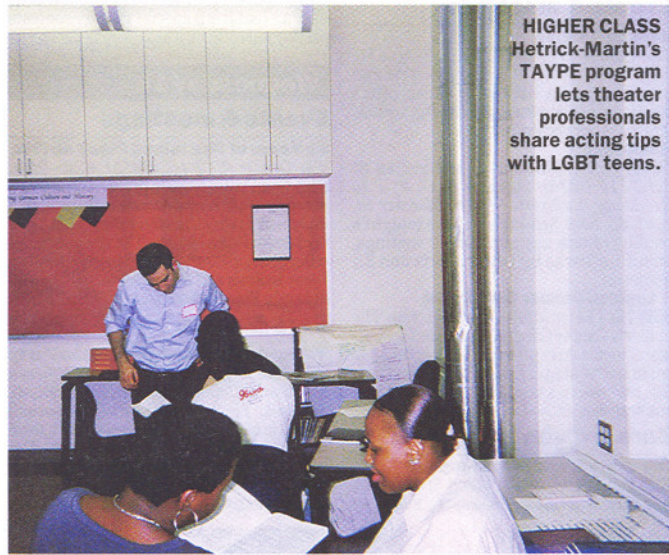


## GAY & LESBIAN

# Acting out

A new afterschool program lets gay teens dwell on drama **By Raven Snook**



**HIGHER CLASS**  
Hetrick-Martin's TAYPE program lets theater professionals share acting tips with LGBT teens.

Gazing out the window of a small, third-floor rehearsal space at the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a gay-youth community center, it's easy to peek straight into the classrooms of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts across the street. It stirs an odd feeling in Tim Cusack—actor, Tisch grad and cofounder of TAYPE (Theatre Askew Youth Project Experience), a queer theater program that's the newest addition to Hetrick-Martin's roster of afterschool activities for LGBT youths aged 12 to 20. "I can look right into the studios where I rehearsed countless plays and learned all the techniques we're now teaching these kids," Cusack says. "The economic disparity between my peers at NYU and the kids at HMI is like two different countries." Attempting to bridge that divide is what pushed Cusack and cofounder Jason Jacobs to initiate TAYPE—and the story of its evolution taught them that the students weren't the only ones with a lot to learn.

Cusack and Jacobs met back in the mid-'90s, in a performance workshop for gay men taught by Tim Miller (one of the famously defunded "NEA Four"). The two started to collaborate and,

by 2003, had formed their own company, Theatre Askew. Their first production, *Bald Diva!*, a gay reinterpretation of Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, received enthusiastic reviews and is up for a 2004 GLAAD award. But still, Cusack and Jacobs felt something was lacking. "We have an obligation not just to make theater in the elite art schools," Cusack says, gesturing to his alma mater, "but also for the disadvantaged kids across the street."

Despite HMI's recent rash of negative publicity (including attacks from conservatives who have questioned whether its

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Harvey Milk High School should even exist), Cusack and Jacobs felt it was the perfect place to launch TAYPE. Founded in 1979, the institute has a history of reaching out to queer kids of color—many of whom are living on their own after being rejected by their families—through myriad programs, from writing to voguing.

At a recent session, TAYPE seemed to be running smoothly, as evidenced by the sight of seven energetic kids acting out silly scenes they had written as part of an improvisational exercise. Their camaraderie was palpable, and every time one flubbed a line, the others would applaud and encourage them to try again. "I didn't have any background in theater so it's strange for me," says William Gilbert, a soft-spoken 17-year-old who expresses an interest in set design. Other students, like Zuri Moore, 18, relish being onstage. "I love to act," she says. "It's fun."

Though Cusack and Jacobs's initial pitch was for a by-audition program with an original final production in April, it proved, quite quickly, to be unrealistic. "These kids' lives are radically changing from minute to minute," Jacobs says. "Where am I sleeping tonight? Are my parents going to let me come home?" We've had to shift our expectations to figure out what we can reasonably accomplish."

After abandoning the idea of traditional auditions, settling on a simpler final project of small scenes and bringing on education director Julio Vincent Gambuto, the program took off. The first half of each session is led by a guest artist; experts so far have included a playwright, a choreographer and an acting coach. Then students practice what they've learned through theater games, journal writing and improvisation. Still, the students wish that more peers had signed up for the program. "To just throw away an opportunity like this is ridiculous," Moore says.

Perhaps next year more up-and-coming thespians will follow her lead, as Cusack and Jacobs are al-

ready thinking about how to make the program more relevant. "These kids' lives have nothing to do with what you see in *HX*," Cusack notes. "But they're still a vital part of the gay community. The question is: How do we reach them?"

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