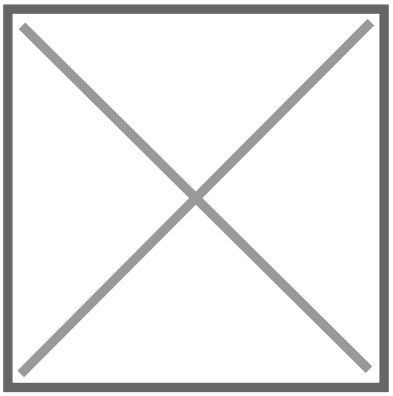


Review: DUMBED DOWN at Plan-B Theatre Company â?? Teaching Is Like Tylenol

Description

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Salt Lake City, UT â?? *DUMBED DOWN*, now receiving its world premiere at Plan-B Theatre Company as part of its Black History Month programming, is sharp, funny, and unsettling. Centering Black pedagogical labor and institutional precarity, the play examines teaching, language, and the systems that decide who is allowed to learnâ??and who is quietly pushed out.

Written by Darryl Stamp and directed by Jerry Rapier, *DUMBED DOWN* centers on a Black high school English teacher working inside an institution structured by interruption: school bells, announcements, policies, phones, and fatigue. Drawing directly from Stampâ??s 25 years teaching in Title I schools, the play resists memoir-as-therapy in favor of something more rigorousâ??a staged argument about how rhetoric is taught, misread, and weaponized, and about what it costs to keep caring inside institutions that rely on care while doing little to sustain it.

Origins

Darryl Stamp is a playwright who has learned how to write from within institutions rather than from a distance, shaping work through sustained proximity, constraint, and repetition. That same inside knowledge comes from Stampâ??s parallel career as an educator, which shapes the playâ??s architecture at every level. Raised in Brooklyn by a single parent, the first in his family to imagine education as a pathway rather than a guarantee, Stamp remembers what it meant to be recognized by exactly one teacherâ??Mr. Cooper, a junior high English teacher who once wrote, â??Excellent! You could be a writer someday.â?• In *DUMBED DOWN*, that moment of recognition becomes a quiet engine: fleeting, consequential, and never sufficient to counter the systems surrounding it, but powerful enough to linger.

A theatrical scene featuring three actors on stage. One actor stands on a chair with arms outstretche

Danor Gerald, Jacob Barnes, and Alex Smith in DUMBED DOWN. Photo by Sharah Meservy, provided by Plan-B Theatre Company.

Teaching Without Off-Hours

From its opening moments, *DUMBED DOWN* announces that teaching is not a job with clean boundaries. The play begins in a kind of nightmareâ??one that will feel immediately familiar to anyone who has ever taught. The classroom dissolves into anxiety logic: authority slips, language becomes heightened and surreal under pressure. It is clever, but more importantly, it is accurate. Teaching lives in the subconscious. The personal and professional bleed together because the hours are irregular, the stakes are intimate, and the relationships matter too much to compartmentalize. This opening establishes the playâ??s emotional grammar: teaching follows you home, into sleep, into fear, andâ??sometimesâ??into moments of recognition you didnâ??t know you were still waiting for.

At the center of the play is Kevin Simon, a high school English teacher who teaches rhetoric not as theory but as lived practice. Ethos, logos, pathos. Syntax. Diction. Simonâ??s love of rhetoric is unmistakable, and the classroom scenes pulse with that affection. Language becomes a source of humor, connection, and momentum. Stamp writes Simonâ??s studentsâ??Malcolm and Craig, current juniors in his class, and Isaiah, a former student who drifts in and out of their orbitâ??as rhetorically alert long before Simon gives them vocabulary. Malcolmâ??s jokes spiral into analogies. Craig corrects language instinctively. Isaiah understands narrative framing well enough to anticipate how he will be read before anyone else speaks. These scenes are loud, profane, quick, and alive: the classroom dialogue feels lived-in, in part because Stamp doesnâ??t rely on academic jargon, but on the rhythms, references, and examples real high schoolers actually use.

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A male actor performing on stage, gesturing expressively while pointing a finger to his lips, suggestin
Danor Gerald in DUMBED DOWN. Photo by Sharah Meservy, provided by Plan-B Theatre Company.

Teaching is like Tylenolâ??itâ??s time-released.
It doesnâ??t cure anything.
It dulls pain incrementally.
It buys time.

