

tya today

SPRING 2020

Get Up, Stand Up

Engaging Young People in
Political Conversations



2019 TYA / USA
NATIONAL CONFERENCE
FEATURED PRODUCTION

BOOK BY
JASON REYNOLDS
BRENDAN KIELY

ADAPTED FOR STAGE BY
JODY DREZNER ALPERIN
VICKY FINNEY CROUCH

Based on the New York Times bestselling novel, two teens - one black, one white - grapple with the repercussions of a single violent act that leaves their school, their community, and, ultimately, the country bitterly divided by racial tension.



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(ON THE COVER, L-R) Brian Quijada and Marvin Quijada in *Kid Prince and Pablo* by Brian Quijada. Kennedy Center Theater for Young Audiences, Washington, DC. Photo by Michael Butcher/Elman Studio.

(L-R) Rebecca Keeshin and Eric Pasto-Crosby in *Mockingbird*, adapted for the stage by Julie Jensen, based on the book, *Mockingbird*, by Kathryn Erskine. Nashville Children's Theatre, Nashville, TN. Photos by Michael Scott Evans Photography.

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TYA Today is a journal published by TYA/USA, a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation founded in 1965, which is the United States Center for the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People. It is the only theatre organization in the United States which has the development of professional theatre for young audiences and international exchange as its primary mandates.

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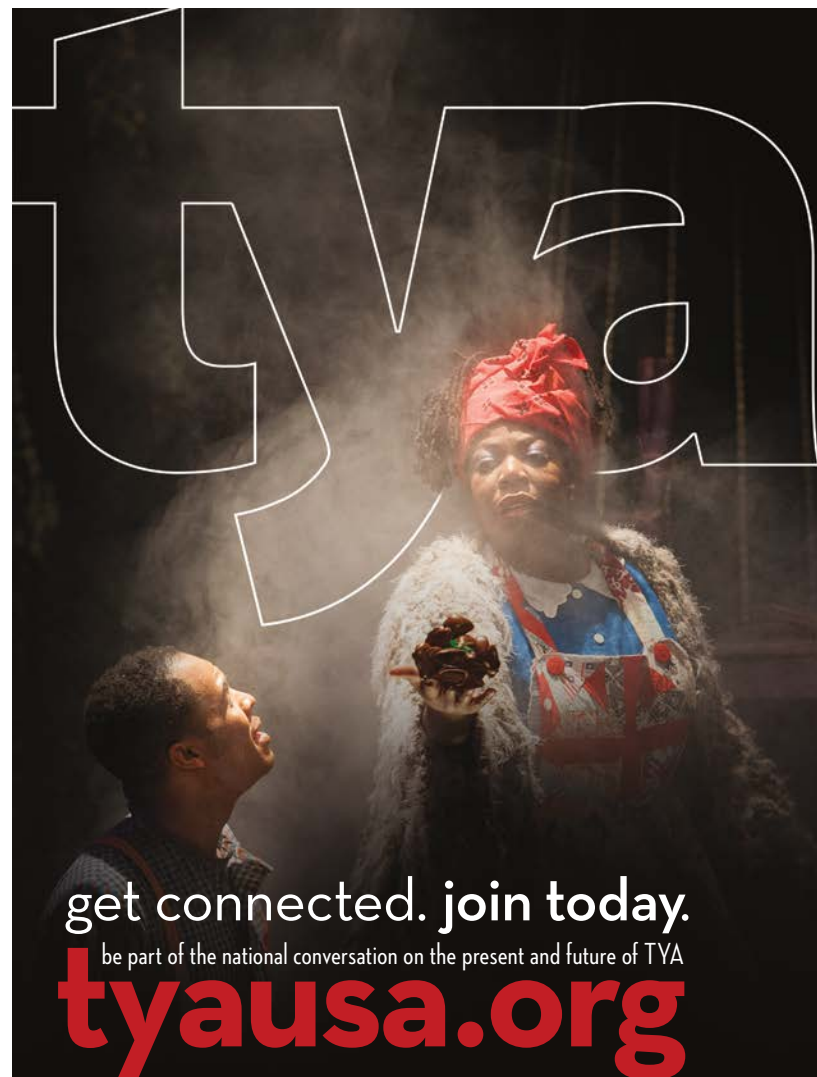


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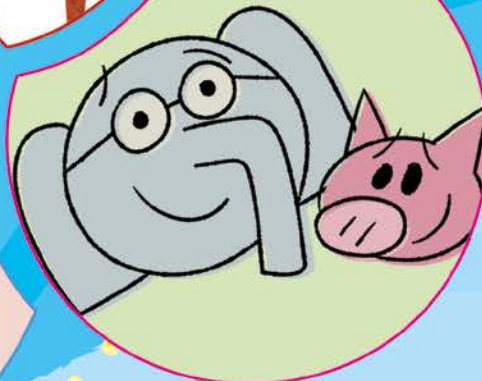
(L-R) Anthony Coleman and Theresa Cunningham in *Wiley and the Hairy Man* by Suzan Zeder. Imagination Stage, Bethesda, MD. Photo by Margot Schulman.

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How Can We Help Children Deal With This Extraordinary Time?

by Paul Fitzpatrick

Reprinted with permission and originally published on the Imagine Blog on March 31, 2020.

Children have a huge amount to deal with at the moment. Last year we heard reports of children and young people suffering from Climate Emergency anxiety. Now they have to deal with Coronavirus anxiety and some will also deal with bereavements. When we get through this, we will need a way for children to come together and try to understand what they have experienced. And we need to find a way to help that happen. But how can we help them deal with this extraordinary experience in their young lives? What can we do to enable them to get on and enjoy their childhood? If only there was a gym for emotional resilience ... Or a class for joy and hope ...

There is. It's called the theatre.

Following the current global crisis we need the theatres, festivals and, crucially, the artists to still be here, ready to provide that platform of healing for us all, particularly children.

After this unprecedented period of social distancing and isolation, we are going to crave meaningful social contacts. Where better to find that than at the theatre? Edinburgh became a beacon for hope in 1947 when the Edinburgh International Festival was founded to 'provide a platform for the flowering of the human spirit' by bringing people and artists together from around the world following World War II. Following the current global crisis we need the theatres, festivals and, crucially, the artists to still be here, ready to provide that platform of healing for us all, particularly children.

When a child goes to the theatre, they are transported to different countries, different worlds and situations. They encounter wonderful people and unpleasant bullies. They experience the highs, the lows, the pain and the beauty of the world. It's a full-body work-out for the mind, the emotions and the imagination.

When this is all over, and more than ever, our children will need to experience exciting, moving theatre and dance especially made for them. I remember a Healthy Scotland campaign with the tagline "Don't do it for tomorrow do it for today". The sense being - don't go out and exercise just so you avoid health issues in later life, go out and exercise so you can enjoy your life more, now. The same goes for children's theatre. I believe that the reason our field presents live performance that challenges the intellect and engages the emotion is so that children can have a fuller and richer childhood, not so they can be better adults.

A recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts states that over time, when attending the theatre regularly, children developed the ability to imagine their lives differently. They could see a future for themselves that was different from the one they were living. The work-out of the imagination in the theatre gave them the strength to develop something very special: hope. And that is something we all need at the moment. ■

Paul Fitzpatrick is chief executive of Imagineate, a unique organisation in Scotland, promoting, developing and celebrating theatre and dance for children and young people.



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Get Up, Stand Up

Engaging Young People in
Political Conversations

by Tiffany Maltos



Justin Weaks in *Long Way Down* by Martine Kei Green-Rogers, based on the book by Jason Reynolds. Kennedy Center Theater for Young Audiences, Washington, DC.
Photo by Michael Butcher/Elman Studio.

In times of volatile political news, social justice movements, and a pivotal election year, so often do we find responses in contemporary art.

The theatre is no exception as sociopolitical plays and musicals have emerged on stage in a long-time practice of commentary and acts of resistance dating from ancient Greece to now, and every era in between. The last few years alone, new works such as *Hamilton*, *The Great Society*, *Slave Play*, and more have continued the tradition of discussing politics and social justice in an effort to open minds and spark conversations with a mainstream public. It is no surprise that Theatre for Young Audiences has also seen an increase of new works that centers these conversations with young people and their families. From idea, to process, to performance and post-show, TYA theatres are building unique experiences to lift these stories and bring young people into a meaningful discussion about the importance of learning from each other and approaching conversations with empathy.

When selecting a show that touches on a social justice and political message, what conversations support the decision? From a traditional season selection process to the less conventional, works are chosen over a number of variables, but at the heart of selecting a production with a social justice message is support from organizational leadership, artists involved and surrounding the piece, and above all, support from the communities on which the show centers and lifts.

Holding the Mirror

“I really have felt a necessity that our program reflects our audience,” said Ernie Nolan, executive artistic director at Nashville Children’s Theatre (NCT). “Our work is either a mirror or a window for the audience ... That’s at the forefront of my mind. Will young people see themselves on stage or will they see someone who is different, but that they can identify with or learn from their experience?”

In 2018, NCT presented *Mockingbird*, adapted for the stage by Julie Jensen. *Mockingbird* follows Caitlin, an 11-year-old girl with Asperger’s syndrome, as she navigates the loss of her brother, Devon, who was killed in a school shooting. “[This] particular play is for a neurotypical audience to try to understand someone who is atypical,” says Nolan. While seeing and experiencing the world through Caitlin’s eyes remained the anchor to the production, the show took new presence after the Parkland, FL shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in February 2018. “What was unexpected was that on the first day of rehearsal I spoke with the actors and shared that this play is of the moment. Two days later Parkland happened.”

A year later, NCT opened *Return to Sender*, adapted for the stage by Marisela Treviño Orta, and tells the story of two young people – one, a son of a generation of American farmers, and

the other, a daughter of undocumented migrant workers – confronting the complexities of immigration and citizenship.

“Fifty percent of kindergarteners in Nashville right now are Latinx. Spanish is the second most spoken language in the city and more and more it’s a necessity that we share those stories on stage,” Nolan added. “Young people may have heard a glimpse of a news story from mom and dad listening to the evening news or NPR, and then need to unpack the things they heard. Days before *Return to Sender* opened, ICE came to an elementary school in Nashville and demanded private records that school denied. It was amazing how all of a sudden when both *Mockingbird* and *Return to Sender* really became ‘of the moment,’ we were responding to current situations right there, in rehearsal and on our stage, in ways we never imagined.”

In October of 2019, Adventure Stage Chicago opened *La Ofrenda*, by José Casas. *La Ofrenda* tells the story of Alex and his grandmother as they grieve the tragic loss of Alex’s parents on September 11th through the cultural celebration of Día de los Muertos. “Our company is part of a larger organization called the Northwestern Settlement House ... Its mission is rooted in social justice and it identifies as a community-based agency,” said Tom Arvetis, producing artistic director of Adventure Stage Chicago. “We have a food pantry, an early childhood education center, a charter school, and an AmeriCorps Team in addition to this theatre, that are all part of this organization. We live and breathe our connection to the needs of this community.”

Three years ago, Adventure Stage Chicago began to evaluate how they could reinforce the mission, vision, and values of Northwestern Settlement House through the work and themes on their stage. “The mission is to disrupt generational poverty,” Arvetis continued. “We looked at what those markers of poverty are and organized our work within that: access to nutritious food, affordable healthcare and housing, proximity to violence, isolation, and there are many more.” Arvetis and his team organized seasons around these markers in thoughtful ways and rooted them in education. The 2019–20 theme was shelter, and the team saw *La Ofrenda* as a way to explore what it means to feel safe, to feel love, and to give shelter to someone else.

Arvetis added, “We have to find language that allows us to have meaningful discussions, that allows us to think critically about the world we live in and the choices that we make. The real gift of being here at the Settlement and doing the work is we really see theatre for young people as critical to a thriving democracy.”

Addressing the Crisis

Another approach to engaging young people in sociopolitical conversations is through touring work. Going to them versus having them come to you. In 2019, The Cleveland Playhouse in Ohio partnered with StageOne Family Theatre in Kentucky to produce *Jacked!*, a retelling of the classic Jack and the Beanstalk that addresses the opioid crisis in both these communities.

“Cleveland Playhouse has been doing classroom matinee tours for seven seasons and each year we’re very careful, as we commission new plays for our young audiences, that we are speaking to issues that the whole community is speaking about,” said Pamela DiPasquale, artistic director of the Cleveland Playhouse. “We don’t shy away from what’s going on. We believe strongly that if the adults in the community are talking about or affected by whatever issue it may be, then children are most certainly affected by it, too.”

