire cast,” Cathey said.

At its core, “RAGE” was not a vehicle to shock or move a political agenda, but rather, a call to engage in long-overdue conversations about gun violence and school shootings. It also represented a cautionary tale for what can happen when people don’t talk to each other, or perhaps worse, don’t listen to each other.

“We can move past all of this,” Dinkova said. “We don’t need to wait for tragedies to happen for us to think and talk about these things.”

1. Kevin Cathey ’23 said entering the headspace of the gunman and exploring the emotions he must have felt was difficult.

2. Frank Scott ’22, left, played the role of Ted Jones, a privileged high school athlete and bully. Here, he argues with his classmate Pat, played by Jamien Jean-Baptiste ’21.

3. The captive students express their conflict and angst in an interpretive dance. Other members of the cast are Tess Adams ’21, Liam Devlin ’22, Kayla Jarry ’22, Emily Kane ’23 and Alessandra Varon ’22.

4. Frank Scott’s character, Ted, is attacked by his angry classmates, who drench him in paint for a visual shock.

5. Cathey, the shooter, takes aim at his algebra teacher Mrs. Underwood, portrayed by professional actress Mariah Sage.

6. Tess Adams, who portrayed Sandra, reacts to the simulated gun violence at the beginning of the play, after her teacher is shot.