A â??Unicornâ?• in the Room

One of the playâ??s most playful and telling metaphors arrives towards the end of the show. Kevin Simon is described by his students as a â??unicorn.â?• A Black male English teacher is rareâ??not because of a lack of talent, but because of systemic pressures that funnel educators of color out of classrooms and into disciplinary or administrative roles, or out of education entirely. The metaphor speaks to representation and fragility at once. Unicorns are rareâ??and they are not expected to last.

DUMBED DOWN doesnâ??t romanticize teaching. It lets exhaustion sit in the roomâ??cumulative, structural, familiar. Burnout isnâ??t framed as personal failure but as an occupational condition, especially in classrooms where emotional labor is constant, and resources are scarce. Kevin eventually

names what that feels like with brutal precision: teaching isnâ??t a cure. Itâ??s time-release reliefâ??enough to keep you moving, never enough to fix whatâ??s broken.

The line doesnâ??t play as upliftâ??it plays as recognition. Gratitude is sporadic in this job, and for teachers of color, itâ??s often paired with extra visibility and extra expectation. *DUMBED DOWN* honors persistence without canonizing it. Staying isnâ??t automatically noble; itâ??s complicated, costly, and deeply human.

> A man wearing a black beanie and a checkered shirt sits on stage, looking thoughtfully to the side.
> *Chad Brown in DUMBED DOWN. Photo by Sharah Meservy, provided by Plan-B Theatre Company.*

Rhetoric in the Room

At its core, *DUMBED DOWN* is a love letter to rhetoricâ??not as academic abstraction, but as survival practice. Rhetorical language is embedded everywhere: ad hominem, parallelism, appeals to logic and emotion. Students debate â??mayâ?• versus â??can.â?• Cell phones interrupt lessons. Announcements cut through instruction. Rhetoric is playful, contested, and constantly under pressure. Importantly, Stamp never treats rhetorical literacy as neutral. These are Title I classrooms, predominantly Black and Brown spaces, where language functions as both power and surveillance. Fluency can open doorsâ??or draw scrutinyâ??depending on who is speaking. The play understands rhetoric as something that sharpens perception while also making certain bodies more visible to institutional discipline. The humor never undercuts this tension. It reveals intelligence that standardized metrics routinely fail to register.

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> Rhetoric is not neutral here; fluency can open doorsâ??or draw scrutinyâ??depending on who is speaking.

Movies, Books, and Escape Routes

One of the playâ??s most compelling dynamics emerges through its studentsâ?? chosen forms of escape. Isaiah Rogers, played with restless intelligence by Chad Brown, speaks in movie referencesâ??*Pulp Fiction*, *The Godfather*, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Film becomes his archive, his escape hatch, his way of narrating himself into something larger than his immediate circumstances. Craig Wilson, portrayed with quiet depth by Alex Smith, escapes through books. Literature offers him a different kind of mobilityâ??interior, reflective, sustaining. When Craig references *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the moment lands with particular weight. These references are not decorative; they reveal how different students reach for different lifelines. The play never frames one mode of escape as superior. It honors the plurality of survival strategies inside the classroom.

> A male actor sitting on a chair in a theatrical setting, raising his hand while looking upward, wearing a
> *Alex Smith in DUMBED DOWN. Photo by Sharah Meservy, provided by Plan-B Theatre Company.*

Performances: Precision, Range, and Recognition

The performances in *DUMBED DOWN* are remarkably precise, grounded in rhythm, listening, and restraint rather than theatrical display. This is an ensemble-driven play, and its effectiveness depends on how fluently actors move between humor, tension, and vulnerabilityâ??often within a single exchange. The cast meets that challenge with clarity and confidence.

As **Kevin Simon**, Danor Gerald strikes a careful balance. He never plays Kevin as a martyr or a hard-ass. In front of students, his energy stays livelyâ??playful, prodding, always pushing them toward the work. In quieter moments, Gerald lets exhaustion surface without telegraphing it. The result is a teacher who can still challenge his students while carrying the weight of what it takes to care.

Chad Brownâ??s Isaiah Rogers is restless, sharp, and constantly in motion, his dialogue saturated with film references that function as both armor and escape. Brownâ??s range as an actor is evidentâ??he shifts from wit to vulnerability effortlessly. He captures Isaiahâ??s rhetorical intelligence without softening his defensiveness, making clear how fluency and humor can register as a threat in institutional spaces. Isaiahâ??s referencesâ??to *Pulp Fiction, The Godfather, The Shawshank Redemption*â??are not throwaway jokes but narrative tools, a way of interpreting a world that often refuses to listen.