“A real fundamental belief and value of mine is access and extending the reach of this work beyond the theatre. If we are not using all of our resources and creativity to try to get these stories told as often as we can, then we’re failing,” added Idris Goodwin, artistic director of StageOne Family Theatre and playwright of *Jacked!*. “I really respect what Cleveland Playhouse does and I wondered, ‘How could my company learn from them? Can we pool our resources and make a large impact in our communities?’”

Once it was established that the two companies would team up for a co-production experience for a touring show, they began to look at what this show would be about. “I was listening to the radio and heard yet another story about the opioid crisis in Kentucky,” shared Goodwin. “This is one of the unfortunate things our two states share. This problem and challenge. I started thinking about the effects of this problem on young people. What does this do to kids and families? I immediately thought about trying to find a way to write a play for the youngest demographic I can explore this so that community stakeholders can use it as an opportunity to explore the conversation in more detail if they wanted to.”

Student Choice, Student Voice

Not all social justice plays come from a traditional season selection process. Off the Page in New York adapted the young adult novel, *All American Boys*, as a project for middle school students with whom they were working. Off the Page had a residency with 8th grade students who wanted to respond to the non-indictment of Officer Daniel Pantaleo, the officer involved in the death of Eric Garner. As a presentation for city council, the group of students were inspired to create a work that responded to interactions between police officers and

Alejandro Tey in *La Ofrenda* by José Casas. Adventure Stage Chicago, Chicago, IL. Photo by Josh Darr.



communities of color. Off the Page organized interviews, assisted with research, and helped students craft a final project to present to elected officials.

Jody Drezner Aleprin, artistic director of Off the Page shared, “The students ended doing something similar to a podcast for their presentation and they played it for city council, a majority white room, and it made the council members really uncomfortable, so much so that the questions students received from them were about the equipment they used, not what they were saying. Coming out of the experience, students were really frustrated because they didn’t feel like the focus was on what they wanted to talk about. We said, ‘You’re at a crossroads and you have two options. One is you can throw up your hands and think that didn’t work and be done with it, or we can regroup and see how we can keep pushing forward on this issue.’ The kids said they wanted to keep going.” The students continued to gain traction on their project as they were invited to Town Halls, local TV shows, and other media outlets. Aleprin continued, “The students wanted to keep going and luckily around that time, *All American Boys* was published. We got our hands on a copy, read it and said, ‘This is the next thing.’” Off The Page began the journey with adapting the novel, a story of two communities at odds when a white officer confronts a young man of color, by

reaching out to co-authors Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. “We had a really clear vision that this would be an immersive promenade piece,” Aleprin shared, “and they were very gracious and granted us the rights to do that.”

The first iteration of *All American Boys* included students recruited from all over Brooklyn to play the roles of the young people in the script, many of them learning to be actors for the first time, performing alongside professional actors cast in the adult roles. Off the Page had access to a New York City public middle school as part of a summer program they had, so they were able to use this location to establish the promenade theatre experience moving from classroom spaces, hallways, and the gym throughout the performance.

Aleprin recalled the strength of the actors during the rehearsal process: “The first week of rehearsal Alton Sterling was killed [on July 5, 2016]. Then Philando Castile [on July 6, 2016]. Then the five Dallas police officers were killed at the end of the week [on July 7, 2016]. Vickey Finney Crouch, my co-adapter/co-director would text in the morning and say, ‘This is too much. Are people going to show up to rehearsal? Are we going to be able to do this?’ The actors would show up. They would recommit every day to diving into this work even in the midst of it being so present.”

Lifting Up Communities

As these works begin to unfold, consideration of who is in the room telling the stories of marginalized communities is of utmost importance. Authenticity of artists, intention, and impact all play a critical role in ensuring the representation of voices within the production are shepherded with care.

In *La Ofrenda*, Arvetis touched on the choices Adventure Stage Chicago made to establish the storytelling: “We made sure we hired the right director, Ana Velazquez. She is new to TYA, but brought a lot of personal experience and cultural background to the creative process. We have a lot of folks who work in the Settlement organization who identify as Mexican American as well as community members we serve who are immigrants from Mexico, so it was very present to us that working from that cultural perspective wasn’t a huge leap for us to make and it really mattered who was in the room.”

During *Mockingbird*, Nashville Children’s Theatre established community partnerships with advocates in the neurodiverse community to help tell the character of Caitlin’s story. “The art in the play that is from Caitlin’s journal was from a partnership through TRIAD [Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center]. We

were connected to an artist on the Autism Spectrum who created the artwork for us that was projected during the show. She also sat during various points during the rehearsal process and gave feedback about the production and the depiction of Caitlin’s experience.”

In October 2019, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts premiered *Kid Prince and Pablo*, an adaptation of Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*, where classism and immigration collide set to live-mixed hip-hop music within a world similar to the United States. Unique to this production is that the playwright Brian Quijada had his brother, Marvin Quijada, compose the music alongside him, and both perform the title roles on stage. Harry Poster, the producer at the Kennedy Center Theater for Young Audiences, shared that the authenticity of the story is inspired from Quijada’s experience. Poster shared, “The way Brian uses hip-hop, rap, and poetry as mediums to tell the story has made it possible for everyone to be at the table in a way that isn’t dismissive ... Brian talks about how he is part of a family of immigrants in the south and he really believes and likes the values of the American Dream, and he grew up championing that. This is a story that’s very much an ode to that.”



Tajh Smith and Shaqur Williams in *All American Boys* by Jody Drezner Alperin and Vicky Finney Crouch. Off The Page, Brooklyn, NY. Photo by Brad Alperin.

“If we were really going to put this on our stage then we really couldn’t greenlight it without knowing how we were going to take care of our audiences ...” – Harry Poster

Throughout the writing process for *Jacked!*, Goodwin worked with a foster care liaison through Jefferson County Public Schools. “My focal point for the piece was the psychological effects on the children affected by this so I started with [the liaison] because she works with a lot of the students who are in households where some of this abuse is going on. They are taken out of the household because of that.” Along with research and the County liaison, Goodwin also connected with the US Social Impact Division at Sesame Workshop, the educational programs organization of Sesame Street. “We had conversations about how Sesame Street addresses issues and does their social impact work for communities in need. I worked to engage with folks who did the social work intimately and could see the psychological ramifications and other paradigms.”

With *Off the Page*’s unique approach to the adaptation process of *All American Boys*, Aleprin acknowledged that her experience as a white woman would be different than that of the young students of color she was working with on the adaptation. “My co-teacher and I are two white ladies and we came to a group of brown and black students and said, ‘Your voice is in the government’ and they were like, ‘Yeah, screw you,’ which is completely fair ... So at every iteration of *All American Boys*, we’ve have artists of color as collaborators, from sensitivity readers and script consultants, to musicians and actors [to provide feedback].”

No matter the story, the process must involve voices from the communities the play represents. These are *their stories* being told and it is vital that they are brought in and listened to in the feedback process. Creating partnerships with local advocacy support groups create opportunities to learn from each other and bring awareness to not only the artists in the room, but the audience at large.

Taking Care of Audiences

When producing plays that examine political topics through the human experience, care for the audience must be considered as both a way to invite them into the discussion and feel respected in the discourse. Each company interviewed mentioned some combination of post-show discussion or panel with a partnered community organization.

In October 2018, the Kennedy Center presented *Long Way Down*, an adaptation of Jason Reynolds’ young adult book

by the same name written by Martine Kei Green-Rogers. *Long Way Down* takes place in a 60-second elevator ride where the character Will decides if he is going to enact retaliation for the murder of his brother. “I think immediately we knew that we had a responsibility with the content [of *Long Way Down*],” said Poster. “If we were really going to put this on our stage then we really couldn’t greenlight it without knowing how we were going to take care of our audiences because of the trauma that happens.” The Kennedy Center worked together as a team with Jason Reynolds to make sure they crafted an experience for the audience that prepared them for what they were about to see and discuss as a group. At the suggestion of Reynolds, the Kennedy Center connected with Williams College Professor of Africana Studies, Dr. VaNatta Ford to develop curriculum around *Long Way Down*. Audience care started before the performance with a pre-show discussion to provide the lens of what young people were about to experience. Dr. Ford would ask questions around the themes of the play without directly linking to the experience the character Will has in the show. Dr. Ford would then let the audience know that she would be back post-show to unpack what they saw and provide room for the community to talk about what this piece brought up for them in a safe space.

A pre-show approach in the form of community artmaking was used at both Nashville Children’s Theatre for *Return to Sender* and Adventure Stage Chicago’s production of *La Ofrenda*. “The lobby activities began the conversation about *Return to Sender* beforehand. There was an art installation that young people contributed to. They wrote down wishes for the world on stars and those were hung like constellations,” Nolan shared.

For *La Ofrenda*, a giant altar with pictures of deceased loved ones and offerings for them was in the lobby of the theatre. “We brought in the voice of the community when it came to how we invited our audience into our lobby,” said Arvetis. “We created an ofrenda in our space and invited members of our community to contribute to that. On November 2nd, we expect to see the community represented fully in the ofrenda and that will continue to be a space where over the course of the run of our show we will continue to invite people to bring whatever they want to contribute to that altar.”

At the end of the performance, it’s vital to connect with audiences to start the dialogue about what they watched. Though there are varying ways to engage, from formal panels with community members to quick metrics by a visual poll in

the lobby, post-show engagement furthers the message of the production while giving the young people in the space to ask questions about what they learned and generate empathy from hearing other perspectives. Not only do the young people in the audience need space to unpack the production, but so do the guardians as well. Furthermore, guardians are looking for tools on how to navigate the discussion with their young person.

“At the end of every public performance of *Mockingbird*, the ushers passed out questions for the car ride home,” Nolan shared. “The feedback we got from guardians was really positive because I think the adults were really thankful for the tool to unpack what the experience might be.”

As with every artform, the piece is subject to interpretation and may receive praise or opposing opinions from the public. “Though we haven’t had opposing feedback [about *Jacked!*], there are always the gatekeepers,” DiPasquale shared. “In Theatre for Young Audiences, the children aren’t buying the tickets, somebody else is. So they have to say, ‘*Will my child*

In those instances, Nolan shared that he comes back to the origin of work and invites these individuals to read the book, which is provided for free thanks to a grant Nashville Children’s Theatre was awarded. If a person offered feedback and have not yet seen the play, Nolan invited them to a performance followed by a conversation with him about the work. “I feel like both *Mockingbird* and *Return to Sender* presented issues but didn’t try to solve them or say who is good or who is bad, and that’s the beauty in these pieces. They say, ‘*Hey, these things happen*’ and leave it to the audience to discuss what comes next.”

Room to Grow

Each organization selected plays that tell stories about marginalized communities, which placed these topics on a large-scale platform, and artistic leaders made decisions to ensure the stories of these communities and experiences were respected throughout the artmaking process. It should be acknowledged that the majority of the companies

“There are a lot of young people already engaged in these political conversations, so if we want to honor them in the art we are making with and for them, we have to acknowledge that they are interested and they have really important things to say in those conversations.” – Jody Drezner Aleprin

like this? or ‘*Will the parents of my students get upset that their child is seeing this?*’ But what Idris does is take [the opioid crisis] and couch it in a fairytale. People know this fairytale and it is safe for adults. They know who Jack and the golden goose are ... and then Idris flips it and makes all of these characters a little closer to what’s going on in households and communities, and it’s working.”

Nolan added, “The opposing viewpoints that we did get were comments from people who view childhood in a certain way. ‘*Why do we need to have these conversations with young people? Can’t we keep them innocent?*’ There were also a few who felt that the work was politically motivated, which really, it’s *human being* motivated. It all came back to people’s ideas of childhood, and what they thought young people can or can’t handle.”

interviewed for this piece are prominent leaders in the field and currently have predominantly white leadership. This is reflective of the field as a whole, as seen in the recent TYA State of the Field Research Study (see this issue’s Education article for more), and diverse representation among theatre leadership and staff goes hand in hand with representation on stage.

As TYA theatres continue to use their stages to lift these stories and engage young people in political conversations, we must also model for this audience how to do the internal work to build authentic relationships with – and become better allies for – marginalized voices. It was not explicitly asked in the interview process if these organizations engaged in staff-wide anti-oppression/anti-racism work. For theatres that select productions with social justice and/or political messages, consider beginning the work within. It is undeniable that when anti-racism/anti-oppression work happens alongside art-making, change and growth within the organization begins and creates a

synergistic power for artists, theatre leadership, and audiences to have the strongest support for marginalized communities without exploiting their stories.

