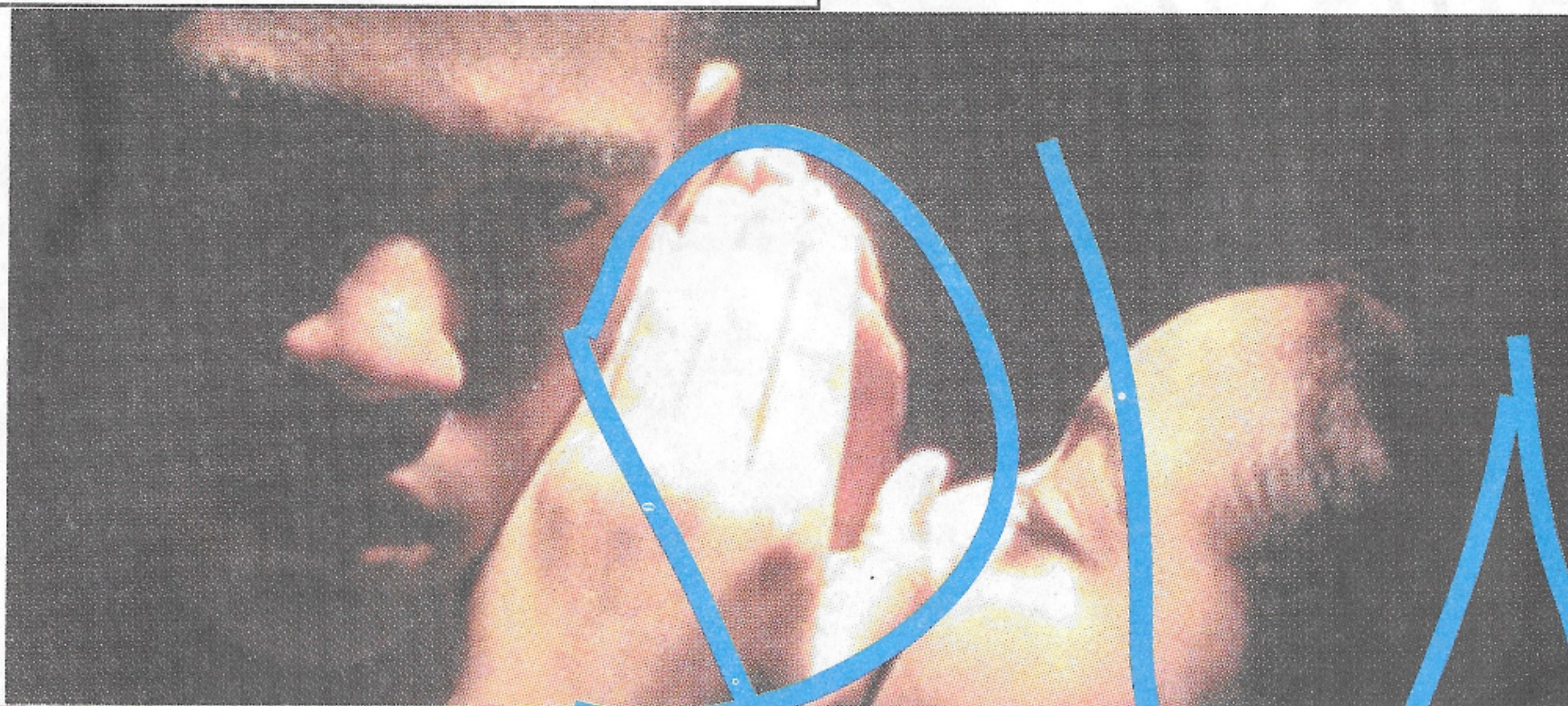


CHILD'S



PLAY

Just because the performers are young doesn't mean the Youth Theater Festival is only for kids. Rather, these dramatic works are a refreshing (yet surprisingly mature) theater alternative for audiences of all ages

By Lucia Mauro

Tired of yawning and rolling your eyes at yet another revival of "West Side Story" or the latest pants-dropping British farce? Longing for a new theatrical challenge? You might want to look to a budding generation of artists for some invigorating answers. Audiences who believe that many adult theater offerings have grown increasingly "childish" would do well to seek out the honest wisdom of young people for inspiration.

The three-year-old Youth Theater Coalition of Chicago (YTCC), which is housed in Columbia College's Office of Community Arts Partnerships, has become a powerful catalyst for boundary-snapping live performance. It's the driving force behind the Youth Theater Festival, now in its second and expanded year, featuring 18 of the city's most avant-garde companies whose unconventional dramatic works are written and performed by artists ranging in age from 6 to 25 years old. Most of these works incorporate original movement and music, and deal with ever-pertinent issues like violence prevention and sexual identity. It seems then that youth theater has come of age.

Running May 17-20 at the Storefront Theater, the Youth Theater Festival spans the gamut of creativity percolating at such established arts centers as ETA Creative Arts Foundation, Kuumba Lynx, Redmoon Theater Dramagirls and Children's Company, Stepenwolf Theatre, About Face Theatre, Northlight Theatre, Piven Theatre Workshop, Lookingglass Theatre Company, Music Theatre Workshop, Free Street Programs, REALITY Theatre, Holstein Park, Association House of Chicago, Albany Park Theater Project, Comedy Sportz High School League, West Humboldt Park Center for the Performing Arts and Teen-REACH. Three of these groups gave us a sneak preview.