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> Three actors perform on stage, sitting at desks in a classroom setting. The first actor, on the left, wea
> *Danor Gerald, Jacob Barnes, and Alex Smith in DUMBED DOWN. Photo by Sharah Meservy, provided by Plan-B Theatre Company.*

Alex Smith plays Craig Wilson with a contrasting interiority. While Isaiah reaches outward through pop culture, Craig turns inward toward books. Smithâ??s range lies in his quiet precisionâ??he relies on stillness and subtle shifts, making his moments of correction, reflection, and literary reference feel authentic rather than forced. When Craig cites *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Smithâ??s understated delivery gives the line a quiet resonance, showing how, for Craig, literature is both a sanctuary and a means of making sense of the world.

Jacob Barnes shows impressive range across multiple rolesâ??Malcolm Thomas, Principal Davis, and a correctional officerâ??shifting between them with precision and a sharp comic instinct. As Malcolm, heâ??s genuinely funnyâ??quick with timing, attuned to rhythm, and unafraid to push humor toward disruption. His jokes arenâ??t just for laughs; they test boundaries and reclaim space. Yet the humor doesnâ??t diminish Malcolmâ??s intelligenceâ??it sharpens it, showing how wit can be risky in institutional spaces.

What unites these performances isnâ??t just polish but recognition. The actors listen deeplyâ??to each other, to the language, and to the rhythms of the classroom. Their work honors the playâ??s rejection of easy arcs. No character is reduced to a type or treated as a neat exception. Instead, *DUMBED DOWN* shows people navigating systems that outsize them, and the performances work because they allow that tension to linger.

Sound, Space, and School as Environment

What I really appreciate about this show is how it balances aesthetic care with grounded practicality. The production never lets visual beauty overshadow the spaceâ??s reality and mood, and Director Jerry Rapier is attuned to what makes sense in a school environment. Yes, we want things to look goodâ??and Janice Chan, one of my favorite designers, ensures that they doâ??but itâ??s never about being fancy. Itâ??s about making it feel honest, even in its simplicity.

Much of *DUMBED DOWN*â??s realism is crafted through Cheryl Ann Cluffâ??s sound design. Schools hum, echo, and interrupt themselves, and Cluff makes sure we feel that: background chatter seeps in, bells break up thoughts, and announcements intrude at just the right moments. She pulls us into a space that sounds alive, not staged. Chanâ??s scenic design complements this perfectly: fluorescent lights hover, softened by side blinders so they focus rather than overwhelm. And those pages embedded in desks and chairs? Thatâ??s language worn down by use but still holding weight. In this world, knowledge isnâ??t abstractâ??itâ??s leaned on, worn, and present.

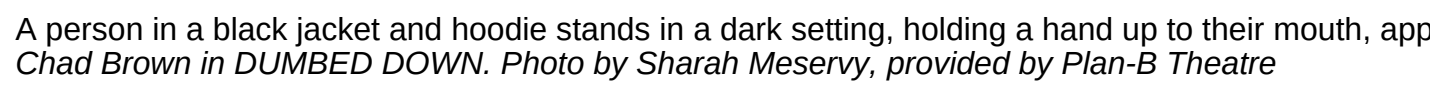
Emilio Casillasâ?? lighting design follows that same ethos: practical, sharp, yet never harsh. Derek Williamsonâ??s costumes do more than dress the charactersâ??they ground each role in the lived reality of the environment, from the studentsâ?? casual layers to the authority figuresâ?? subtle contrasts. And behind the scenes, David Knoellâ??s scenic building and electrical work ensure that everything feels sturdy, functional, and realâ??no frills, just a space that feels lived in. Itâ??s this combinationâ??sound, light, costume, and craftâ??that makes *DUMBED DOWN* feel so natural.