At the start of this movement is the next generation of TYA creative and administrative leaders. In the TYA State of the Field Research Report published in 2019, statistics on leadership and staff demographics found that over 95% of TYA's artistic, business, education, and multi-role leaders identified as white. As an industry we must look at *who* is at the table for season selection, *who* is deciding what stories are presented, and *how* authentic partnerships with marginalized communities are happening. TYA board trustees and leadership selection committees must also engage with anti-oppression/anti-racism work in order to incite this shift. The more those in positions of power begin to do this work, the more we as an industry can begin to transform. When TYA leaders with diverse intersections – of race, gender, gender non-conforming, LGBTQ+, citizenship, neurodiversity, ability, etc. – begin to lead the theatre with the largest TYA platforms, the more our industry reflects a landscape as diverse as the young people we serve.

Young People are Ready

In an interview Reynolds gave about his works being adapted he said, “For some reason, the works I’ve written seem to be primed for the discussion. Primed for the adaptation to engage in that discussion for the audience.” The same could be said for young people in the United States today: the news they hear, the shows they watch, and the books they read have primed them to engage in the political and social justice discourses we are having as a nation.

“There are a lot of young people already engaged in these political conversations,” said Aleprin, “So if we want to honor them in the art we are making with and for them, we have to acknowledge that they are interested and they have really important things to say in those conversations.”

“I feel really committed that that’s the job of our institution: really reflect our community and to also offer opportunities for personal discovery,” Nolan added. “Some of these social justice or political shows will be moments of discovery for a young audience. TYA theatres are helping build the next global citizens of the world. These are the audiences that are going to vote. These are the audiences that are going to be the next leaders and politicians and so, for me, it’s important to share all kinds of stories with them and those social justice stories happen to be part of that conversation.”

Poster added, “We are giving a safe space to have a conversation. It’s storytelling and the nature of storytelling is to learn about other people’s perspectives, learn about stories that are not your own, or to amplify and elevate stories that are not being heard by everyone. *That’s our job.* I don’t think the work we are putting on stage is subversive and I know that’s dangerous to say. I think we are finding ways to be outlets to circumstances that kids in our audiences are living every day, and if we can be a safe outlet to tell those stories and participate in the storytelling, then we are starting the conversation.”

In times of scarcity of funding, competitive ticket prices, and turbulent times for theatres, it is now more than ever we must combine efforts to keep TYA institutions moving forward. Theatres are greatly needed to continue the tradition of not only learning together as one audience, but from each other, especially when we engage in meaningful discussions about the world we live in.

“Theatre has been around forever,” said Goodwin. “Storytelling and providing a mirror of who we are is ancient. It’s what we do, it’s the way we know who we are and a way that we remember who we are ... It reminds us that we are not alone and that these things that are happening to us have been happening forever, and though they may not be happening in the exact same way, we’ll get through it. *Theatre is necessary* and someone is going to do it after we’re gone. We gotta have food. We gotta have oxygen. And we gotta have storytelling.”

“We are one of the last true civic spaces in our society where young people have an opportunity to engage with strangers in a storytelling experience that encourages them to think critically and to recognize themselves as a part of a larger body politic,” Arvetis implored. “That is the responsibility we have: to nurture that, maintain that, and make sure that it doesn’t go away because young peoples’ ability to recognize themselves as part of something bigger is going to allow them to feel like they have agency in the world as they get older. The role that we have as a TYA theatre is to provide the messages of hope and critical thinking that inspire and empower to ensure a new generation of young people are excited about the world they are inheriting.” ■

Tiffany Maltos is the associate director of education at Seattle Children’s Theatre.

BY THEATRES
MATT FOR
OMASTA YOUNG
— AUDIENCES
UTAH AND
STATE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Education and community engagement play important roles in TYA theatres today. Many theatres house education departments (or similar departments), and even those that do not often engage in educational endeavors such as providing study guides for young audience members and offering a wide range of theatre and drama courses for patrons of all ages.

This article explores the roles and programming of TYA theatres' education departments and the perspectives of their leaders by considering survey data collected during the 2019 TYA State of the Field study sponsored by TYA/USA and conducted by Utah State University.

This larger study, the first systematic investigation of its kind in the US, surveyed the artistic, business, and educational leaders of TYA companies affiliated with TYA/USA about myriad topics. We invited all TYA companies affiliated with TYA/USA that produce or present a season of shows for public audiences to participate. Fifty-nine of the 61 invited theatres (97%) participated at least in part. For details regarding the study's methodology and many of its findings, please refer to the *Theatre for Young Audiences State of the Field Research Report*, available from TYA/USA (info@tyausa.org).

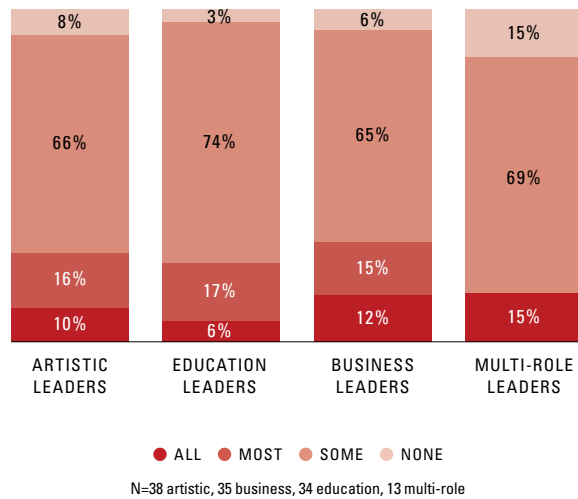
Classes And Programs Offered

Fifty of the theatres surveyed (85%) provided information about the types of courses they offered, and of those theatres, 100% offered creative drama, skill-based, improvisation, and play production classes. The most commonly offered classes for children aged 0-5 were creative drama courses (offered by 70% of the theatres), while skill-based classes were the most commonly offered courses for children ages 6-10 and adolescents (80% and 76%, respectively). A few theatres (8%) also offered skill-based and improvisation courses for adults.

Other common educational offerings at these 50 theatres included school residencies unrelated to productions (at 68% of the theatres), internships and apprenticeships (at 62%), teacher professional development courses (at 58%), and workshops or classes for families (at 50%). Ten percent of theatres offered other types of educational programs.

We asked artistic, business, and education leaders as well as leaders fulfilling multiple roles at their companies to indicate the degree to which their theatres' education programs related

Figure 1. Degrees to which leaders indicated their theatres' education programs related to the shows they produced/presented.



to the shows they presented/produced. As Figure 1 illustrates, all leaders indicated that some, most, or all of their educational programming was directly related to their theatres' seasons (usually "some"). Interestingly, education leaders were most likely to indicate that at least some of their programs directly related to their theatres' seasons but were also the least likely to indicate that *all* of their theatres' programming was directly related.

That relatively few leaders of all types indicated that all or most of their education programs relate to their seasons may impact the types of scripts used in theatres' educational courses. Twenty-eight theatres responded to a question asking what percentage of the scripts used in their education programs were original (as opposed to licensed). Of these, the mean percentage reported was 56%.

School Performances And Educational Resources

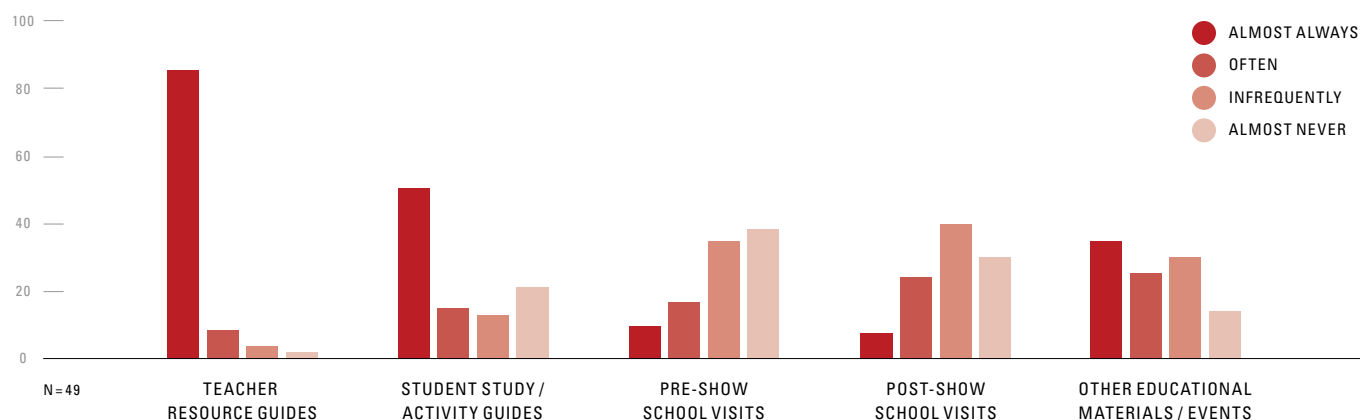
Fifty theatres (85%) reported the percentages of the performances that served school and public audiences. Seventy-nine percent of the performances presented/produced by these TYA companies were for school audiences. Sixty-six percent of the 53 theatres that answered questions about touring indicated that they toured shows, producing or presenting a collective 2,596 touring performances during their 2017-18 seasons. The number of touring performances ranged from 2 to 265 per theatre, with a mean of 49 and median of 11.

Given the percentage of performances they offer for schools, theatres are incentivized to align their seasons with academic curricula and to offer their patrons educational resources. Forty-nine theatres reported the types of educational resources they offered and, as Figure 2 indicates, the most common offerings were teacher resource guides, followed by student study guides. Relatively few theatres offered pre-show and/or post-show school visits.

Theatres indicated that the most common element included in teacher resource/student study guides was lesson plans; 93% of the 45 theatres who answered questions about the guides included such plans. Less commonly mentioned was information about the show (40%), further resources related to the play (33%), information about the playwright (29%), information about the creative team (27%), and synopses of the plays (22%). Few theatres included information about theatre etiquette (13%), information about the producing theatre (9%), or materials other than lesson plans that make academic connections (9%).

Most TYA companies (75%) indicated that their education staff members were responsible for creating educational resources, though at some (18%), artistic staff shared this responsibility. Sometimes but not often these resources were created by administrative staff (9%), external writers (7%), graphic designers (7%), or by universities with which the companies partnered (5%).

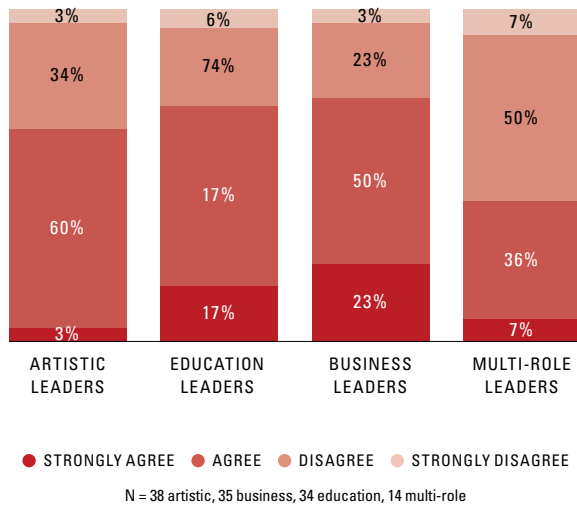
Figure 2. Frequencies at which educational materials and programs were offered.



Alignment With Academic Curricula

As discussed above, the prevalence of school performances may influence the types of shows presented/produced. We asked company leaders to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the statement, “In general, it is important that the shows my theatre presents and/or produces align with school curricula.” As Figure 3 shows, a majority of leaders at theatres that have separate artistic, business, and education leaders responding (N=34) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with business leaders agreeing most strongly. Leader of theatres at which they filled multiple roles, however, mostly disagreed with the statement.

