

## FIRST LADY OF THE THEATER

By Evan Henerson, Staff Writer  
The Los Angeles Daily News - Thursday, April 28, 2005



Having already performed their adaptation of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" a half-dozen times for schools and peer groups last week, members of Shakespeare Festival/LA's Will Power to Youth program figured to be over pre-performance jitters.

Then again, none of those audiences included first lady Laura Bush, who on Tuesday dropped in to SF/LA's downtown headquarters to meet the Will Power performance team and stayed to watch a few "Romeo and Juliet" highlights.

During her 35-minute visit, Mrs. Bush took a tour of the performance "stations," learning about the "Romeo and Juliet" adaptation, costumes, sound, music, movement and acting. Company members -- ages 14 to 21 -- and their mentors explained and demonstrated the style of dance known as "wrecking," and let the first lady execute some sound cues on the electronic sound board.

At the end of the 15 minutes of performance highlights -- which included the party where the title characters first meet and kiss -- Mrs. Bush applauded and told the performers, "This was so great. But it wasn't enough. I'd like to see more." She also gave the group a plug while chatting with Jay Leno during an appearance on "The Tonight Show" that evening.

"We were nervous, and we were also very honored," said Terence Bonds, 20, a youth mentor and member of the Will Power to Youth writing team who played Capulet. "We knew there was going to be that tension and nervousness, but we just thought if we looked past that and gave it our all, it would just turn out perfect."

Mrs. Bush, the honorary chairwoman of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, had previously recognized Will Power to Youth through the \$10,000 Coming up Taller award in November 2003. Since then, the committee has been tracking Will Power, SF/LA's much-heralded development and leadership program that targets underserved youth, according to artistic director Ben Donenberg.

Under the guidance of professional theater artists and human relations specialists, a group of 20 to 30 kids are paid minimum wage to study, adapt and perform a work of Shakespeare, from scene and costume design to the creation of music. This year's Will Power to Youth Group set "Romeo and Juliet: Las Veronas" amid warring casinos in 1950s Las Vegas.

Several youth-focused arts organizations across the nation have been targeted for an honorary visit, including SF/LA. But security concerns and potential schedule changes prevented company

administrators from telling the kids exactly who would be attending Tuesday's performance and meet-and-greet until lunchtime Monday.

Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, was confirmed, as was Adair Margo, chairwoman of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. The identity of the "special guest," however, was the topper.

"Chris Anthony, our youth and education director, made the announcement and they were all just, 'Whoa!'" said a laughing Donenberg. "One of them said, 'Snap!' I didn't know what it meant. I had to ask if that was good or bad."

Donenberg attended the Coming Up Tall ceremony in 2003 and returned to the White House last week for a special dinner thrown by President and Mrs. Bush honoring Shakespeare's birthday. On Tuesday, for a change, the White House came to SF/LA.

"The hope is, by profiling us this way, this will help us continue to do the work we've been doing," he said.

Donenberg founded SF/LA in 1984. In addition to Will Power to Youth, the company's Will Power to Schools component brings classroom manuals, literacy and instruction techniques into L.A. classrooms. Each summer, the company performs a professional production of a Shakespeare play at a downtown location and at the South Coast Botanic Gardens in Palos Verdes. As part of its "food for thought" admission policy, the company has generated \$1.5 million in nonperishable food donations to benefit the needy over the past 20 years.