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Why This Play Matters

Importantly, *DUMBED DOWN* resists being read through the familiarâ??and often reductiveâ??frame of the â??school-to-prison pipeline.â?• While the play does not deny the realities of carceral entanglement, it insists on a broader reckoning: with an education system shaped by constraint, contradiction, and triage, one whose impacts are felt far beyond any single district or demographic. What Stamp stages is not inevitability, but accumulationâ??the slow stacking of policies, pressures, and compromises that make care increasingly difficult to sustain. What makes *DUMBED DOWN* extraordinary is not that it exposes failureâ??we already know the system is broken. It is that it honors the intelligence, humor, and rhetorical agility that persist inside that brokenness. The play trusts language. Trusts laughter. Trusts the slow, unglamorous labor of care.

Hope here is not triumphant. It is delayed, partial, and deeply human. Like Tylenol, it works quietlyâ??time-released, imperfect, and without guarantees. That honestyâ??about what teaching costs and why it continuesâ??is precisely what makes *DUMBED DOWN* resonate.



Chad Brown in DUMBED DOWN. Photo by Sharah Meservy, provided by Plan-B Theatre Company.

Show Info

DUMBED DOWN (World Premiere) â?? Plan-B Theatre Company
Studio Theatre at The Rose (Salt Lake City, UT)
Feb. 12â??Mar. 1, 2026 | 60 minutes, no intermission

Thurs/Fri 7 PM | Sat 4 PM | Sun 2 PM

https://planbtheatre.org/dumbeddown/
Tickets

After 25 years, Kevin is (really) leaving teaching (this time). But what will happen to the students who might otherwise slip through the cracks?

DUMBED DOWN is a tale of language, love, and learning inspired by playwright Darryl Stampâ??s career teaching 11th-grade American Literature at Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas, and Hunter High School in West Valley City.

A WEEK WITH A PLAY

DUMBED DOWN will serve high school students in grades 11-12 with free student matinees via their **A Week With A Play** program, wherein students read a play, see that play, and then discuss it with the playwright. Click the button below for details and registration.

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DUMBED DOWN Google Slides including script (grades 9-12, SY26)

Creative Team

Playwright: Darryl Stamp (bio | blog post)
Actors: Jacob Barnes (bio), Chad Brown (bio), Danor Gerald (bio), Alex Smith (bio)
Director: Jerry Rapier (bio)
Costume Designer: Derek Williamson (bio)
Education Liaison: Aliyah Bacca (bio)
Graphic Designer: Alisha Jones (bio)
Intimacy Director: Rebekah JoAnn Guerra (bio)
Lighting Designer: Emilio Casillas (bio)
Line Notes: Kallie Filanda
Props Designer + Education Coordinator: Sharah Meservy (bio)
Scenic Designer: Janice Chan (bio)
Scenic Builder + Electrician: David Knoell (bio)
Sound Designer: Cheryl Ann Cluff (bio)
Stage Manager: Taylor Wallace (bio)

Original Music and video: Danor Gerald

About the Playwright

Darryl Stamp has been a member of Plan-B Theatre Companyâ??s Theatre Artists of Color Writing Workshop since its inception in 2017, and his relationship with the company has unfolded through sustained collaboration rather than one-off commissions. In 2019, his short play *Roar* premiered as part of Plan-Bâ??s *â?¦OF COLOR* series. The following year, his short play *Mis En Place* was commissioned by Plan-B at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown as part of the national *Play at*

Home initiative; the piece is now included in the COVID-19 Response Collection housed at the Library of Congress.

Also in 2020, Stamp produced and directed a reading of an early version of *DUMBED DOWN* for the all-virtual Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival, marking the first public iteration of the work that would later evolve into its world premiere. In 2023, his play *GO HOME COME BACK* premiered at Plan-B Theatre Company, followed in 2024 by his monologue *American Survival Story*, presented as part of Plan-Bâ??s *FULL COLOR* series.

In addition to his playwriting, Stamp has been an adjunct acting instructor at Weber State University since 2019 and has served as a teaching artist for Plan-Bâ??s *Playwriting With Young People* (grades Kâ??6) and *Playwriting With Young Adults* (grades 7â??12) programs in Salt Lake City schools since 2022.

A retired high school teacher, Stamp draws directly from his 25-year career in education in *DUMBED DOWN*, which reflects both the emotional labor and the rhetorical intelligence required to teach within under-resourced systems. He extends his gratitude to his wife, Melinda, and his daughter, Sophia, for their love and support.

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Category

1. Reviews
2. Premiere

Tags

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2. Alisha Jones
3. Aliyah Bacca
4. Chad Brownâ??
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9. Emilio Casillas
10. Jacob Barnes
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