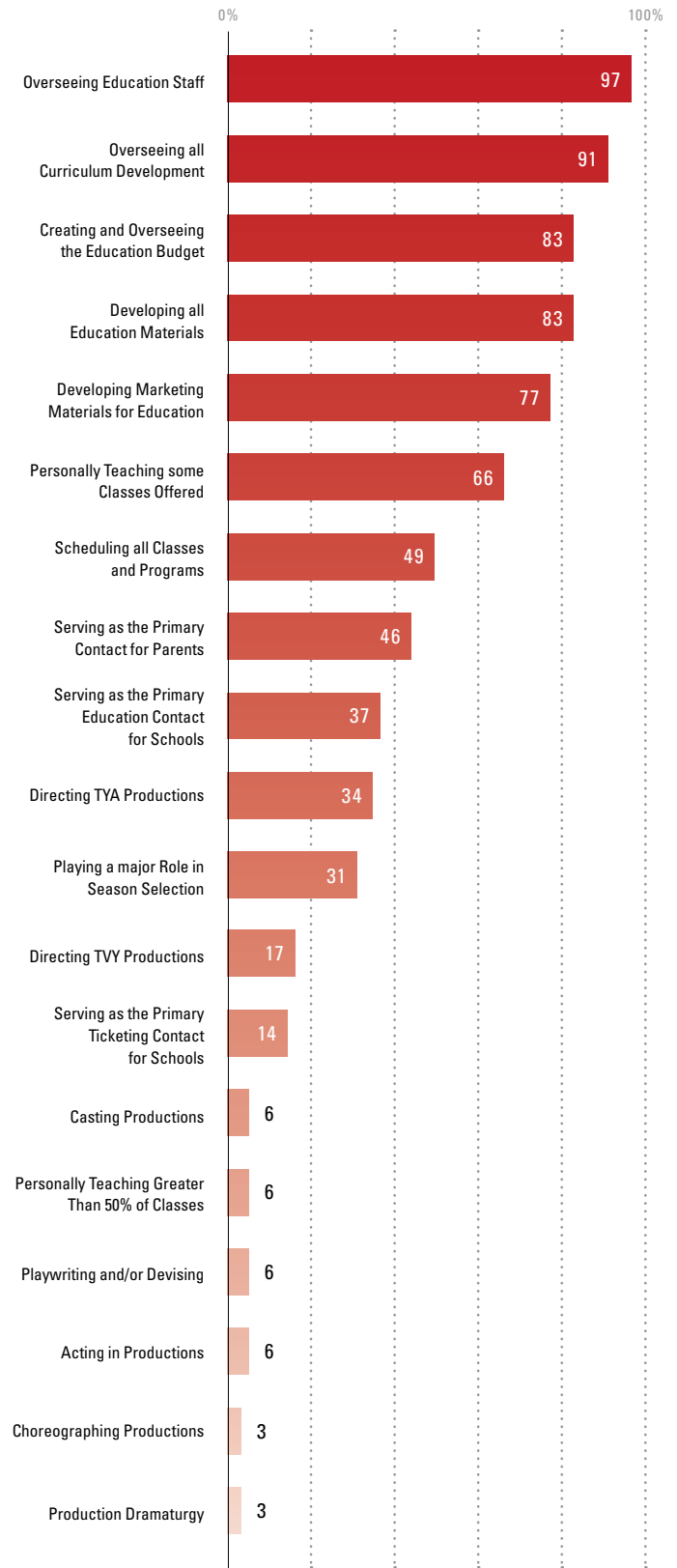
Figure 3. Degrees to which various TYA leaders agree with the statement: “In general, it is important that the shows that my theatre presents and/or produces align with school curricula.”



Education Leaders

Most education leaders were white (97%) females (86%) with graduate degrees (77%). Although most artistic and business leaders were also white (91% and 97% respectively), education leaders were much more likely to identify as female (only 51% of both artistic and business leaders identified as such). Education leaders were also more likely to hold graduate degrees than artistic leaders (46%) and business leaders (48%). Despite this, education leaders earned significantly less than their colleagues. On average, education leaders earned 37% less than artistic leaders and 40% less than business leaders. Nevertheless, TYA companies’ education leaders fulfilled a diverse array of responsibilities, as indicated in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Percentages of education leaders fulfilling various responsibilities.

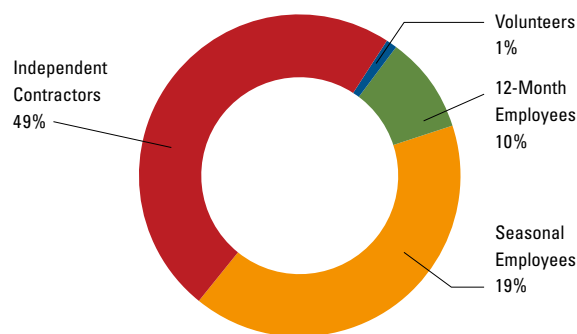


N=35

Teaching Artists

Thirty-one theatres reported whether or not they employed any teaching artists (TAs) to deliver instruction during their 2017–18 seasons; of these theatres, 100% did. As illustrated in Figure 5, the vast majority of these TAs (89%) were hired as seasonal employees or independent contractors, with some full-time year-round employees and very few volunteers.

Figure 5. Percentage of teaching artists hired in various ways during theatres' 2017–18 seasons.



That nearly half of the TAs were independent contractors is revealing, as the US Internal Revenue Service indicates employers can hire independent contractors only if the employers have “the right to control or direct only the result of the work and not what will be done and how it will be done.” As such, while theatres can hire independent contractor TAs to teach particular types of courses, per the IRS definition theatres cannot lawfully dictate precisely what or how these TAs teach, giving such TAs a degree of autonomy.

Salaries for *full-time* teaching artists during the 2017–18 season were low compared to other employees at the theatres surveyed. The average (mean) salary for teaching artists at theatres with budgets under \$250,000 was \$13,000 (compared to education leaders at \$19,000 and artistic leaders at \$21,667). All salaries increased significantly at theatres with budgets of \$250,000–\$999,999, at which on average TAs earned \$31,000, education leaders earned \$33,889, and artistic leaders earned \$58,500. The greatest salary discrepancies existed at theatres with budgets of \$1 million or greater. At these theatres, leaders' salaries were significantly greater than at smaller-budget theatres, but teaching artist salaries remained about the same. At theatres with budgets between \$1–3 million, TAs earned mean salaries of \$31,000 (no increase from \$250,000–\$999,999 budget theatres) while education leaders earned \$52,059 and artistic leaders earned \$86,441. TA salaries slightly increased at theatres with budgets greater than \$3 million to an average of \$36,429, but education leaders at these theatres earned an average of \$67,292 and artistic leaders earned \$128,409. As such, on average at the largest-budget theatre companies, full-time teaching artists earned only 28% of what their artistic leaders earned. At these companies, education leaders also earned only about half (53%) of what artistic leaders earned.

More On The State Of TYA

While this article focused on educational programming and personnel, the survey from which this data was drawn covered a much wider range of topics. For more from the survey, see the *Theatre for Young Audiences State of the Field Research Report* (available from TYA/USA at info@tyausa.org), the fall 2019 issue of *TYA Today*, and future articles that will explore how data from the survey compared with earlier surveys of the field. ■

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“Being Seen, Being Yourself, and Being Celebrated”

Autism-Inclusive Theatre Festivals

by Heidi Schoenenberger

Theatre for Young Audiences practitioners are continuously seeking ways to invite every child into theatre spaces. When you consider how theatre spaces by their very nature may not seem the most welcoming to young people (dark, somewhat noisy, yet asking audiences to remain quiet), you must also consider how the same characteristics of entering this space can be off-putting for any disabled or autistic person.

Natalie Mack, Spencer Lott, and Emily Bruner in *Up and Away* by Trusty Sidekick Theater Company. Big Umbrella Festival, Lincoln Center, New York, NY. Photo by Alexis Buatti-Ramos.





n audience's range of needs, interests, and triggers differ drastically for an equally wide range of abilities and identities. However, over the past five to ten years, more theatres have been learning how to transition into inclusive and welcoming spaces for all audiences:

disabled, neuro-diverse, and neuro-typical. Even more recently, organizations and passionate artists are programming multiple shows and experiences in a festival format for all audiences, which celebrate autism.

The word festival, at its very heart, means a celebration. A festival is a reason for people to gather, usually centred around the performing arts. Theatre festivals are found around the world, and theatre festivals dedicated to celebrating children and families have become widely known internationally (see ASSITEJ International's website). However, similar to theatre spaces, we must ask the question: how do festivals invite *all* people in? How are the developments in creating welcoming theatre spaces for autistic children and their families being celebrated around the world in a festival format? And, what opportunities arise when a festival specifically serves an underrepresented audience?

How Relaxed Performances Became Relaxed Festivals

Relaxed performance events first occurred in the 1990s and promoted autism-friendly theatre productions. A relaxed performance means that the audience members have the freedom to do what makes them comfortable during the show. This could mean learning about the theatre space before they attend, walking around the space during the show, and talking or making sounds during the show. From the artists' perspective, the sound is made lower than it would be typically during a show, the house lights are up a bit, and the loud or bright visual and aural cues are cut or reduced. In addition, the staff at the theatre are trained to be welcoming and offer noise defenders, sensory-friendly items to hold, and perhaps even visual stories that tell audiences what they can expect from the experience. According to Ben Fletcher-Watson, researcher and consultant for the Autism Arts Festival, relaxed performances are rapidly expanding across the US and the UK, and gradually around the world. According to the recently released State of the TYA Field National Research Study, in the US, "Seventy-three percent of participating theatres offered special performances for patrons with special needs, such as sensory-friendly performances. Eleven percent also produced or presented entire productions exclusively or primarily for patrons with special needs" (Omasta, 2019). This suggests that the majority of participating theatres that make work for children also make work for audiences with diverse needs.

With the widening understanding of how to make public spaces more friendly for autistic and disabled people, theatre companies and larger cultural organizations have started to program work in the following ways:

1 / **Hosting** consecutive relaxed performances for and by autistic artists as part of festivals.

2 / **Creating** work from the ground up specifically with autistic audiences in mind.

3 / **Adapting** performances to give audiences the choice for how they want to experience theatre.

These autism-friendly festivals are connected by the artists' unique approaches to the work and are inspiring and connecting other artists from all around the world.



Cast of *Sensory Circus* by FEEL Theatre.
Autism Arts Festival, Canterbury, England.
Photo by FEEL Theatre.

AUTISM ARTS FESTIVAL // CANTERBURY, ENGLAND

The first arts festival known to further develop relaxed performances to include an autism-friendly program is the Autism Arts Festival in England. The festival first occurred in April 2017, and then again in April 2019. It takes place on the University of Kent campus in Canterbury. The initiative was created and led by Shaun May, who is a senior lecturer in drama and theatre at the University of Kent. According to Fletcher-Watson's evaluation of the festival, the event "aims to be both a celebration of autistic creativity and an attempt to develop the idea of a relaxed performance further to create an entire festival that is as accessible to neurodivergent people as possible."

What makes this festival unique is that the majority of the artwork programmed is created by autistic artists, for autistic audiences. While the festival does not focus specifically on theatre for young audiences, it does program work for children and families in a relaxed environment. Along with work for programmed for and by autistic adults, the Autism Arts Festival provides a comfortable

space for families by preparing them for what they will experience in each show. The brochure for the festival was directly inspired by the AWESOME Festival in Australia, which is a festival of work dedicated to children and families that include parallel, bespoke brochures for parents of autistic children. Fletcher-Watson explains how these brochures include a list of all of the shows along with elements such as the possible triggers, the length of a show, and the degree of audience participation. Fletcher-Watson believes this preparation is key to the positive experience and decision-making of the audiences. He notes, "As a parent being able to prepare your child or an adult being able to prepare yourself for the experience, that's really 90% of the battle ... Getting that information in advance is absolutely key." Therefore the Autism Arts Festival ensures they get as much information from the artists as possible beforehand to better prepare all audience members.

BIG UMBRELLA FESTIVAL // NEW YORK CITY, US

In April of 2018, New York City audiences were treated to a full month of performances specially created with an autistic audience in mind. The Big Umbrella Festival developed after the successful run of Trusty Sidekick Theater Company's performance of *Up and Away*. This immersive work specifically designed for kids on the autism spectrum and their families was commissioned by Lincoln Center Education (LCE) in 2013. Peg Schuler-Armstrong, former director of programming and production at LCE, reflects that *Up and Away* "was such a runaway success in the year which we first produced it, so we had to bring it to the festival ... This community was just beyond thrilled that this work was being created specifically for them and we didn't just want to stop there."

