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IRT's Westside Experiment Provides Eureka Moments for Teens

By Jack Smart | Posted July 23, 2014, 1:48 p.m.

child actors IRT Theater Kori Rushton

N.Y. theater teens Vampire Cowboys

Westside Experiment

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Photo Source: Courtesy IRT

IRT Theater's Westside Experiment is not your average summer camp.

Instead of mounting a musical or learning to tap dance, teenaged actors immerse themselves in the art of devised theater, developing original work with a professional downtown company. "I think a lot of theater [education] programs are about the spectacle and making sure that the kids have really great costumes for the parents," said Kori Rushton, producing artistic director of IRT. "This is about the work, this is about the process, this is about the nitty-gritty of the core of the art form." As evidenced by their exuberant July 19 showcase, teens and experimental theater are a perfect fit.

An offshoot of IRT's 3B Development Series, the Westside Experiment has for the last three years paired middle school- and high school-aged kids with a theater company for two weeks of unstructured collaboration, physical expression, and improvisation training. This summer's teaching artists were Qui Nguyen and Robert Ross Parker, co-artistic directors and founders of the Obie

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Award-winning “geek theatre” group Vampire Cowboys. Their wacky genre-blending approach to devised work matched the youngsters’ bouncy energy, and culminated in three original mini-comedies dubbed “Inquiries of Time Space and Robots.”

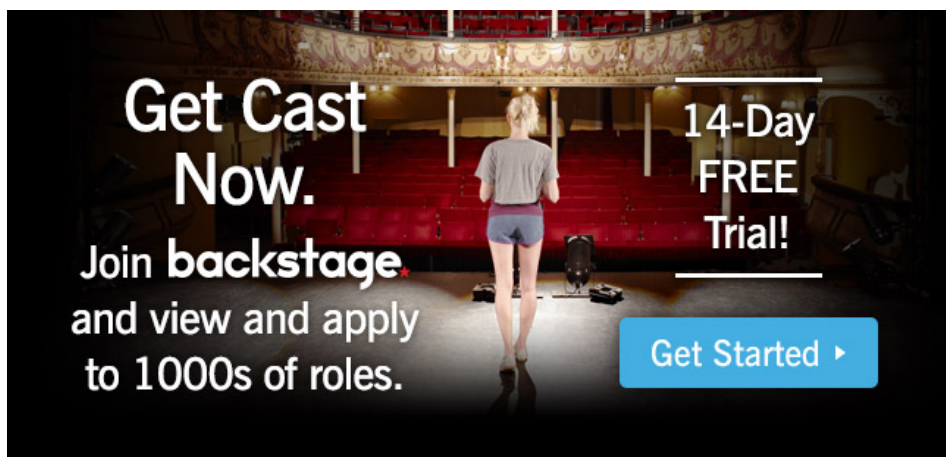
For both teachers and kids, the learning went both ways. “It’s a symbiotic relationship,” said Rushton. “It’s good as an expert to go back to where you came from.” Nguyen said the experience reminded him of the more informal, improvisational beginnings of his company. “This touched on the roots of Vampire Cowboys, of what Robert and I did back in 1999 when we first met. We would pull a genre from the sky and kind of play around, and know we would employ stage combat at some point.”

Stage combat is undeniably the program’s highlight for its students. “I got to punch a lot of things,” said Dinah Schone, one of 15 performers who underwent rigorous stage combat training and games. According to Nguyen, it’s the perfect way to channel kids’ rowdiness into a focused performance. “It makes them have to use their body physically but in a disciplined manner,” he said.

The second half of the program was spent inventing their own plays through made-up scenes loosely structured by Nguyen and Parker. “We did our performance and they had a recorder with them, and they took a lot of what we did and spruced it up,” said Zack Monteleon. “They were really nice teachers.” As with the Vampire Cowboys’ adult actors, goofiness and spontaneity were encouraged among the students at all times. “We hang out during lunchtime and then we’d make jokes and bring them back here!” said Tamir Hicks.

For Rushton, the Westside Experiment is an opportunity to introduce the tenets of devised work—movement, innovation, play—to tomorrow’s actors and audiences. “Most of us involved in downtown theater got exposed to it when we were in college,” she said. “So how will that change the industry by opening up the doors to middle school kids?” Rushton hopes Westside Experiment will one day be run by its current participants, the torchbearers of future downtown theater.

One thing’s for certain: these 15 young artists are hooked. When asked if they would recommend this program to friends, they responded, without hesitation, a raucous, resounding, “Yes!”



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