

A student in a black athletic outfit is performing a handstand on a green grassy field. The student's legs are spread wide, and their arms are extended downwards. In the background, a large, multi-story school building with many windows and balconies is visible. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

GEORGETOWN

D A Y S

A PLACE OF PURPOSE

A UNIFIED GEORGETOWN DAY SCHOOL

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GEORGETOWN DAY SCHOOL

46 THE NEXT HOME: ONE GDS

DAVENPORT STREET TO DAVENPORT THEATRE

Writer/Director S. Asher Gelman '02 and the boldness of Afterglow

In his off-Broadway playwright/directorial debut in 2017, S. Asher Gelman sought to begin a courageous conversation with his audience that would last long after curtain calls. *Afterglow* explored universal human struggles with love and loyalty—communication and commitment—through the story of three men in a love triangle. The play transcended identity, while both powerfully representing experiences in LGBTQ communities and shattering preconceived notions about relationships in the gay community.

This “little play that could” became the longest-running play in the 34-year history of Davenport Theatre (an off-Broadway theater in New York City). Its initial eight-week run was extended to 14 months and 467 performances, closing on August 12, 2018. And yet, the conversations Asher had with audiences at Davenport Theatre actually began years before on MacArthur Boulevard at Georgetown Day School’s Lower/Middle School campus.

Young Visionary

“On my first day with Asher in first grade,” said Jan Tievsky, former teacher of theater, dance and creative movement at GDS, “I remember entering our makeshift studio space to see him looking around, opening all the cupboard doors, even climbing inside some. Asher wasn’t acting out—but instead didn’t want to sit still. It was clear that even in those first moments, he was already curious and fascinated by space.”

As a young choreographer in his Middle School years, Asher understood how to manipulate and explore space. His stunning dance productions took on tough conversations and had a strong emotional component. He carried that boldness forward through his time on the High School campus on Davenport Street. In High School, he put on unforgettable performances, including one that told through dance and spoken word the story of a woman battling breast cancer.

The conversation—about inclusivity and universal human struggles—continued there. “I get much of my courage from my parents,” he said. “They’ve always been incredible advocates, volunteers, and activists. I felt a lot of encouragement to put truth out into the world and to put good out into the world.”

In High School, Asher had the opportunity to apprentice with the Dana Tai Soon Burgess Dance Company, given the

aptitude he had demonstrated in dance. He took home “Most Outstanding Choreography” and “Best Festival Dancer” awards two years in a row at the Washington Area Independent Schools Dance Education Association Dance Festival. Asher went on to complete a Masters in Fine Arts at George Washington University, where Dana Tai Soon Burgess served as his faculty advisor and professor.

In reflecting on Asher’s work, Dana said, “Even as a High School student, Asher demonstrated a willingness to experiment and take chances with his work. That carried through in his graduate work, where Asher always dove in to explore emotional terrain—his performances were always a real emotional rollercoaster [for the audience]. Asher brings a theatrical perspective to dance and conversely his theater productions are enhanced by the physicalization of his stories.”

Brave Space

Asher explained that the boldness of *Afterglow* was informed by his time at GDS. “Jan was instrumental in my whole journey. She pushed me to create art that makes us think, and she continues to push me.” Then, he paused, looking back on the formative years through the lens of *Afterglow*. “It’s about creating not just a ‘safe space’ but a brave space...Staying safe and sheltered all the time—that’s not where learning happens. Learning happens in that place just outside your comfort zone.”

For *Afterglow*, “Asher divided the audience in half so they were facing inward toward the stage and each other,” explained *Afterglow* Assistant Director Nina Kauffman. “We wanted to keep our audience alert to each others’ reactions and body language. They’d forget each others’ presence altogether as they were drawn into the story; then they’d remember the person sitting across the room from them, often coming out of a very intimate moment.”

“We feel [as audience members] that we are voyeurs to the intimate scenes going on in front of us,” Dana said. With three frequently naked lead actors and a shower on stage, there were plenty of opportunities to experience discomfort.



Just as his placement of the audience drew them into the story, Asher was equally effective at drawing the cast and crew into the creative process.

“What made me especially proud to be a part of our *Afterglow* team is that no one person was at the center in terms of decision-making; this process was entirely a collaborative effort,” said Nina. “Everyone, regardless of their role on the team, was encouraged to contribute their unique artistic voice and vision to every aspect of the show, from the story line to the shower (and figuring out how to keep it from leaking during a scene!). Asher’s openness and wholehearted trust in all of our abilities as artists are what gave us the space to take chances, and for that, I’m very grateful.”

What Has Always Mattered

When Jan came to see *Afterglow* in November of 2017, she felt the baton had passed. In 2016, she chose not to review the script when asked so that she could experience the show as an audience member. “‘I’ve influenced you as an artist,’ she recalled telling Asher. ‘Now the student is the teacher, and I want to come fresh to the theater.’ I was so moved by what I saw. Asher really captured so many of the emotions that couples go through, whether gay or straight, when hitting a rough patch. It was the kind of artistic experience that really stayed with me and had me thinking about it for weeks afterwards.”



“I want to continue to create art that makes us think and puts us in uncomfortable situations and forces us to have a difficult conversation, whatever that may be,” said Asher.

Afterglow will be produced in seven major cities next year, including Chicago and London, and his new project—*safeword*—is scheduled to open Off Broadway in April.

So much of what has always mattered at GDS—inclusivity, courageous conversations, full and truthful self-expression—are a part of Asher’s story, just as his story remains a part of this school. S. Asher Gelman will surely hold firmly to all he learned on MacArthur Boulevard and beyond, from Davenport Street to Davenport Theatre.

FOUNDER’S AWARD

Georgetown Day School opened its doors in 1945 as the first integrated school in a segregated city, founded by seven families who sought to create a school committed to academic excellence, educational innovation, and social justice.

The Alumni Founders Award is given in the spring to honor an alumnus who embodies the GDS values of fighting for social justice, equity, and serving the greater good. Nominations are open to all fields and levels of accomplishment. Alumni may self-nominate or nominate others for the award.

*All nominees will be considered each year for three years.
The nomination period begins January 1 and ends April 15.*