The Big Umbrella Festival took place from April 10 to May 6, 2018. It was scheduled in April during Autism Awareness month because schools were on spring recess, which helped with space availability. The performances utilized all three spaces in the LCE building. However, the entire Lincoln Center campus was involved in one way or another, showing relaxed performances as well as three interactive productions specifically created with this audience in mind. The festival spoke directly to LCE's mission to make art

accessible for diverse audiences. The international showcase performances included *Up and Away* by Trusty Sidekick Theater Company (US), *Light Show* by Oily Cart (UK), and *Oddysea* by Sensorium Theatre (Australia) - three works that, according to Schuler-Armstrong, "were very different in approach. They all had small audience capacity and there were some similarities among practice, but the aesthetic of the show, the style of the show, the way that the actors interacted with the young people was very different from show to show." This variety was an important element of the festival.

Two professional development opportunities were also offered during the month: one for artists and one for administrators, with seven different countries represented in attendance. As Schuler-Armstrong explains, those who did the professional development "had three varied experiences with artists who had already created the work. They had the first-hand opportunity to speak with them in depth about their practice and share with other people." This allowed an exchange among practitioners who want to develop their own work by connecting with others.



A young audience member enjoying *Oddysea* by Sensorium Theatre Company, Western Australia at the Big Umbrella Festival, Lincoln Center, New York, NY. Photo by Lincoln Center.



Rocky Alterman Barnea at Safe Place Festival, Tel Aviv, Israel.
Photo by Lior Rotstein.

SAFE PLACE FESTIVAL (סירומש תומוקמ לביטספל) // TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

The Safe Place Festival premiered in August 2018, a few short months after the co-founders, Sharon Gavriellov and Or Alterman, attended the Big Umbrella Festival in New York. As General Manager, Alterman attended the professional development for administrators at the New York Festival, while Artistic Director Gavriellov attended the professional development for artists. The two of them have since curated two relaxed festivals that include autism-friendly performances and experiences for children and families in Israel. This is the first event of its kind in their country. The first festival took place at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Alterman comments on the choice to place the festival during the two weeks of summer when schools for autistic children are closed: "It's the perfect and also the most difficult time because they (caregivers) have the kids home for two weeks and they have nothing to do with them because Israel doesn't have so many or any accessible activities at all." This allowed families to travel and experience a variety of performances and activities (many indoors) in the hottest month of the year in Israel.

Alterman and Gavriellov describe the birth of this festival as "a perfect collision" because Alterman was looking to take her son, who is autistic, to shows, but could not find any that suited

him in Israel. At the same time Gavriellov was looking to make a show for an autistic audience and their families. They set off to New York with the knowledge they would make a festival of relaxed performances, but not knowing how to do it. Gavriellov comments that at the professional development at Lincoln Center, "We learned so much. It was a life changing trip for us."

Gavriellov compares their first festival to a flood with a dam opening when it came to the need for this kind of work for Israel's audiences. This impact made Gavriellov and Alterman realize that the work needs to happen more than once a year, rather than making communities wait for the festival. If the want for it to happen throughout the year is there, the work should be available at any time. For Alterman, their agenda changed from focusing on the art to focusing on educating audiences. Alterman comments on the freedom they are giving families by sharing, "You need to educate the audience that they can come to these shows because many parents are still afraid of taking the kids to these kinds of shows ... Part of what we do is telling them, 'It's okay. They can run wild, they can make noise.'"

Impact on Public Perception

For some countries, the transformation from over-stimulating to autism-friendly spaces is and has been spreading among grocery stores, shopping malls, schools, theatres, and art museums. For others, it is just beginning. For example, in Israel it is completely new to the public, yet embraced by those who have encountered it. Alterman notices, “The Safe Place Initiative really changed something, the way people see all kinds of disabilities ... We started with this (festival) and we saw how many other places have started to do something like local events.” What the co-creators are most proud of, however, is that after their first festival they were able to encourage Israel’s oldest and largest festival, the Haifa Festival for Children’s Shows, to include a relaxed performance. This was something that was never done before, and now that it was done once it will remain part of their programming. Gavriellov expresses, “This time for the first time in 30 years we have a slot for a relaxed performance. It was huge.” Because of the ability to incorporate a relaxed performance in a larger festival, the initiative will make an impact on the larger public audiences. Gavriellov goes on to explain the reason they are organizing relaxed performances in many venues: “Part of our agenda is really to change the world in that way, that it’s by law that you have to have accessibility to any public venue, so why don’t you have cognitive accessibility? The cognitive disabilities are always transparent so we are trying to make them visible.”

Meanwhile, in larger cities such as New York, relaxed performances have been incorporated on mainstream stages and include adapted Broadway productions. LCE has noticed that not only are relaxed performances now expected by audiences, but that families and school groups look forward to performances specially designed for audiences on the autism spectrum. Since some of these performances have a smaller audience capacity (no more than ten children), the need for the shows to run continuously is there. Upon reflecting on the first Big Umbrella Festival, Jacqueline Handy, manager of programming, commented, “Having a chance for children to be highlighted in such a beautiful and intentional way was echoed from parents to teachers, to people we work with, to kids. So, we saw huge positive feedback both from people in the space and from folks who were just hearing about the work.” Even people who saw the marketing materials, but who did not see the performances were providing positive feedback on the initiative.

In the UK, larger government bodies for funding the arts such as Creative Scotland have now recognized the importance of providing options for audiences. Fletcher-Watson notes that Creative Scotland “are now on board with the idea that ‘Yes, of course if you are working with audiences with autism or complex needs in that area then you should be offering things like the backpack.’” The backpack is a tool that any cultural center can adopt. It is simply a bag or backpack that the center lends to audience members for the duration of a show or museum visit. Inside the backpack are items such as noise defenders for auditory sensitivities, fidget spinners to play with, and social stories introducing the venue with photos and captions. These autism-friendly packs are now used in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Heritage Museum, and other cultural centers in Scotland.

Impact on Artists

When reflecting on the impact that performing in an autism-friendly festival has on the artists, it is important to note that currently almost all of this work created for children and families is made and performed by neuro-typical artists. According to Fletcher-Watson, autistic artists haven’t made work for young audiences for the Autism Arts Festival yet. He notes that autistic artists are one of many groups “that hasn’t had access to making art, that the first thing they want to talk about is their experiences.” The sharing of their experiences are likely to be quite complicated and may not be appropriate for children as an audience. However, he notes that this is something very likely to change as more autistic artists continue to get opportunities to make work.

For dancer and choreographer Renana Raz, the Safe Place Festival was the first time she performed for autistic audiences. She, together with two of her colleagues have developed, created, and currently teach a dance workshop called Boogie Woogie for children ages 2.5 to 6. She has also created a performance based on the concept of stage responses to YouTube videos called *YouMake ReMake* for a child audience. For this festival, she and Gavriellov took the time to adapt the piece together for an audience of autistic children and their families. As Raz explained, “I tried to look at it with new glasses.” As an artist, she discovered more about space, place, surprise, and audience when adapting the work. Raz explains performing for this audience as similar to performing for any child audience in that the audiences “laugh at the same things, they have excitement at the same places, they do know to enjoy surprise, but when it’s not that extreme and in a different way.” As an artist, she describes that “it makes you feel really alert ... alert in a good way.” She remarks that the experience of performing in the festival has made her “want to create something especially for children with autism ... since you know the rules it’s really interesting to dive in.”

Schuler-Armstrong agrees that understanding the audience is one of the keys to programming and making work for them. She comments, “I think because the field is so new, a lot of people are afraid to try to start to work for neuro-diverse audiences ... Once you can let go of that preciousness and just make really great work for them, taking into account the things that you know, it just becomes one big celebration ... They deserve great art just like all kids.”

Tim Webb, former artistic director of Oily Cart Theatre Company, who mentored artists in the Big Umbrella Festival, commented on how beneficial this festival was for the artists: “It’s very good for the artists to get together and to see one another’s work and to talk about it.” He also noticed how there were people in attendance at the festival, professional development, and symposium from all over the world “who were interested in the field, but I guess it gave that interest a tremendous boost.” Schuler-Armstrong agrees with this, saying that their hopes were exceeded for the impact the professional development had on the artists and administrators. “One thing we really did not anticipate was the artists that were in the showcase itself ... their desire to connect with each other ... It was fantastic to see that kind of impact. They continue to support one another online and socially.”

Why this is only the beginning ...

While there are many joys and successes from these three international festivals, each of the programmers and artists notice that this is only the beginning of an exciting and necessary journey. Stand-alone relaxed performances have turned into festivals and festivals are turning into initiatives. The passionate hard work that has gone into these programs has demonstrated a thirst for this type of work and celebration. Around the world it exemplifies thoughtfulness for the abilities of many.

These three companies are all interconnected and sharing with one another because the best way forward is to learn what does and does not work. Webb explains, "There was quite a bit of work beginning to emerge and it needed celebrating ... You can see that it is spreading rapidly." It is indeed being spread and celebrated, yet Webb makes a suggestion that is important for all to recognize when he states, "The festivals are nice and stimulating, but there's a sort of consistency in maintaining the presence in your home country." He suggests that it is important to come together and share practices but also to maintain a presence in your catchment area so that, similar to all three festivals, you can make it an initiative rather than a once-off experience.

Schuler-Armstrong notes that there is still more work to do specifically on representation. She expresses, "Nothing about us without us' is a very important phrase in the [disability] community and we take that seriously ... Work for young audiences of any kind is not a particularly diverse field to begin with so the further we break that down in terms of the niche audience, the harder it becomes to get full representation of the audience you're serving onstage." Assistant Director of Programming at LCE, Rebecca Podsednik reflects on ongoing and future considerations for programming: "Having a neurodiverse representation on creative teams, on stage, and on the curation process ... That's really critical to us ... but also the range of work that audiences will see once they're here." These principles align with LCE's mission and are being considered on a wider scale as well in the TYA field.

The most recent Autism Arts Festival incorporated live streaming of performances so that audiences who could not make it to the venues would not miss out. Fletcher-Watson says that this is the next thing to consider: "The key thing really for me as this area develops is to think about how there are audiences who want to engage with the arts, but they just don't want to go into a theatre ... We don't just consume our live art in the theatre space where it's happening anymore ... So if I'm autistic and I'm comfortable at home, why can't I engage with smaller scale performance? ... It's possible and getting cheaper all the time to produce a really high quality camera broadcast that people can pay for or you can make for free if you can afford it."

Although for some, the priority is getting the message out to the public. Gavriellov explains the effort of making this work public by saying, "Sometimes it feels like a drop in the sea. There's a lot

of work because the awareness is very weak (in Israel)." However, the exciting part is that Gavriellov notices, "People are so surprised by it (the work), which is great." She urges, "You should do something with this surprise." This has led her and Alterman to make themselves available to share practices and consult with other artists who are interested in adapting work. Gavriellov concludes that although there is more to be done on the work in general, "It's not that hard to do, but the impact is so important. It's such an amazing way to change the world. I think this is really the basic for inclusion ... If you think of yourself as an artist, then you probably think that your art is for everyone, so you should have everyone in the crowd."

There is power in opening up a festival to include audiences, and this includes more than the children. For Raz, she realized, "In Hebrew ... the name of the festival is like, 'your place is reserved' ... For me, until the point where the kids came into the space, I was sure that this reserved place is for the kids, of course. But the moment they entered the space with their parents and with their families, I understood that it's not only for them. It's for all of the family of this single kid. That was really overwhelming for me."

Podsednik agrees that coming into a truly welcoming and relaxed space is the start of a meaningful experience for families. She reflects, "This environment is unique. There are few public spaces where families can let their shoulders down and release the concern that their child will be judged for going around touching the scenery in that space because that is what they need to do, or stimming or verbalizing, or just being themselves. Everyone in the festival, artists, staff, and fellow audience members are all there for them ... so it became one less worry." The place to start an autism-inclusive theatre festival is by creating a welcoming space near home, and the goal is to continue to celebrate individuals.

As Handy reflects on the biggest joy from the 2018 Big Umbrella Festival, she remembers a moment from the performance *Light Show* when each performer holds up a mirror to every child and caretaker in the audience. She offers that this work is about "one, being seen, two, being yourself, and three, being celebrated ... not just by the performers who are singing your name, but by the students in your class who are singing your name, the people around you who don't know you but are singing your name because we're a community now. That was a huge, huge joy for me." ■

Heidi Schoenenberger is an Irish Research Council Scholar at the National University of Ireland, Galway pursuing her PhD in Theatre, focusing on Theatre for Young Audiences.



playing in the Field

TYA Emerging Fellows of 2019

by Shavonne T. Coleman

Trying to “break into” any field can be difficult. There can be a number of issues in regards to access as you try to navigate that journey. The Theatre for Young Audiences Emerging Leaders Fellowship is finishing up its second year of existence, and the 2019 TYA Emerging Fellows are already feeling the impact of their experiences. The fellowship is an annual opportunity where students or early professionals are awarded a stipend to help them travel domestically in order to explore the field of TYA further. Participation as a fellow is an opportunity to see a script, an article, or theory come to life. Not only are emerging leaders able to connect with current leaders in the field, but they are also given the opportunity to grow and learn as a cohort. This opportunity bridges the gap created by location, finance, time, support, etc. I sat down to talk with the 2019 fellows and each conversation drove home how powerful it is to get to “play in the field” in order to build your practice.