At a South Side grammar school, five members of Music Theatre Workshop's apprentice program are presenting "Real Life Stories," a poetic-percussive montage that grew out of a project, more than two years ago, for the Field Museum's "Living Together" exhibit. Through a streamlined and profound narrative, the piece describes how we can learn about people different from ourselves by listening to and acting out their stories.

Leah Ignacio, 22, delivers a fervent monologue about a teenage girl who witnessed the shooting death of her infant brother by a gang in a Chicago park. Now in the custody of the Department of Children and Family Services, her character conceals her deep anger and hurt through an uncomfortable outpouring of laughter. Karen McKeegan, 20, takes on the introverted persona of a young girl with a physical disability. Tormented by her classmates, "Desi" talks about how a Music Theatre Workshop role-playing exercise helped her gain self-confidence.

In another emotional segment, 23-year-old Giau Truong shares his mother's tumultuous experiences growing up in war-torn Vietnam while accordion player Amber Stokes, 18, and drummer Garrette Horne, 22, create a stirring sonic backdrop.

"Because it's my own mother's story," says Truong, "I learn a lot more about myself every time I perform it. As a teenager, I didn't understand my parents' way of thinking and would run away from them. But, by enacting their stories, I can appreciate them. This experience has brought me back to my roots."

According to Ignacio, the 20-minute show aims to "get a dialogue going," and it allows the actors and audiences to step into another person's skin. Since 1984, Music Theatre Workshop — founded and directed by Meade Palidofsky — has been utilizing theater-writing exercises for empowering youth at the Juvenile Detention Center. Its varied programs, including the one that generated "Real Life Stories," are spread across schools and museums citywide.

At the end of "Real Life Stories," the performers urge the audience to "hear the wisdom in rhythm and rhyme."

Cindy Henkin, an instructor in Free Street's Parenteen residency at the Arts of Living center in Lincoln Park, imparts a similar kind of philosophy to young pregnant and parenting teens. The writing of Parenteen participants will be performed by ensemble members from Free Street's TeenStreet Theater.

"For our piece in the Youth Theater Festival," says Henkin, "we're playing with the shape and rhythms of rumors. The writers and performers are also exploring the shifting roles of themselves as both perpetrators of rumor and its victims."

The result is an abstract performance piece called "The Mystery of the Rumor." Two of the TeenStreet artists, January Wells and William Barnui, describe the show's imagery as a series of shadowing, in which one performer follows another in silhouette to indicate the clandestine way rumors take root.


"I'm interested in exploring how rumors can affect your life," comments Wells, 16. "I once heard a rumor that I was stuck up. So I confronted the people who started it. But I didn't get up in their face. I just told them I was aware of what they were doing and that what they were saying wasn't true."

One of the most layered visual motifs is the throwing and clinging to a pillow, showing how lies get tossed around and how, if you hold onto a lie too long, it's no longer interesting. They also weave a feather through the production, blowing on it to illustrate how, like a rumor, it has to "stay in the air" to have any sort of life. "Everybody has been connected to rumors," notes Barnui, 15. "At some time in your life, you hassled along a rumor or have been a victim of a rumor."

Redmoon Theater's Dramagirls — a sustained writing-performance-design mentorship program for sixth- through eighth-grade girls in Logan Square — have turned to the Greek myth of "Persephone" for a contemporary, non-linear examination of transformation. "We create a safe space for these girls to develop public speaking skills and generate their own ideas," says Jen Onopa, director of Dramagirls. "One of the participants was extremely shy in the beginning. Now she has a speaking part in the play."

Interestingly, the young artists decided to write an actor-driven play versus a puppet-based one (Redmoon's trademark brand of theater). But the experimental "Persephone" certainly will utilize wildly eclectic visual metaphors. Onopa describes the set, created by the Dramagirls, as being divided into three parts: Heaven, Earth and the Underworld. One scene takes place in a restaurant — which splits in half to become Hades — complete with trees made of forks and spatulas and a floor paved with pots and pans (an inverted reality).

Audiences may never see a Zeus quite like the one these girls have imagined. He pulls people up to Mount Olympus using a vacuum-like suctioning contraption. In one of the more poignant moments, Zeus grabs hold of a man who abuses his wife. The abuser is then forced to wander the earth and carry around his wife's pain (represented by an unwieldy bag of junk).

These insightful youth groups believe theater can be entertaining and serve a crucial purpose. As Meade Palidofsky of Music Theatre Workshop stresses, "You do this not just to give young people performing experience, but to really change their lives." This isn't your average kids' stuff. It's extraordinary kids' stuff that's definitely suitable for adults. 

The Youth Theater Festival runs May 17-20 at the Storefront Theater, 66 E. Randolph. Performances are Thu.-Sat. at 7 p.m.; Sun. at 3 and 7 p.m. Tickets: \$10, adults; \$5, students and individuals under 21 years old. Weekend passes: \$30, adults; \$15, students. Call 312/742-8497.