

The Weirder the Better?



Theatre students learn best, one educator asserts, from futzing around with the unstructured fringes of the art form

BY KOURTNEY RUTHERFORD

Students at IRT/Westside Experiment performing *The Portal of Parallels*.

LEE WEINER

CONFESS: I THINK WE SHOULD TEACH OUR kids whacked-out experimental theatre.

My conviction is born from experience. Children aren't often exposed to the kind of theatre that blew my mind on my own path to becoming a theatre artist—a brand of performance distinctively different from that usually taught in classrooms. Although I love acting and theatre in all its forms, as a youngster the school musical wasn't my thing. What captivated me, by contrast, was the unstructured creation from the ensemble-based groups I discovered in college. That adventurous undertaking gave me the opportunity to learn something new through the vehicle of a show as it evolved, as opposed to imitating the pro forma mechanics of some big Broadway production.

This unconventional mode of theatre—in which I might be figuring out how to play drums, attempting to speak a foreign or made-up language, or tackling the task of constructing a house inside a room—instantly made me hungry to learn. It made me feel like I was participating in an art form that was immediate, not unlike visual art or music—something I could work on any time I wanted, independent of being picked for a part or having what someone else deemed a special ability to sing, dance or act.

I learned a lot about how theatre-in-education functioned when I eventually began to try to teach the exploratory methods of theatre-making I had so productively practiced. Conventional theatre educators often try to strike a tricky balance between creating a positive educational experience for students, pleasing parents and school administrators, rescuing program funding (or getting it off the ground in the first place) and conveying to children what theatre is like in the “real world”—all, one hopes, without crushing students' enthusiasm or egos. Added to the

mix is the reality that drama teachers need not have worked in professional theatre. In fact, a full-time teaching commitment usually prohibits working in the field at all.

My friend and colleague Kori Rushton and I take a different approach. This past summer, I joined Rushton (who I know from the Experimental Theatre Wing at New York University and the master's program in educational theatre at City College) to start a summer acting lab for students ages 12 to 18. The Westside Experiment—housed out of IRT, a grassroots theatre that develops emerging artists (previously known as the Interborough Repertory Theater, it shortened its name in 2007 when Rushton took over as artistic director)—lets students devise theatre in collaboration with IRT's summer resident company. “IRT really supports downtown theatre artists,” enthuses Rushton. “I give them the space, I give them the keys, I allow them the time to find the play. Most of these artists are not the type of artists that you would necessarily see on or Off Broadway—these are the artists that I want to expose students to.” We were curious to see what would happen when experimental artists who were trying to establish themselves and find audiences were teamed up with adolescents, who in a similar way are struggling to find their identity and voice.

Rushton, a veteran public school drama teacher, saw a pressing need for an alternative experience to traditional drama programs in schools. “I wanted to build a school where students were working hand in hand with actual artists,” she notes, particularly those doing experimental work. For the first year of the program, we took all students that applied, regardless of their theatre background, and were especially keen to recruit those who might be into things other than theatre—like science, fashion or computers. The result was *The Portal of Parallels*, a show about the nature of reality, created

with the Operating Theatre.

How do education programs built from this approach differ from the wide variety of programs out there? Many of the ideas promoted by experimental theatre—innovation, development of new concepts, physical approaches to acting technique, employing multiple disciplines—have been absorbed into the mainstream. But what you find at the heart of many such programs, even the ones that share our out-of-the-box aspirations, are *plays* and the *construction of plays*. The work of experimentalists veers toward *deconstruction*, favoring no single performance form and giving pride of place creative freedom—to the exploration of a concept just because the artist might like it. Instead of creating a play, the work could be characterized as *play itself*: fooling around with ideas, putting new things together—all guided by adults who have experience working in this mode.



