

The Stage Between Worlds

By Andrea Chen – Thomas S. Wootton High School

As I step into the opera house, a chill threads along my arms, yet I scarcely notice. The seats, a royal red so deep it almost hums, stretch in precise, endless rows. Above me, the ceiling arches like the spine of a golden leviathan, filigree twisting into arabesques, silver catching the last stubborn light before it fades. The walls breathe color—crimson, beige, umber, gold—and for a moment, I feel as though I could drown in it, lose myself entirely. When the lights dim and the curtain rises, the stage exhales—and I am both awed and unshielded, a visitor in a world larger than myself, yet one I ache to disappear into.

I have always loved theater and film. The flicker of a scene, the sweep of a gesture, the weight of a single line—these are worlds I can step into, where I understand what ordinary words cannot capture. Watching performers summon stories to life, I imagine the lives they carry within them, the possibilities they reveal, and I recognize the courage I wish to claim in my own.

Yet beneath the awe, another voice stirs. STEM. Grades. Internships. The path prescribed for a first-generation daughter of Chinese immigrants. Their sacrifices, whispered in the quiet of our townhouse, press heavier than the chandeliers above. The rigid rows of seats, straight and unwavering, feel like the life others have drawn for me. And yet it is not only their expectations I carry. I have absorbed them, made them mine. Every hesitation, every decision, is measured against standards I have internalized—the proof of worth in scores, the quiet terror of failure, the belief that duty must eclipse desire.

Every possibility is charged with weight. Every choice is a test. And still—the pull of performance persists, threading possibility through the tension. Each actor whispers courage, rebellion, vulnerability. I see myself both beneath the spotlight and in a lab coat, a body split between duty and desire, and I feel the ache of wanting both, suspended between lives I cannot fully inhabit.

The orchestra swells, a single note suspended like held breath. I close my eyes and let it fill me. Perhaps it is enough to move forward, even imperfectly. Perhaps it is enough to choose a path that quickens the pulse rather than calms it, that honors heritage, internal expectation, and heart alike.

The curtain falls. Applause rises and fades. The room empties. I linger, seated, imagining the lives I could live, the roles I could explore, the person I might become. I am both student and dreamer, expected and aspiring, and in that tension—beautiful, bitter, and unrelenting—I discover a fragile, luminous truth, a life still forming, a stage still set, a story waiting for its lines.