

The About Face Theatre performs *insideOUT*, produced at the Jane Addams Center Hull House in August 2003.

# HANDING OFF THE DRAMA

## BUILDING A THEATER PROGRAM FOR LGBTQ YOUTH

By Julio Vincent Gambuto

FROM THE LOOKS OF IT, the cafeteria at New York City's Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI), home of the Harvey Milk High School, is your ordinary multi-purpose common space, complete with lunchroom serving window where staff members stand thrice daily, paper-hatted, to serve hot meals under—yup, you guessed it—roll-down steel caging fit for any public school food court. Antiseptic circular tables dot the room when it's a dining hall, but easily fold away to make room for activities other than the 30-minute dinner break that has just taken place. A few stragglers remain, perfectly manicured for the evening's activities, debating whether they should join the Peer Education Group meeting or spend the next hour voguing in a nearby classroom. This is not your average public school canteen. It's one of the most controversial common spaces in New York City. And I'm standing in the middle of it wondering what the hell I am doing here.

Work well done at The Theater Offensive



Backstage love as performed by the kids from New York's TAYPE



I've been coming to HMI for ten weeks now with my partners Tim Cusack and Jason Jacobs, co-Artistic Directors of Theatre Askew, an NYC-based theater company, to run TAYPE, the Theatre Askew Youth Performance Experience, a ten-week after-school youth theater program for LGBTQ teens. Now, not 72 hours before the final performance, *Just to Be Safe*—an artistic amalgam of our work, married to two other dance and music satellites under the Institute's Pop Arts after-school program—two of my teen actors are about to rip each other's throats out. Somehow what started as a quick quip about changing a line of the script has horse-powered from zero-to-60 in a matter of seconds and we're facing what could be a fight in the café.

Not a week before, the battle would have been set on the dance floor, as this same room was filled, dimly lit and pounding, like the house of a drag ball à la *Paris Is Burning*. Scores of teens went head to head in fierce voguing competitions before a panel of judges and myself, the room's only baffled guest, who stood confused wondering how, in fact, the human body could bend in so many ways. (Hey, I was born in '78 and grew up in the outer boroughs of New York City. Who the hell knew what voguing was until Madonna did it?).

The first time I was invited into "the café" was by the Institute's Director of Arts and Culture in September 2004. Jason and I were there to pitch a new youth theater program, one that was met with an open door for Theatre Askew, a young theater company of which I have become an active member. Jason and Tim created Theatre Askew in 2003 after years of collaborating on theater projects around New York, with the mission of broadening the community's definition of "queer," giving an evolved meaning to the rainbow flags one can't help but pass on the way through HMI's entry space. Jacobs explains, "We started the company

to expand the experience of queer theater. We found gay theater to be very limited in focus and wanted to reach more people and appeal to more audiences." The group's premier production, David Koteles' *Bald Diva!*, a witty and provocative queer adaptation of Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*—the initial workshop of which found me in a fireman's suit standing on a wooden block stripping down to my suspenders mocking an elongated fire hose—did exactly that, playing to sold-out houses in New York and garnering the nascent company a 2004 GLAAD Award nomination.

Part of broadening the scope of gay theater included starting a youth theater program. For me, it was just time to get off my ass, quit worrying about whether my headshot was pretty enough for "the business," and yes, give back. My partners came to the project from varied perspectives. "I came to New York in 1987, in the era of ACT UP and major gay activism. It seems like, by the mid-'90s, the gay community had retreated from that sense of connectivity, but I find it

impassable in their rehearsal of a scene from Zuri's play. The original work, *Raw Deal*, which grew out of a series of playwrighting workshops, is the story of a young girl's quest for a record deal after being kicked out of her mother's house and searching for her father, who turns out, in Scene 2, to be Pamela, a high-heeled, transgendered woman living with HIV. (Yes, just in case you were wondering, we're not exactly mounting *Bye Bye Birdie!* here. The actor playing Pamela lost both of his oversized "ta-tas" in the second performance, as they slipped through his shirt and came crashing to the ground. His on-stage response? "They're new. I'm just getting used to them.")

As the actors battle about the value of maintaining the integrity of the script, which Jamelia has just impulsively rewritten to the scribe's dismay, I ask one to take a deep breath and the other to take a step toward the table, so we can sit and discuss the problem. Somehow I've become an after-school counselor and am mediating my first real disciplinary issue with the group. And while each meets the

## WE'RE NOT EXACTLY MOUNTING BYE BYE BIRDIE HERE.

really important for myself, for all of us, to challenge that retreat," Cusack explains. "That connectivity extends to the youngest members of the gay community."

Funny how the creative process works. The two young actors who are now arguing are the least connected they've been in weeks, testing their own limits of teamwork (not to mention my waning patience) and questioning, quite vocally, their commitment to the project. Jamelia and Zuri seem to have come to an

other half-way, I can't help but notice the styrofoam plate that one of their peers has left stranded in the center of the bargaining table.