Deepmala Tiwari was born and raised in New Delhi, India. She came to North America to study Theatre for Youth at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the fall of 2018 after a long, rich history of devising, creating, directing, and producing theatre in India. In 2016, Tiwari was awarded a fellowship from the Ministry of Culture in New Delhi as a Young Artist to devise a TYA production. That same year, she founded her own theatre company, The Color Bakery, based in New Delhi, India. Unique in its vision, The Color Bakery worked to bring devised and produced theatre work to communities throughout India. In her most recent work, Tiwari directed Suzan Zeder's *Step on a Crack* and will direct the production of Anne Negri's *This Is Not a Test* (unpublished) next year. She was also cast in Suzan Zeder's *When She Had Wings* and toured the Southwest and Northeast regions of the US with the production in the spring of 2019.



Born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, **Melisa Orozco Vargas** is a candidate for the MFA in Theatre for Young Audiences at the University of Hawaii at Manoa where she recently presented her thesis production, *Keiki Kalo*, a theatrical experience for the very young honoring Haloa, the taro plant, which is the staple of the Hawaiian people (<http://keikikalo.weebly.com>). The piece also celebrates her own life's journey personally and artistically, combining mother/sister/childhood, community, hula, theatre, music, nature, food, and life in Hawaii.

What made you apply for the TYA fellowship?

DT My advisor Rachel Briley told me about the fellowship. Because I was new, I didn't have any idea so she pushed me to apply for this - in a good way. I never thought I would get it because I thought, "I am an international student and they will not select me, it's not going to happen," but it did happen and I'm still shocked. Coming here from India, being here 6 months and getting the fellowship, it was a dream come true.

MOV I applied for the fellowship for practical reasons: I was working on a production of theatre for the very young as my thesis project, but had very little exposure to Theatre for Very Young Audiences (TVYA) - or professional theatre, in general - and needed to somehow gain access to artists or companies who did this kind of work outside of Hawaii in a timely matter (it was already December and the production was to happen in September). I saw the fellowship as a potential means to get my foot in the door - to meet people, see their shows, and learn about their processes - and also to finally experience TVYA/TYA on a national level. It was time to get out there. I dreamed big and far: New York City, to be exact, to shadow Lauren Jost and Spellbound Theatre (which I excitedly learned was co-founded by my former MFA colleague, Margot Fitzsimmons). The stars aligned and I connected and made a plan with Lauren, received the support I needed from my advisor who was away on sabbatical at the time, and during the selection process even received a generous private scholarship from the university which would supplement the fellowship award and make travel from Hawaii feasible.

KD As someone who is pursuing artistic leadership, I want to make sure that I am able to get as much knowledge around the different factors that go into decision making at a theatre. I think as an outside observer it's really easy for us to jump to conclusions or make rash judgments

based on what we think we are seeing in front of us. Through smaller mentoring opportunities, I've gotten to see the inner workings of a couple of different theatres and it's made me think, "Hmmm okay, now I want to see more, what else happens?" I also used [the fellowship application] as a barometer for myself to see where I fit in this landscape and what I can bring to it.

What was the fellowship year like for you?

DT I went to see the Children's Theatre Company (CTC) in Minneapolis so I met the head of their Neighborhood Bridges program and she told me a lot about how it got started, their work with schools, and she gave me tons of books and lesson plans. The whole program was started by Jack Zipes, who wrote a lot of books and they did adaptations like *Little Red Riding Hood* which was really about rape and consent - so that blew my mind! They take the story and dissect it, they make a lesson plan around it, go to the schools and teach it. They literally give agency to children to know their story, learn about other stories, and be cognizant that these things aren't always fairytale, sometimes they're real. That really inspired me. Visiting CTC, exploring process drama, and learning about the Neighborhood Bridges program is paving the way and also filtering what I'm good at and what I should do next.

MOV This was an incredible year of growth, learning, and creativity. I loved going to the TYA/USA Conference and Festival in Atlanta to meet with the 2019 fellows and experience the daring and bold TYA field, especially TVYA. Shortly after that, with just one luggage on my back, my two children (ages 4 and 7) and I headed to New York for two and a half weeks. We spent an amazing full week experiencing the rush of Times Square and devising with Spellbound during their residency at New Victory LabWorks, and also seeing some international TVYA shows at the New Victory and Lincoln

Center. Instead of just observing as I had planned, Lauren had me up on my feet collaborating with the team as they worked on *Shakespeare Stars*. Even my kids were invited to play! Everyone in the room embraced us. And half of them are mothers, which was incredibly validating. I appreciated having my own creative space as well, thanks to the support of my co-fellow and current NYC resident, Khalia Davis, and her friend who both helped with childcare. Spellbound artist Emily Baldwin hooked my kids up with her Children’s Museum of Manhattan colleague which meant two days of fun at the museum for them! Every moment of our trip was full and fulfilling ... I came back home exhausted and energized at the same time.

Another very special aspect of the fellowship was being able to cultivate valuable relationships with individuals in the field – emerging and established artists, educators, and practitioners from around the world – who I can look to for inspiration, guidance, or even future collaboration. Throughout this year, I’ve been fortunate to have Jonathan Schmidt Chapman at TYA/USA mentor via phone calls and emails, and in-person at the conference and in New York. I connected deeply with Megan Alrutz, head of UT Austin’s Drama and Theatre for Youth and Communities program, in Atlanta and subsequently she made her first trip to Hawaii to see and learn about *Keiki Kalo*. And what better way to finish the year than with Australian playwright Finnegan Kruckemeyer in the audience whom I later got to hang out with during his joint Honolulu Theatre for Youth-UH Mānoa residency. Truly, it was a most rewarding year and an unexpected crescendo to the finish line which is graduation in May 2020.

KD I loved that I met the first three fellows because we had a model to go off of and we knew if we had any questions that we had three built-in guides. Also, the three were so unique in what their missions were. I don’t have any other comparison of what it could

be without Jonathan Schmidt Chapman at the helm of TYA/USA so I can only speak to the great work I feel he’s doing of connecting all of us and connecting with us himself. Just checking in was nice, to have someone who was the beacon and that anytime I’d go, “Okay, I need to get in touch with this person from Kennedy Center ...” He’s like “Great okay, I got it,” and the connection would be made almost instantly! So logistically it was great for me. On another level, I really appreciate the visibility that it’s giving me. I’m an independent artist, I’m not technically attached to any one institution. I’m not in school, so I don’t have, “I’m getting my masters in Applied Theatre ...” Because I can’t say that, how do I meet people that are doing what I want to do and how do they know who I am and that I love doing it? This fellowship created a great initial step, introduction, and gateway in beginning those positive relationships because I could just start with “Hello, I am an Emerging Leader Fellow,” and that granted me access.

What project(s) are you currently working on and what is one big goal you have for the next 365 days?

DT Wow, well first, I really need to graduate! I’m currently in design meetings for my thesis production, *Tales of the Arabian Nights* written by Barry Kornhauser. It’s a play about stories within stories within stories and depicts the universe as life. It will be a touring production that will tour in North Carolina schools. I also have a company in India, The Color Bakery. I’m acting as the dramaturg for their play and it’s a devised performance called *Quite the Contrary*. It’s about India’s refugee crisis called the Rohingya crisis where the Bangladeshi people are coming into India because the political scenario in Bangladesh is not good and our government is restricting them. It’s like here with the Mexico border and American border. My goal is, that’s a really tough question ... I want to get a job



Khalia Davis is a multidisciplinary performing artist from Bay Area living in New York. Partial Directing/ Assistant Directing credits: *Frog and Toad* (BACT); *The Big One-Oh!* (Atlantic for Kids); *She Persisted* (BACT); *Pillowland* (NYCCT); *Judy Moody and Stink and the Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad Treasure Hunt* (BACT); *Story Pirates* (NYC/LA). Upcoming: Devising with Spellbound Theater at New Victory LabWorks. Davis was recently awarded the 2019 Emerging Leader Fellowship with TYA/USA and the NYCCT Leader Fellowship for 2019/2020. These new opportunities will hopefully create better visibility for herself within the community so that young artists of color feel represented not only on stage but behind the curtain as well. BA Theater Arts: University of Southern California www.khaliashdavis.com.

“This fellowship created a great initial step, introduction, and gateway in beginning those positive relationships because I could just start with ‘Hello, I am an Emerging Leader Fellow,’ and that granted me access.”

– Khalia Davis

here, I'd like to get experience here and I'd like to teach in university settings, learn more about people in the field because I feel my theory is weak in comparison to my practical experience.

MOV First of all, I am graduating in May, which is exciting! As I continue to make progress toward and beyond this milestone that has been 4.5 years in the making, my biggest project is to grow and improve *Keiki Kalo* and create a touring version of the show (with a role for my son) that I can share with children and families throughout the Hawaiian islands. I am also working on a couple of "less-TYA" pieces with my UHM-based ensemble 你好 / Peligro! (or Aloha also means goodbye).

Additionally, I help our theatre and dance department at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa to bring Balinese performing arts and master artists to the schools in connection with our 2019-20 wayang listrik production, *The Last King of Bali*. This kind of community outreach allows me to be directly involved with arts access and inspires me to find ways to personally engage as a teaching-artist and theatre educator.

KD I just finished directing *A Year With Frog and Toad* at Bay Area Children's Theatre. It had really great reviews, the artists were beautiful human beings and great talents so that was a wonderful experience. Then I came back to New York and jumped into my fellowship project for Emerging Leaders. I was in DC last week and I met with Imagination Theatre, the Kennedy Center TYA team, and with Arts on the Horizon. I specifically met with each of them to look at their company models and watch new work development. The next thing I will be jumping into is working as a devising artist at Spellbound Theatre.

What do you hope your project or your presence will bring to the field of TYA?

DT In North America, I think I can bring a different voice from my community and talk about issues which people only see on television, hear on the radio, and read in newspapers. I can work globally because I have experience with different people - diverse people in my country, other countries, and living here for the last couple of years learning about the TYA culture here and comparing it to my country. How people work and how they tell a story - I will not be part of the melting pot culture but more like the salad bowl, the taste and the ingredients are separate but still part of the cuisine.

MOV My best friend from high school came to watch my piece and she said, "Melisa, I can see all of you in this, this is you, who you are throughout all of these years and I can see all of it here." *Keiki Kalo* is Hawaii, it's motherhood, it's children, it's birth, it's language because it's bilingual, it is the community. It is community in the space but it was also created by the community. It is hula, it's food because *kalo* (taro) is food, it's the Hawaiian peoples' staple and also it's the first food that many children in Hawaii eat because it is nutrient-dense and hypoallergenic. In essence, I took my life experience, things that interest me, my vision for community, and the voice of community members, and put them all on stage (with the help of an incredibly supportive advisor and co-creator, our Director of TYA, Mark Branner). What it resulted in is an original piece of theatre for our local community in Hawaii that tells a story about the place we live in, the people and culture of this place, and gave us real tools for being able to go out and work with our kids, with each other, now and into the future. There are more stories to tell, more experiences to be had together ... I want to work with members of our community of all ages so we can tell these stories.

KD I hope that it brings color to the TYA landscape. I mean now there are more of us [involved with the organization] - great here's me, Deepmala, and Melisa all women of color and we have this awesome opportunity. What other women of color do we know or men of color do we know or trans people of color do we know that also can engage as theatre artists in TYA? My goal is to continue to build and create a space for leadership amongst our people. It's so frustrating that we watch shows and we see ourselves reflected on stage - thank you, thank you that is a good thing - but the people who are making the decisions about what the shows or education programs could be are often all white. The world's not like that, that's not what we look like and if you're saying that's not what it looks like by casting in a diverse way, then why won't you do the same behind the leadership? I keep hearing, "Oh, I don't want to have to leave my job."

