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Louis Graham tries his hand at graffiti technique during a workshop in Brooklyn while Emma Wieber looks on.

New York Arts Adventure

By the time they sat down for lunch with Washington Post theater critic Peter Marks, there was plenty to talk about. Just the night before, in a moment of symmetry, all six actor-musicians from Jordan-Matthews High School in Siler City were on Broadway watching “Six,” the hit new musical where former wives of King Henry VIII returned to life for a one-night concert to determine who had it worst in life. After the show was over and the sold-out audience was gone, students wandered down the orchestra section to the stage for a 40-minute discussion with half of the queens they just saw perform.

Earlier editions of this annual New York Arts Adventure had students going on stage and backstage at “Tootsie” and “The Band’s Visit” to learn how all of the magic happens. That wasn’t in the cards this year, given the pandemic protocols, but even this conversation was special. At the time, “Six” actors had done only one similar event — fulfilling a “Make a Wish” request just a few days earlier. “We wanted to do everything we possibly could,” the stage manager said while moving everyone around safely for a group photo that even the actors requested but was not part of the original plan.

There were plenty of other shows — five for everyone, to be exact — and the

first night landed some second-row center for “Company” and others a few feet from the stage at “Moulin Rouge!”

Over five days, there was another long lunch with producer and actor Jessie Austrian from Fiasco Theater to talk about pursuing a life in the arts. A street-art tour and graffiti workshop in Brooklyn with noted (and perhaps notorious) artist Leaf. An afternoon 93-stories overlooking Manhattan at Summit One Vanderbilt. And a somber visit to the 9/11 Memorial and sites in Lower Manhattan.

Marks opened lunch at Joe Allen restaurant by asking what students saw during the week and what they thought. It created a vigorous back-and-forth debate with the critic answering plenty of questions and injecting an insider’s perspective from his own reviews and work for decades in New York and Washington. But when the nationally renowned critic, someone who often chairs the jury selecting finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, unexpectedly shifted the conversation to Jordan-Matthews’s production of “Oklahoma!,” the young actors were stunned.

“Who knows?” Marks concluded. “Maybe someday I’ll review you guys.” One of the young actors said it was “literally a jaw-dropping moment.” **d**