It was styrofoam that got me here in the first place. My second production with Theatre Askew found me bearded and barely clothed in a production of *The Tempest*, directed by Jacobs as his MFA thesis at Columbia, with a ten-foot styrofoam rainbow strapped to my back. Imagine that! In a matter of one show, I had gone from a hunky fireman spraying

## Happy Birthday, GLSEN!

Outside the theater and inside the classroom, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), celebrates ten years of groundbreaking work ensuring safe schools for LGBTQ students, teachers and their families. Every day, GLSEN works with over 2,800 clubs in schools all across America to launch projects and programs that make a walk down the hallway a little less traumatic for queer students. To celebrate their 10th birthday, GLSEN recently launched a public education campaign called *Teach Respect*, targeted at the serious problem of anti-LGBTQ name-calling, bullying and harassment that affects all students—gay and straight—in our nation's schools. *Teach Respect* will use public-service announcements in print media and radio to raise awareness. For more information about GLSEN's many educational resources, public policy agenda, student organizing programs or development initiatives, visit [glsen.org](http://glsen.org).

### On the Web

Find out what's up next for the local gay theater companies listed in this article. Get more information on their youth programs and upcoming theater projects.

Theatre Askew  
Theatre Askew Youth  
Performance Experience  
(TAYPE)  
New York City  
[theatreaskew.com](http://theatreaskew.com)

The Theater Offensive  
True Colors Out Youth Theatre  
Boston  
[thetheateroffensive.org](http://thetheateroffensive.org)

About Face Theatre  
About Face Youth Theatre  
Chicago  
[aboutfacetheatre.com](http://aboutfacetheatre.com)

True Colors Out Youth Theatre performs a Guerilla Theater piece at Cambridge City Hall.



his heavenly hose on the audience to a fairy sprite in nothing more than a linen loincloth and big ol' gay rainbow. I quickly note the styrofoam plate and wonder—as I am sure my reticent father did as he sat in his Yankees cap, cross-armed and popped, in the audience of *The Tempest*—how my acting career had brought me to this point, rather than, say, a lucrative national Michelin tire commercial or a guest spot on *Passions*. All I can offer is that this was the moment that my adventures in gay theater were about to get that much more rewarding. With much labor here in HMI's café, the young actors are able to find common ground around the fact that each comes to this shiny lunchroom table from a week overpowered by obstacles, but

and youth theater programs like it all across the country, creates a common space for gay men and women of all ages to come together in a creative dialogue that tackles not only the shared experience of being queer (You're gay, I'm gay, let's *tawk!*), but the vastly different viewpoints from which each of us approaches the experience. And somehow, the company members who are tackling these very innovative theater projects are becoming role models for a younger and struggling set.

Megan Carney, Director of Educational Programs and Associate Artistic Director of About Face Theatre in Chicago, which is currently producing its seventh season of youth theater with its original production,

## "IT'S REALLY POWERFUL. YOUTH ARE SO HUNGRY FOR ANY SENSE OF HISTORY."

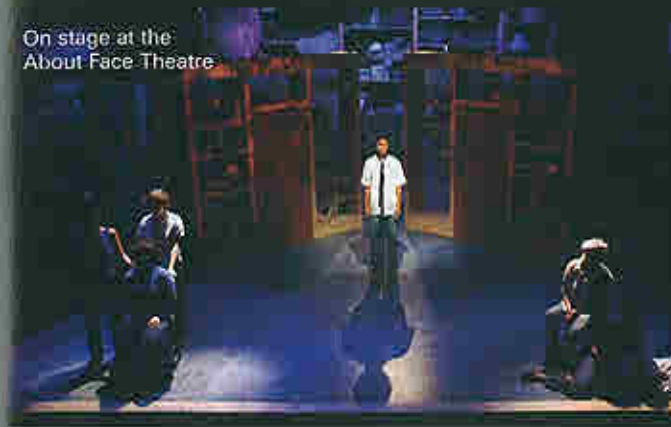
with a committed sense that the play is greater than any disagreement discovered in the process of creating it. (Yes, it's textbook, but all the theater fags out there can tell you how true it is.) The actors both shed tears that might net either starlet dramatic kudos, and leave the room exhausted from what this process has called on them to do. I leave feeling the same way. Getting your ass up and into the community is not as easy as it sounds.

But it's been well worth it. What I have been most struck by in the creation of this youth theater program are the relationships we've developed with the program's participants. I know for myself—pre-college, pre-Internet, and pre-West Hollywood Pride dancing on a pool table (it's true, my friends have pictures)—I knew nothing about gay people as a teen. When I was Jamelia's age, I was ordering cheese fries with my girlfriend at the Victory Diner on Staten Island! But TAYPE,

*insideOUT*, says, "It's almost a taboo. It's hard to find places that bring gay and lesbian people of all ages together to celebrate culture. [The program] is a way of documenting our common history, and it's really powerful. Youth are so hungry for any sense of history. It connects them to a different experience and helps them feel more confident about their lives." Megan was also caught off-guard becoming an instant role model for her group. "Personally, when we began, I thought of [the program] simply as an interesting theater project. I didn't expect to be suddenly perceived as a role model or build such meaningful relationships. It's been remarkably rewarding."