COURTESY OF ANDY'S SUMMER PLAYHOUSE

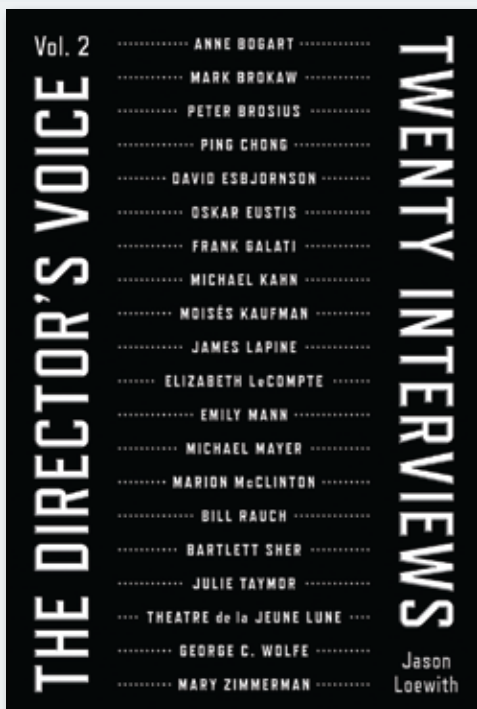
Sounds great—but does this way of making theatre offer enough structure for kids? Indeed, it does. While the idea might seem radical, the practice of exposing students to the edgiest elements of theatre art is actually decades old. Leading experimental companies across the country have built programs in which kids are trained to create original work. In this alternate world, separate from the ethos of the Big Spring Musical, students make art alongside working theatre artists. By default,

these programs are achieving that holy grail of progressive education: children intrinsically motivated to construct their own learning process.

The ground-breaking New York City-based ensemble the Wooster Group began its Summer Institute 15 years ago as an offshoot of arts-education programming at Middle School 131 on the Lower East Side. Co-created by Ariana Smart Truman and Kate Valk, the program now lasts three weeks and enrolls

between 12 and 14 kids per summer, ages 12 to 17, who are allowed to return over subsequent summers. The program is free and employs working artists from a mix of disciplines, who develop the chosen text together with students—anything from *Serpico* to Pinter plays, *The Outsiders* to Dylan Thomas. Sometimes the material relates to the work of the Wooster Group itself, as when the students worked on Racine's *Phèdre*, the subject of the company's widely performed 2002 *Phèdre* (To

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MAGGIE HOFFMAN

The Wooster Group's Summer Institute showing of *Shakespeare Death Scenes*.

You, the Birdie!), and sometimes it doesn't. There isn't a formal audition or recruitment process, though Truman says they tend to seek out "kids from underserved neighborhoods where exposure to this kind of theatre is something they are not going to be provided with." Lack of context can be a gift: In many ways, *not* knowing what constitutes a good result allows the students to be more imaginative.

A program with similar aspirations, Andy's Summer Playhouse, has been luring experimental artists to rural New Hampshire for more than 40 years. Named in honor of beloved children's book illustrator C.W. Anderson, the program was founded in 1971 by two schoolteachers. Obie-winner Dan Hurlin directed the program for 15 years in the 1980s and '90s. The students, he says,

"haven't been fed a steady diet of narrative," leaving them "open to so much more."

During his tenure, Hurlin brought an impressive roster of artists to this workshop program, from playwrights David Lindsay-Abaire and Lisa Kron to performance artist Holly Hughes and puppeteer Janie Geiser. Three mainstage productions each summer featured more 30 children apiece. Although Hurlin did hold auditions for the tuition-free program, anyone who reapplied would automatically be included the following year. "I never felt like I was teaching them—I was directing a theatre," recalls Hurlin. Children continue to return year after year—and the program is currently run by two of its former students, artistic director DJ Potter and executive director Alexandra Urbanowski.

In Austin, the ensemble Rude Mechanicals began Grrl Action in 1999 as a three-week summer program for girls ages 13 to 16. The program emerges from the experience of "finding our voice onstage, finding our confidence onstage," says co-director Madge Darlington. It loosely relates to the Rude Mechs's professional work in that the participants are constantly looking for new ways of formulating performance by combining disparate raw materials. The focus is on getting the artists' thoughts on the page and gradually making that text performative. Darlington and co-director Jodi Jinks emphasize feminism—one exercise involves writing down the names of famous women (beyond popular role models such as Oprah and Beyoncé) and exploring their achievements in fields such as science and academia. The third week of the program culminates in a show. There is no formal audition process, just an online application and a nominal tuition. As in the Wooster Group's institute, students are invited back after their initial session and never age out.

Creating theatre alongside experimental artists can be a powerful educational tool—students learn that they can make something concrete from a mere idea, a skill that is verifiably transferable, whether or not they choose a life in theatre. The programs are rigorous in their own ways, and let students explore ideas that they are interested in without particularly analyzing why. "It's less about creating brilliant theatre," as Hurlin sees it, "than giving kids the ability to make something that is viable in the adult world." ☒

Kourtney Rutherford has collaborated with Big Dance Theater, Witness Relocation, Half Straddle and Radiohole.

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