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THEATER

August 22, 2007

Well-Versed

"Romeo and Juliet" gets an update by people who understand Shakespeare's issues.

by Mary Burruss

Rival gangs, questions of morality, issues about behavior in a divided community, the effects of conflict — "Romeo and Juliet" has them all.

It's also the perfect medium for the teens involved in Will Power to Youth Richmond to explore the serious social concerns that affect their lives. So when these kids present their version of "Romeo and Juliet" at the end of this seven-week program, the hope is that the training they've received will help them avoid any of the star-crossed troubles of the characters.

The Will Power to Youth Richmond (WPY) program is the first satellite version of a 14-year-old youth development initiative started in Los Angeles shortly after the Rodney King riots. Created by the Shakespeare Festival/LA and the City of Los Angeles Summer Youth Employment Program, WPY is an employment-based arts program designed to help at-risk urban kids by giving them their first jobs. The Richmond version of the program is the joint effort of Richmond's Gang Reduction and Intervention Program (GRIP), which falls under the jurisdiction of Richmond Shakespeare and the state's Office of the Attorney General.

"A major goal of WPY is to reach youth before they join a gang and offer them support and an alternative way of life," says Chris Anthony, director of youth and education for the Shakespeare Festival/LA. Anthony is part of a team of eight veterans of the Los Angeles program who came to Richmond earlier this summer to train and mentor the leaders of the fledgling Richmond group.

Support for the program comes from an interagency agreement between the U.S. Department of Justice and the National Endowment for the Arts. "It's the only interagency agreement in the Bush administration," says Amy Wight, special projects coordinator for the public safety and enforcement division for the Office of the Attorney General.



Don't spoil the ending: Alison de la Cruz rehearses a scene from "Romeo and Juliet" while, at left, Reshawn Jefferson, Brian Martin and Doneka Royster keep up with the couplets. Will Power to Youth Richmond's first production is designed to give teens solutions to problems as old as Shakespeare.

Photo by Scott Elmquist



WPY focuses on youth living in severe economic situations who are interested in working and learning about theater arts. The project locally targets youth from the racially tense Broad Rock corridor on Richmond's South Side (where rival African-American and Hispanic gangs are causing havoc), but kids from economically challenged neighborhoods from all over town are eligible.

All of the 23 participants had to apply and interview as they would for any other job, and are paid an hourly wage. Anthony, of Shakespeare Festival/LA, Wight and Cynde Liffick, of Richmond Shakespeare, selected the kids based on age, their willingness to take risks and their desire to affect change. Not only do the kids learn job skills and have unique exposure to the performing arts, but they also receive one year of follow-up from GRIP to increase their chances of future success.

Each morning, the community of youth and mentors at the WPY program "check in" to practice active listening and good communication, and wait to hear work plans for the day. The check-in is a tool for focusing the group and reinforcing the message of working together to solve problems and achieve a common goal. These are part of the soft skills the youth are learning in the job-training segment of the program. Leading the kids through the daily work are five people from Shakespeare Festival/LA, who facilitate groups, playwriting, stage managing and youth coordination, as well as a number of local artists and facilitators. Wight handles the administrative duties.

"The first week is dedicated to building the community," says Anthony. In this initial phase of the process, the participants learn communication skills, create rules for their workplace, and discuss concepts like patience, respect and honesty. The youth are also exposed to all of the elements of theatrical production in order to discover their interests. Anthony says the biggest challenge is "convincing the youth that we're serious." The second week they are placed in a production team, such as movement, scene design or costume design, and they are given a role in the show.

"The program is designed for the average kid to gain job skills and to apprentice work as an artist," Wight says.

"Theater is the perfect artistic medium for this type of work, because the different elements require teamwork and trust," says Rebecca Ferrell, a mentor artist for kids learning production and movement skills.

In the fifth week, says Ferrell, "the kids are really starting to support each other and support the team; they are realizing that the entire [WPY] community is counting on them to do their job." Theater work fosters a family-like atmosphere, which is critical in keeping these kids out of trouble.

Shakespeare is uniquely suited to this type of program because the plays are socially complex, the language is difficult, and his works are often perceived as boring by the target age group. The kids overcome their poor image of Shakespeare by examining each aspect of the play and learning to relate their own problems to the action within it.

"What we create is a world where we talk about important issues in-depth" by using Shakespeare, says Richmond Shakespeare's Liffick. The youth delve into the social issues, research the text and learn to interpret the story in their own words. "Romeo and Juliet" was chosen primarily to address social issues that face rival groups — a problem in many of these kids' neighborhoods. The play is partly the Shakespearean text interwoven with original text written by the kids. As a local twist, it's set in Jackson Ward in the 1930s.

After only five weeks in WPY, there are already some positive changes in the kids. In addition to mastering the heroic couplet, kids get exposed to aspects of the arts they might not have otherwise. Lee Hurt, a 16-year-old at Franklin Military Academy, says WPY has led him to appreciate jazz, blues and swing music he would not have explored on his own. Hurt says he plans to pursue music as his major in college.

Giving kids like Hurt some coping skills and a plan for the future is what the organizers hope will keep them off the streets. **S**

WPY's "Romeo and Juliet" will be performed at the Firehouse Theatre Aug. 23 at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. and Aug. 24-25 at 7:30 p.m. Performances are free and open to the public, but reservations are required. For ticket reservations, contact Rebecca Ferrell at 937-0299.

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