About Face created their Youth Theatre program in 1998, a natural extension of the company's mission to include education as a benchmark of their work. What began as a commission to create a theater piece in response to the then-new Defense of

On stage at the  
About Face Theatre



Taking a bow at  
The Theater Offensive



Marriage Act (many thanks to Newton for showing us that, yes, every action has an equal and opposite reaction), has become the very successful About Face Youth Theatre. Their latest venture—The Home Project—is set to take place this summer and will consist of a theater lab investigating home and homelessness with a diverse ensemble of Chicago's LGBTQ youth and their allies. When asked what sparked the interest in The Home Project, Carney notes that "youth want to celebrate the common space that they share as young gay people, but they also want to talk about other big issues in their lives; they want to focus beyond their sexuality."

And like we found at the Hetrick-Martin Institute, many of the youth that participate in About Face Theatre and TAYPE are dealing with issues well beyond the *Will & Grace* landscape, facing challenges that the younger gay, but white, relatively affluent, middle-class *me* just never had to tackle. Homelessness, the imminent threat of HIV and an astonishing dearth of support and resources are all day-to-day challenges that these youth and their queer peers are facing head-on. All of which reminds a sobered pup that yes, there are kids in all of our cities who have stories to tell that might

just blow your mind. Abe Rybeck, Artistic Director of The Theatre Offensive, Boston's most popular source for gay theater, and founder of True Colors Out Youth Theatre, agrees. "The topics that our kids want to work with really call a bluff on the idea of a gay generation. They really challenge the idea that their experience equals a general set of concerns that we all share." The diversity of youth's concerns is refreshing to Rybeck, as is the heart with which his performers take to the stage, "The degree of raw talent, honesty and courage the performers display is riveting."

For me, it's that courage that makes these kids so inspiring to be around, the same courage (thanks to Dorothy and her yellow brick company for putting it in our genes) that brought Jamelia and Zuri back to the colorful café space for their final performance last week. As technicians fiddled with lights and HMI staff prepared for their audience's arrival, this program that began as so many of its parent and sister programs throughout the country, as an interesting theater project, had somehow morphed into something quite meaningful to all of us involved. The café was now transformed into an intimate black box theater (roll down the steel, roll in the stage and turn out the

lights, voila!). Tim and Jason sat with the incredible arts staff of HMI, waiting for the show to begin, and I taped a list of scenes to the backstage wall and reviewed the running order of the set changes with the TAYPE actors. And while I walked them through the travel pattern of the shiny lunchroom table that served as their main set piece, the two actors, who had just days before dramatically sworn they'd walk off the set, were now fixing each other's hair, adjusting each other's costumes and reviewing their lines with focus and concentration that would have impressed any trained thespian. In the opening number that followed, a poem called *Trust and Betrayal*, the two young women, accompanied by their incredible cast mates, moved from opposite sides of the stage, meeting one another in the center. Jamelia put her hand over Zuri's shoulder, looked her in the eye and said, "For you, I will comfort your choices." And I knew, in that instant, what the hell I was doing here in a cafeteria on Astor Place. We—Jason, Tim, the entire HMI arts staff and I—were there to pass along one of the greatest gay traditions of all time—*theater*—and hopefully teach, and even learn, a bit about the power of the theater to be the common space between all of us. **G**

## Five Ways To Support LGBTQ Youth

**Log on and get connected.** Support your local gay theater, youth services center, LGBTQ homeless center or gay & lesbian center online. Get on their mailing list (don't fret, they're not selling your name and number to gay trinket vendors), support their programs, attend their events. Drive that beautiful new Land Rover over to the center and get involved.

**Become a volunteer.** Whether you're a trained professional or not, youth service centers, theaters and the like can always use your support and/or services. It doesn't mean you have to work directly with gay youth. Offer them whatever's easy and gratifying to you.

**Send along the dollars.** If you can't spare the time to volunteer, no problem. Send along some money. Really, youth programs around the country can benefit from your personal or corporate donations. Tell your boyfriend to crack open his wallet, or rally your office gay group to sponsor an event and raise money the good old-fashioned way...over alcohol.

**Call your high school.** Huh? Absolutely, contact your high school's administration and find out if there's a teacher running a gay-straight alliance or shepherding the LGBTQ youth at your alma mater. It's a great way to re-connect with old teachers and friends and support LGBTQ teens in the process.

**Encourage the youth you meet.** Whether he's a friend of a friend or you just see a rainbow stitched to his backpack, tell an LGBTQ teen that you applaud his willingness to be out and proud. After all, you were once in those same stylish shoes.