

**Something about lying**  
By Idris Goodwin

I had been doing plays on a twig and twist-tie budget for a couple years which at its best got me ripped apart in the local press. My favorite: *In Goodwin's latest play a character repeats, "Don't tell me what I need!" Well it's the opinion of this humble reviewer that, Goodwin, you need a rewrite.* I was 26 and had just graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago with a Masters in the Fine Art of writing, which meant that I slept on a mattress in my friend's unheated art studio. I knew a lot about the art of hustling which is how I wound up with a job interview at the very progressive Perspectives Charter School.

Perspectives wanted me to teach speech and drama to 8<sup>th</sup> graders. They asked about my credentials. "I am an underground hip hop MC that also writes plays and makes very little money doing either. But if I had a speech and drama teacher that really cared and just gave me a little push, maybe I'd be making more." They asked about my approach to discipline. I told them, "I'll employ any form of discipline you want; dunce caps, eraser slapping, public ridicule – I am a company man."

I had done some teaching before - mostly a mixed bag of language tutoring and weekly teen writing workshops. I was used to the ambitious, dreamy artist kids that wanted to look out the window and free-write. I was used to wearing my pajamas till noon. The Perspectives job was a daily affair. I had to set my alarm, look presentable, and carry myself with a modicum of decency. I had to create actual curricula around tangible goals and all that junk. The kids I'd be dealing with were like most of us in 8<sup>th</sup> grade - miserable, bored, awkward and looking for any excuse to drive our teachers toward that bottle of anti-depressants. However, it was a small price to pay in exchange for socks without holes.

Most performers will tell you that no matter how many hours they've chalked up on stages, there is always a feeling that one day the audience will turn on you. There will be one day when someone finally stands and says, "HE'S A FAKE! A PHONY! GET HIM OUTTA HERE!!!" Teaching, as we all know, is the ultimate performance for an audience that would rather be elsewhere.

I stood before twenty blue-uniformed brown faces peering at me blankly. Girls with pressed hair in colorful barrettes and boys with their shirttails hanging sloppily from their trousers. Sharpening their ridicule, judging me, waiting for me to show the cracks in my armor so they could destroy me. I wasn't gonna let them. No sir. I over-planned and over-explained, improvised and diverted, sometimes just threw hail marys and crossed my fingers. "Just get to 11:42 am, Goodwin." I never let them see me sweat, even when things were clearly on fire.

My main fire-starter was Michael Young, the resident wise-ass. He kinda had this young Fresh Prince - Nick Cannon - "aint I stinker" thing that appeared to be working very well for him. Except with me, because after all, that my shtick. I had to show this upstart that he couldn't encroach on my charming troublemaker terrain. So I was a little tougher on Michael than some of the other students, but only a bit. I liked to knock him off his self appointed Fonzerelli pedestal, much to the joy of the other students, who were often eclipsed by Michael's swagger. My ability to steal Michael's thunder helped me build

the trust of the other students. The weeks began to pass a little quicker. But then, it happened. Michael caught me slipping.

“Where is my pen, Mr. Goodwin?”

“What pen?”

“You didn’t have a pen yesterday and I loaned you mine. It was my favorite pen and you said you’d give it back. Where is my pen?”

“Give it back? I thought I gave it back”

Did I take Michael’s pen? Maybe, I don’t remember. And I looked- the room, my bag, my home, my coat; no pen. Day after day, he would ask, loudly so the whole class would hear, “Mr. Goodwin, where is my pen?” And day after day I told him, “I don’t have it. I gave it back to you.” The class slowly began to split on the great debate of “Mr. Goodwin; Thief or Cool Teacher Guy with Wrinkled Clothes?” Some students came to my aide, but some questioned with big innocent pre-teen eyes. Michael began to regain his thunder. I had become the oppressor, a lying reviser of history, an authoritative bully, petty and irresponsible. He knew that I knew that somewhere in this nappy head of mine, I held that very opinion of myself.

Towards the last week of the program, I was forced to discipline Michael for some silly 8<sup>th</sup> grade reason, like pulling hair or kicking a trash can or calling someone a nappy headed ho. His father was called to the school and guess who had to face him? That’s right, not my understudy. Michael’s father as you could imagine was a stoic blue-collar man with hands that could strangle a yak. Despite his ice-like demeanor I could tell that Papa Young was annoyed to be pulled from work to pick up his knucklehead son. Just like my stoic and potentially yak strangling father, when Van Hoosen middle school called to tell him that they were not fond of my witticism and antics. Michael sat at his father’s side looking up at me, terrified. I knew that look well. It was the look of impending doom. A look that can also be found on the face of gazelles when they hear that rustle in the distance.

Mr. Young asked me in a cold and low voice, “So, what’d he do?” I couldn’t send a fellow entertainer to the chair, just for experimenting with his craft. Michael was merely a frustrated social commentator using his natural gifts to sway popular opinion. He probably didn’t get much attention from his dad, just a lot of restrictions and punishments. So what if he defied my instruction and used my class as the venue for creative development on his own terms? Michael’s desperate eyes were locked on me as I formulated my answer. “Nothing too bad, Mr. Young. We were doing some improv and it got a little carried away. Michael is just a very committed performer. He just needs to exercise some better judgment.” I looked at Michael and shrugged as if to say, “Best I can do for ya, kid. You’ll be remembered.” Michael smiled back. It was more a smirk actually, kind of like Gollum in Lord of the Rings. He looked to his father and said, “This is the guy I told you about dad, the one who stole my pen.”