

The Broadway Theater Company Giving Troubled Teens a Second Act by David Wallis

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Stargate Theatre pays at-risk youth to script and stage performance pieces. Their aim: to reduce recidivism, teach literacy and provide work experience that looks far better on a CV than jail time.

I am the pain you feel when you can't express yourself.

I am a swift kick to the stomach of injustice.

—Christopher Thompson, co-author of Stargate Theatre Company's production of "Behind My Eyes"

Last summer, on his first day on the job as an actor and writer for the Stargate Theatre Company in New York City, Christopher Thompson contemplated quitting. While many might consider getting paid to create performance art a step up from janitor's assistant — his previous summer job — Thompson initially thought otherwise. Fear consumed the 17-year-old from Flatbush, one of Brooklyn's less fashionable neighborhoods; he worried about being mocked for his grammar, handwriting and morbid humor. "I was afraid of people finding my form of expression really bad, really effed up," says Thompson, who bears a resemblance to the Cat in the Hat with his lanky frame, long striped-knit cap and mischievous grin. He remembers feeling "extremely defensive" and thinking to himself, "This is awful. Why am I here? I'm not a talker, but I need the money."

Thompson's bumpy path to the stage began after a brief stint in New York's notorious Rikers Island prison. Police arrested him last year for punching a classmate; it was his first offense. He contends that the kid he slugged during lunch harassed him about his black skin, but Thompson acknowledges that he has "anger problems."

An alternative-to-incarceration program recommended Thompson to Stargate, a pilot project founded last year by the prestigious Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC), which produces Broadway and Off-Broadway plays. The unconventional Stargate theater troupe pays "court-involved" and at-risk teenage boys (most participants have committed low-level crimes) to stage a performance piece in a quest to reduce recidivism, teach literacy and provide work experience that looks far better on a CV than time in jail. The cast members — who applied to be part of the program — worked for a minimum of 12 hours a week for six weeks last summer to develop an autobiographical show, which they performed at New York City Center – Stage II, a sleek theater in Midtown Manhattan. After the premiere in August 2013, the teens returned to high school, though they reconvened for an encore performance of the show in October.

"We're hiring these young men to be members of a theater company," says David

Shookhoff, education director of the Manhattan Theatre Club and an acclaimed director, most recently of the Off-Broadway hit "Breakfast With Mugabe." "Their job is to write and to perform and to operate as an ensemble." Shookhoff believes Stargate's seven charter members learned to be timely, collegial and cooperative, valuable traits in the workplace.

Shookhoff, 69, conceived Stargate in 2010 while brainstorming over poached eggs with Evan Elkin, 52, then an executive at the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit policy research group in New York, and now a consultant specializing in criminal justice reform. Trustees at their respective organizations had a hunch that MTC and Vera would find common ground so they set up their key innovators on something of a blind date. "By the time breakfast was done, Stargate was hatched," recalls Shookhoff, who favors a professorial gray beard and tweed jacket. The Leon Lowenstein Foundation, a nonprofit that focuses on education, provided the seed money for the venture, and Stargate is in talks with other major funders to underwrite its second season this summer.

Elkin, a psychologist, believes the teenage years are an opportune time to introduce underprivileged kids to theater. "We forget to recognize that adolescence is this great moment where you sort of are figuring out . . . your own identity and the roles you want to play," he says. "There's this tremendous parallel process in theater." Creating a play in a therapeutic environment, he suggests, helps young people with criminal pasts reflect on their decisions and envision overcoming the barriers they face. As one of Stargate's grant proposals puts it, the program "engages difficult-to-engage youth."

At the same time, Stargate empowers its players to run the show. The seven members of the first season, for instance, signed off on the firing of three cast mates who missed several rehearsals. "Young folks who have been in the system are not accustomed to having a voice and setting the tone," observes Elkin, who watched the actors "get in touch with themselves" while crafting a "lyrical piece of art."

Stargate's teachers are successful show business pros, who include four-time Emmy-winning writer Judy Tate and guest artist Lemon Andersen, a convicted crack-dealer-turned-monologist who has appeared in several Spike Lee films. Rehearsals are held in the same studios used by stars working on recent Manhattan Theatre Club productions, including Mary-Louise Parker, Debra Messing and Sarah Jessica Parker. Tate, the program's artistic director, considers it critical for the aspiring thespians to get a taste of a thriving theater company. "When the kids come to the studios of Manhattan Theatre Club and see the photos on the walls of all the productions that have happened, it creates an environment of professionalism," she says. "They get to go home and say, 'I'm paid as a writer. I'm paid as an actor.'"

Research on the efficacy of theater as an intervention for juvenile offenders is limited. A study of adult inmates from 1980 to 1987 found that those who had participated in arts programs were nearly 50 percent less likely to return to prison within one year of release compared with the general population of parolees. Juvenile offenders in an arts program in Washington State detention centers, according to a 2003 evaluation published in *The Journal of Correctional Education*, caused fewer disruptions "at a statistically significant level."

Stargate's admittedly small sample of teens, who were 16 and 17 years old when they joined the program, are performing well; no graduates with criminal records have been rearrested and several improved their grades. The cast have been invited back this summer to serve as paid recruiters and mentors for new cast members.

Anecdotally, Tate witnessed her young colleagues experience Prospero-worthy transformations. She singled out Thompson; she described him as “very, very shut down” at first and prone to hold his shoulders “up to his ears” and to mutter into his chest. Tate advised him to change his posture if he hoped to reach an audience. “Your head must be held up because you’ve got to project your voice,” she recalls telling him. “And one day,” she continues, “he was sharing a particularly beautiful piece of writing, his shoulders went down and his head went up and he spoke out into the world.”

Thompson credits a coaching session with Lemon Andersen — Stargate brings in accomplished guest-artists to inspire the cast — as a revelation. “He taught us that you have to keep chipping at that wall, chipping at that wall. It’s not about being cool,” recalls Thompson. “It’s about showing who you are.” He adds that he now relies on writing as an outlet. “I love writing now. Even though my friends think it’s cheesy. ‘Hey, I get my emotions out there, you don’t.’”

Several weeks of theater exercises, writing sessions and rehearsals culminated in “Behind My Eyes,” a show based on their disappointments and dreams, performed before peers, parents and even probation officers. Shookhoff, Stargate’s co-founder, remembers jumping out of his seat at the end of the show — and he wasn’t alone. “You know, standing ovations are kind of cliché on Broadway. There’s almost a sense of obligation,” he says. “A true standing ovation is what we experienced at the end of the Stargate performance, where the audience simply leapt to their feet, cheering and screaming, laughing and applauding, because they had been so deeply moved.”

Before the finale, the cast forms a circle to represent a whirring, buzzing time machine. Each performer rotates into the spotlight to answer the question, “What if we . . . got blasted 20 years into the future?” On the stark stage decorated with black cubes and a backdrop emblazoned by the performers’ writing, a future pilot fantasizes about flying through the “clouds and moist mist with rushing winds. I’m surrounded by 432 passengers and their lives are all in my hands.” A would-be transportation czar visualizes a revamped New York in 2033, where “the subway tunnels no longer have rats because I fixed them up with the help of ‘Extreme Makeover: New York City Edition!’”

And Thompson, who mumbled through initial rehearsals and nearly quit Stargate, envisioned a promising future. “Everything I do,” he said with confidence, “will lead up to my master plan!”