No one is trying to kick you out. What we are asking is that you make space. So if you aren't ready to leave the position of Artistic Director then you need to appreciate how important it is for you with the help of your board to cut into your budget a position that could be an associate. This position is there with you to learn the culture of your company so when you do retire or move on to something else, you can trust that if that individual who has been by your side the last 5 to 10 years is shepherded in, they will know what to do. But we aren't being given that opportunity.

Lastly, what would you say to other students and practitioners who have an idea for a project, exploration, or want to be involved in TYA (the field or organization)?

DT The fellowship encouraged me to travel and meet more like-minded people who are working in the field, have experience and really care about TYA. To the young people who want to understand the TYA field, don't come for money. You have to love TYA and want to understand

children and their issues. Commercialization is involved with TYA a lot but if you don't understand children and you don't love children then you will be frustrated, like any other job.

MOV The field of TYA has so many opportunities for anybody; I believe all theatre practitioners and students should explore TYA at some point in their career/education. The experiences of young people are extremely broad and diverse throughout different age groups and developmental stages, giving artists endless creative options and possibilities. You can do "dangerous" things, you can talk about taboo subjects in TYA, you can be weird or silly or sweet, and young people will embrace it. And they'll often experience all of this with their parents - who are not young audiences - and that is good because through TYA we can impact and inspire both children AND adults. I would also like to say to theatre students and practitioners who are parents or are raising young children, that you should not rule yourselves out of participating or creating because you have so much to contribute and so do your children. This fellowship and my experiences this year demonstrated how parent-artists are being supported through growing infrastructure and individuals who value our presence and voices.

KD I have been pushing membership of TYA/USA for artists because it's a hub of information for you. Then I would say whatever your medium is - whatever your artistry is - find an opportunity to showcase that art with an established TYA theatre in your area. Do some research. There may be a community theatre that does one children's show a year you could work with. If you're a student, oh my gosh, there are so many opportunities if you're a student! I think it is sometimes harder for those of us outside of school to get our name and work out there. So my advice is 1. Join TYA or other organizations that align with your artistic goals; 2. If you

are in school or right out of school then you could apply for volunteer work, internships, or apprenticeships; and then 3. Come to the conference! Meet other people like you.

"This is nice, we don't get to have conversations like this often," Deepmala said as our conversation closed. It's true, it's painfully true. We are the very people who create opportunities for our communities to play and to watch plays but we forget how important it is for practitioners to get out in the field and play themselves. We can get too wrapped around self-preservation to open up conversations that will impact the field more broadly and sometimes become too isolated as we focus on only our piece of the puzzle. That's one of the things about childhood, when basic needs are met, young people are able to play, explore, and thrive - how do we replicate that in our artistry, how do we meet or organizations' needs so that it doesn't become all-consuming? How do we play again? The TYA/USA Emerging Leaders Fellowship is forging a path for new artists, new works, and innovative practices intended to run alongside and eventually converge with that which came before. This opportunity is reminding us what it's like to invite someone into play for the sake of love, growth, and learning. We could all stand to learn something from someone 40 years older or 55 years younger every now and again. Maybe the future of TYA is figuring out how to stretch out, how to create and take up space not just for ourselves but for others. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Ready or not, here we come! ■

Shavonne T. Coleman is an artist and educator from Detroit, MI who now works and resides in Austin, TX.

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Exploring Microcosms

Within the New Work Ecosystem

by Wendy Bable

Michael Ortiz, Amber Jaunai, Alice Marcondes, Baillie de Lacy, Matthew Macca, and Annie Perales in *Not My Monster!* by Nick Gandiello. The Flea, New York, NY. Photo by Allison Stock.

Imagine If You Will . . .

. . . a place that exists on 16.83 square miles and houses 1,563 residents, where 17.5% of the population is under the age of 18 and 97.3% of the population identifies as White.

. . . a place that occupies roughly 23 square miles and houses 1.63 million residents (weekday commuters push that number to 3.9 million); 16.8% of the population is under 18 and the racial demographics break down into 58.9% White, 50.7% Non-Hispanic White, 10.3% Asian, and 15.5% Black or African-American.

That's 274 young people in one place, and 274,000 young people in the other. Those two places you've just imagined are real - Bar Harbor, ME and Manhattan, NY. They occupy the extreme ends of the population density spectrum where artists are generating new work for young audiences.

However, both the Barn Arts Collective in Bar Harbor and New Victory LabWorks in Manhattan share space on the more recent end of the "year established" spectrum. As TYA practitioners scan the landscape of developing new work for young audiences in the United States, we encounter several spectrum extremes, but rather than feeling jarring and disconnected, they create a national composition where the notes played are in harmony, even when they are separated by several octaves.

Profiles: "Generation Y"

In 1983, life-long TYA advocate and professor of theatre Dorothy Webb founded the Bonderman Playwriting for Youth Symposium at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). Named for Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman, this biennial festival combined workshops and readings of new plays to "facilitate the creation of new, good quality theatre for children." In the mid-1990s, the event moved to Indiana Repertory Theatre (IRT) where it continued under Webb's leadership until her retirement. In 2011, IRT and Childsplay in Tempe, AZ elected to co-curate the event, changing its name but keeping its original DNA, before it arrived at its permanent home at Childsplay in 2017 under the new moniker, Write Now.

Less than a decade later, Kim Peter Kovac and Deirdre Kelly Lavrakas co-conceived and curated a biennial festival of new work for young audiences entitled New Visions New Voices (NV/NV) to be housed at The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. TYA was moving further away from adaptations of fairy tales and relatively "safe" content and embracing a growing appetite for new work that grappled with challenging topics that had been absolute taboos not long before. Kovac and Lavrakas sought to un-silo playwrights and build a multicultural community around them to support the play-in-development. In 2006 as the collaborative teams became increasingly international, Kovac and Lavrakas established the International Playwrights Observer Program to allow between four to six

playwrights to participate in the development process. NV/NV has also workshoped English translations of successful TYA plays in other languages starting in 2012.

Profiles: "The Igeneration"

New Victory Theatre emerged in its current permutation as a venue for family-friendly productions - "Theatre You Never Outgrow" - in 1995. It is part of a larger nonprofit ecosystem called the New 42, which also owns the New 42 Studios. After 20 years of presenting high quality performances from all over the world in a wide range of genres, and with an invaluable new studio space available to them, the artistic staff wanted to create opportunities for more artists from their own backyard. New Victory LabWorks emerged in 2014 to provide professional development, rehearsal support, and artistic partnerships for both long-established and emerging TYA ensembles as they develop new work.

First Stage in Milwaukee, WI has been one of the nation's leading theatres for young audiences for over 30 years, and it currently houses two intersecting initiatives dedicated to new work. The Foundry reading series grew out of the The Wisconsin Cycle that took place at First Stage around a decade ago. The newly launched Playwrights-in-Residence initiative hopes to engage their community in discussion about new work and the process of creating new plays, while providing an artistic home for a small group of playwrights. In addition to developing their own plays, the playwrights-in-residence advise on season selection and potential artistic collaborators (including potential new play projects they would like to explore), and provide feedback on other plays in development at First Stage. The current cadre of playwrights includes long-time collaborator James DeVita, as well as Alvaro Saar Rios, John McClay, and Alice Austin.

Barn Arts Collective was established in 2008 in a literal barn-turned-antiques-shop-turned-ersatz-TYA-laboratory. Built in the 1880s, the structure later housed an antique shop run by Founding Artistic Director Andrew Simon's grandmother. Shortly after her passing in 2003, Simon began inviting TYA colleagues to the property for informal residencies to develop and present new work. Simon and Barn Arts Co-Founder Pavel Ezrohi then began

curating The Hamilton Project, an annual festival that got its name from a tax document from 1887 which valued the barn at ten dollars. The Hamilton Project was designed to support only individual artists, so in 2012, Barn Arts began inviting artistic ensembles to the property to workshop new work for young audiences and present these works-in-progress to families in the Bar Harbor community.

The Flea was founded in 1996 “by a group of downtown artists looking to raise a joyful noise in a small space.” When Niegel Smith came on as artistic director in 2015, it was mid-point in a decade that witnessed viable theatre spaces for small companies in New York City drop from 100 to now less than 25. After an \$18 million expansion project, The Flea now maintains three small-scale theatre spaces: The Sam (seating 120), The Pete (seating 72), and The Siggie (seating 44). These venues are ideal for developing more intimate, immersive work and were built with the purpose of being shared with multiple Anchor Partners, one of which is New York Children’s Theatre. The Flea established its Serials series in 2011 – a late night play competition with their resident acting company, The Bats, and playwrights in its resident writer’s program. In each cycle (there are eight in the course of a year), the audience chooses one of five short plays to receive a serial episode, which then goes up the following week. Shortly after arriving at The Flea, Smith modified this event as a development opportunity for new TYA work, which is presented episodically over the course of a year under the name “Cereals.”

Compression, Expansion, Acceleration, & Simultaneity

Time is a complex variable when developing new work and how it’s used directly affects the intended outcome. The primary operations of time used by the companies profiled above are compression, expansion, acceleration, and simultaneity. With some deference to the assumption that there is *never* enough time, these companies use temporal elasticity to deepen and enhance the process.

Deadlines naturally trigger compression of time; without deadlines, tasks would simply expand to fill whatever temporal space is available *ad infinitum*. However, the compression of time is often a useful “enabling constraint” that contributes energy and vitality to the work. Both New Visions/New Voices and Write Now compress time with great efficacy to spark and sustain each artistic teams’ momentum. At each gathering, multiple projects are scheduled into half-day rehearsal blocks over the course of a week. There are several practical advantages to these half-day sessions. They allow actors to be cast in both a morning and an afternoon project, which provides a full day of work rather than a partial day. These half-day blocks also allow the artistic team to decompress and process the day’s work, and give playwrights time to write/rewrite. Half-day sessions also allow members of the artistic team to [gasp!] rest and replenish – a necessary component of the creative process that we as a field often forego when we need it most.

Gathering multiple projects during the same time period facilitates collegial socializing and cross-pollination, particularly for directors and dramaturgs. Outside of a new play development event, most artistic teams work in isolation, and there are limited opportunities to unpack what’s happening in the rehearsal room with colleagues

who are in-step on the same creative cycle. Barn Arts Collective has made simultaneity a necessary feature of its residencies, and in May-June they typically have four residencies in process at The Barn. Co-founder Andrew Simon shared, “It’s exhilarating when we have multiple ensembles on-site and they’re able to share their fledgling works-in-progress with one another. The validation they receive is as critical to their creative process as the constructive feedback. It helps everyone be less precious about the work and take bigger risks, because they’re not alone. They have a support system.”

The Flea uses the expansion of time with great success in its Cereals program. Each “episode” of the cycle is presented with three-month intervals in between. “We discovered fairly early on that the intervals and the episodic structure allowed our playwright to really get to know their audience,” says Niegel Smith. “We also discovered that musicals require a different interval system than non-musicals due to the nature of their development. That was valuable for us to know as an *institution* so we can support these artists with the appropriate resources.” The Cereals model also gives The Flea four points of contact with an audience, comprised mostly of returners who are eager to see the next installment in the story.



Both First Stage's Playwrights-in-Residence and New Vic LabWorks have a hybrid time structure of compression and expansion, where short periods of intense collaboration are followed by longer reflection/gestation periods. Unlike The Flea, there are no public work-in-progress events to serve as benchmarks throughout the year. Instead, First Stage and New Vic create a project schedule tailored to each artistic team's needs and the availability of key collaborators. Each theatre maintains an ongoing dialogue with their artists. LabWorks artists gather for monthly cohort meetings that may include workshops and panels, resource exchanges, and time for teams to brainstorm and discuss challenges and discoveries they've experienced. First Stage is more informal, as it is rare for all four playwrights-in-residence and Jeff Frank to be in the same place at the same time, but they are in ongoing conversations about potential collaborators, current projects, and season planning for the next two to three production seasons.

Any new play development process with a trajectory towards a public reading naturally accelerates towards that end. Rehearsal room time can feel like it's operating on warp speed when compared to natural time, and it can be difficult for artistic teams to stay focused on the

process rather than the *product*. Both Deirdre Kelly Lavrakas and Kim Peter Kovac are known to frequent each New Visions/New Voices project's rehearsal room to remind teams that "they don't need to solve everything today, or even this week - they just need to take the next step." Every other organization profiled here has a similar ritual where the person in charge, whoever that may be, reminds teams they *just need to take the next step*. All six organizations profiled here cultivate this same ethos: risk-taking and mistake-making are catalysts for big discoveries.

Intersections With Geography And Community

Each company scaffolds risk quite differently for both the artistic teams and the audiences who witness the work at a public reading, but all of them strive to avoid preciousness and generate honest, useful feedback that will move the work forward. Post-reading conversations, if conducted, are carefully facilitated (with echoes of Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process*), and those facilitators are deft in giving the artistic team permission *not* to know yet how to answer or respond to a particular question or comment. Good facilitators know to make space for discoveries that happen in those rare moments immediately after witnessing a new story, when both artists' and audiences' brains are still processing what they've experienced and neurons may be firing more rapidly than language comes together to articulate a thought.

Because New Visions/New Voices and Write Now culminate in festival/symposium-type gatherings of professionals in the TYA field, their intersection with their geographic community may be less visible to event attendees. However, in the months preparing for the event, both The Kennedy Center and Childsplay invest a great deal of time and resources to gather collaborators with a vested interest in new plays for young people. Childsplay's Associate Artistic Director and Write Now Curator Jenny Millinger is adamant that young people are meaningfully involved in the development process. "This practice was inherited from Dorothy Webb, who has been a life-long advocate for young people having a voice in the development of new work," states Millinger. "Each play is assigned to a class who are the first dramaturgs to respond to the play at the beginning of the [development] week. They are invited back mid-week to witness the process, and they are the first respondents after the public reading at the end of the week." Millinger also mentioned how much she's learned as a dramaturg herself from "reading" the young audience's physical response during the reading, noting when they lean in, laugh, gasp, and become restless. Though uncoded or formalized, this visceral dramaturgy often yields information that is never mentioned in post-reading conversations.

Though Bar Harbor, ME has a small population, Barn Arts Collective is passionate about creative match-making between resident artists and the community. This can mean anything from an informal conversation between an artistic ensemble and a lobster fisherman's co-op to seeking out local artisans as designers and co-creators. "The community has really bought into being a part of this process," says Andrew Simon. "One of my favorite memories of community/artist intersections is coming together to roast s'mores around the campfire at intermission. People in small communities are dependent on one another for basic survival, and the resident artists pick up on that vibe very quickly, so there's a spirit of mutual respect and interconnectedness that emerges almost immediately." Simon is encouraged by the recent expansion of

Actors in *How to Break*, created by Mixing Texts Collective as part of the New Victory Theater Labworks. The New Victory Theater, New York, NY. Photo by Liz Maney.



Barn Arts to a wider audience when they presented a choose-your-own-adventure theatrical experience at The Criterion, a 750-seat, old vaudeville house built in 1932. “This is a rural area with very limited access to theatre experiences,” states Simon. “I’m grateful that Barn Arts can provide more experiences for the young people here.”

Now that The Flea has grown solid roots in TriBeCa, Artistic Director Niegel Smith is eager to expand The Cereals to the other four boroughs of New York City. “Theatre is a cultural space to engage the pressing issues of our day,” states Smith. “We need MORE of those spaces, especially in this time when those spaces are disappearing at an alarming rate. We have three great new spaces to share, but not everyone can access those, so we need to go to them.”

“Theatre is a cultural space to engage the pressing issues of our day. We need MORE of those spaces . . .” — NIEGEL SMITH

Jeff Frank at First Stage is seeking more opportunities for new play development work and readings to happen IN the community rather than at First Stage. This was particularly critical during the development of *On the Wings of the Mariposa* that premiered earlier this year. The individuals who make cultural access decisions for children, often their teachers or their schools, frequently have a different racial composition than the children in the community where First Stage is positioned geographically.

Despite its residence in one of the most diverse and arts-rich cities in the United States, New Vic is currently working to engage more with other New York City new work development programs, sharing organizational resources and ideas to cultivate an even stronger community and expanded ecosystem. There is a vast network of new work supporters and enthusiasts in both the public and cultural sectors of New York City – but that interest is in new work for *adults*. New Vic hopes to expand and amplify the new work network for TYA and has the profile and reputation to do so not just locally, but nationally as well.

Challenges

With the exception of The Flea and Barn Arts Collective, the “tyranny of the title” is still an overwhelming challenge for those who want to cultivate and produce new work. For building-based theatres, title recognition is an economic necessity that many TYA practitioners would like to escape but cannot presently do so without jeopardizing the fiscal viability of the entire organization. Media conglomerates have the financial resources to scoop up the rights to popular children’s books, films, and other story-forms and sometimes warehouse them for years, even decades, before they go into production. Young people are also a demographic with rapidly-shifting interests. “Young people’s consumption of narrative is shifting so rapidly,” states Jenny Millinger, associate artistic director at Childsplay. “We’re all running just to keep up.”

Where do new plays go once they’ve been through one of these development opportunities? New Visions/New Voices requires playwrights to apply with sponsoring theatres who intend (at least at the time of the application) to produce the work, but this doesn’t always come to fruition. Once a project has jumped the hurdle of a public reading at a festival, it *may* get picked up by a theatre and move onto production, but that pathway is more common for a play that has been developed within an institution (or as a co-production with two or more institutions) rather than at a festival of new work. Even commissioned plays-in-development that are scheduled for a particular season may need more time and get moved to a later date – a choice First Stage had to make for their recent production of *On the Wings of a Mariposa* by Alvaro Saar Rios.

Fortunately, digital platforms such as the New Play Network allow playwrights to get their plays out into the universe without the obstacles of receiving a predetermined number of productions before a publishing company will add it to their catalogue. With the tyranny of the title still encumbering TYA season selection, there’s a great deal more leg-work involved in launching a new play into full production. Too often plays get stuck in an endless development loop (development is less expensive and less of a financial risk than a full production) and are never realized beyond the aesthetics of a staged reading.

There are still some challenges with new work for which a script is not the primary artifact or projects that are in the earliest phases of conception. This is to be expected in a title-driven theatre economy, and the United States in general still privileges the written word over other theatrical languages. Non-verbal theatre is often at a disadvantage, as it can be difficult to translate them into an artifact that is supported by automated submission forms without crashing file-size limits or violating the submission guidelines altogether. Automated forms are practical and necessary for new work development opportunities that have a high number of submissions, but an increasing number of theatres are seeking work that is more movement-based and image-driven. Write Now and LabWorks both accept a broader scope of submission materials from vision boards to project pitches filmed on a smartphone, but there is still a significant gap between what artistic ensembles are creating and how reputable development partners review their work.

Looking Forward

As our field looks to the future, we are grappling with important questions about the development of new work. An ongoing refrain is, “How do we find audiences for it?” The underlying current running through Write Now, New Visions/New Voices, Cereals @ The Flea, Barn Arts Collective, LabWorks, and Playwrights-In-Residence is the relentless, ebullient enthusiasm of the leaders of those programs. It is *infectious*. If we could figure out how to bottle and sell their exuberant advocacy for new work, we might never have to do *A Christmas Carol* ever again. (No disparagement intended, but we know that such big-audience-draw, familiar classics are what many theatres program to balance the financial risk of a putting a new play on the season.) We are currently immersed in the Age of Influencers – is there a way to capture and amplify the enthusiasm of these champions of new work? It may not go viral, but it would certainly boost the signal on platforms that potential audiences now hold in the palm of their hand.

As a field, have we become too reliant on Lerman's *Critical Response Process* and other long-established dialogic frameworks as the foundation of facilitation tactics in discussions about new work? Are we employing those frameworks out of habit, or are we weighing their value and efficacy for each new work before we engage in these discussions? What might we discover in trauma-response practices, community-organizing principles, or the dialogical practices of cultures and identities other than our own that might reveal our blind-spots in matters of equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonizing our theatre spaces?

Finally, are we as TYA practitioners talking enough about ownership and compensation when theatres involve their community as respondents and dramaturgs? The individuals invited into these conversations frequently come from marginalized communities or have marginalized identities. How are we compensating them for their intellectual and emotional labor as project consultants? If a community or particular group makes a significant contribution to a script that goes onto production, are we negotiating fair and transparent profit-sharing and/or royalties agreements? We often

see community partners credited in the program or in the published version of the script, but are they receiving monetary compensation as collaborators who were an intrinsic part of the process and thus the final outcome? Are they represented in discussion panels and invited to the stage with the rest of the creative team to respond to questions from the audience? Are we moving beyond just offering free tickets to our community partners and/or naming them in a pre-show announcement or lobby sign to placing a tangible value on their work? How might such actions that support inclusion and equality deepen our connection with the communities we hope to serve with new, exciting stories NOT adapted from a book? ■

Wendy Bable is a freelance director, dramaturg, writer, and TYA pollinator based in the Greater Philadelphia region. She currently is the President of the Board of Directors of the International Association of Performing Arts for Youth (IPAY) and is seeking opportunities for new theatre-making adventures with the TYA/USA community and beyond.



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BLACK BEAUTY

TO

SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE

stage



Performance

Seattle Children's Theatre's production of *Black Beauty*.
By James Still. Directed by Courtney Sale. Set Design by Carey Wong.
Costume Design by Trevor Bowen. Lighting Design by Connie Yun.
Music Direction by Robertson Witmer. Sound Design by Chris Walker.
Puppet Design by Annett Mateo.

Photo

Conner Nedderson, Keagan Estes, and Hana Lass in *Black Beauty*,
adapted by James Still. Seattle Children's Theatre, Seattle, WA.
Photo by Angela Sterling.

Adapted from the beloved novel by Anna Sewell, this spirited tale of bravery and perseverance kicks off the theatre's 2019–2020 season with a powerful stride.

Our paramount goal was to create a work filled with beauty, multi-generational collaboration, and trust in our audience.

COURTNEY SALE, DIRECTOR

I thought a lot about the difference between adapting STORY vs. adapting PLOT. The structure of the book is a challenge because it's very short episodes – some of which relegate *Black Beauty* to the sidelines and I wanted to go back to the subtitle of the book: 'An Autobiography of a Horse.' I needed to reimagine the structure so that *Black Beauty* was at the center of his own story. What emerged is a universal story about community and friendships, (in)justice, and the power of kindness, and about the resilience that comes from staying curious about knowing and telling your own true story.

JAMES STILL, PLAYWRIGHT

I felt it was important to capture the rhythm and muscularity of the horses, so I wrote music with a strong pulse and a rippling syncopation to accompany the scenes of trotting and galloping. The piano score often served as an emotional bridge for the horses, connecting them to the humans they interacted with. The instrumentation evolves as the story moves to the city; an accordion introduces elements of English folk song, and percussion instruments are used to illustrate the horse carriages on the busy streets of London.

ROBERTSON WITMER, COMPOSER

Because the life-size horse puppets were many of the main characters in the play, the set was designed to accommodate the dimensions and movement requirements of these puppets as well as the smaller rod and mechanical ones that populated the show.

CAREY WONG, SET DESIGNER

Our connections to horses runs long and deep. Using the idea of our personal connection to them, each of the horses are made out of different materials and styles. *Black Beauty*'s geometric pattern reflects all the different paths his life takes throughout his journey.

ANNETT MATEO, PUPPET DESIGNER & COACH

I wanted to evoke a poetic dreamlike landscape for some of *Black Beauty*'s strongest memories. I borrowed a technique from the dance world and leaned heavily on low angle lighting which let me strongly accentuate bodies of the actors and the large-scale puppets while keeping light off the stage floor. This allowed those moments to escape from the stage world and expand into a more memory-driven emotional state.

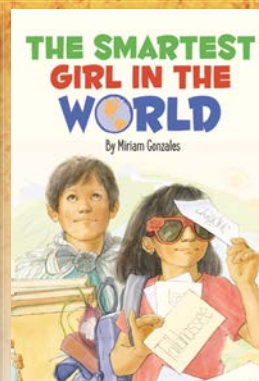
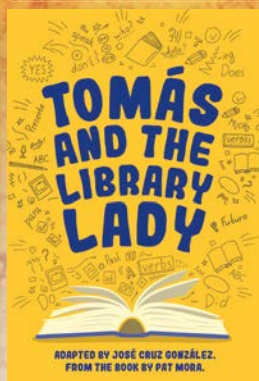
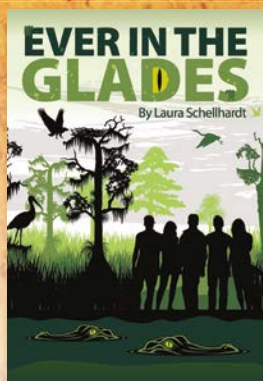
CONNIE YUN, LIGHTING DESIGNER

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