

Techniques entice challenged kids into lyrical mode

Ever tried to write a musical theater song? You know, the kind of song that makes the audience jump to its feet at the end. A take-no-prisoners rock song, an anthem that sticks in people's minds or a ballad that reminds people of things they once dreamed of and never got.

Regular people can't write songs like that, you say?

You're wrong, and Bruce Livingston has proof.

Bruce is in the business of proving people can do more than others expect of them — more than even they expected of themselves.

For five years he's run the PlayWrite Program, which joins Portland theater professionals with kids in alternative schools, "described by whatever the term-of-the-month is," Bruce says, "'disadvantaged,' 'marginalized,' 'underprivileged,' whatever."

Bruce is convinced "people don't really believe these young people are as talented and creative as they are. I think a lot of programs sort of pander to them." Not PlayWrite.

The theater professionals work for several weeks with 10 kids each session, coaching them, bugging them, questioning them until the kids produce short plays with unusual characters: victimized tennis rackets, grizzly bears with ambition, modest catfish.

"We get to a very confrontational place with them," Bruce says, "challenging them,

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because we are convinced they are strong intellectually and emotionally. It's not just about patting them on the back."

At the end of the workshop series the plays are given staged readings by professional actors. The young playwrights sit in the auditorium, "often with their mouths open," Bruce says. "They are certainly focused. And they love it."

The process bonds the young writers and the professionals. Sometimes it's hard to say goodbye. So two years ago Bruce and

some of the theater professionals decided to offer alumni of the workshops another opportunity: to take the short plays they wrote the first time out and turn them into musicals.

The students write the song lyrics. Writing the music are some of Portland's best theater composers: Marv Ross, Doug Fraser and Mel Kubik. At the end of the workshops, some of Portland's best actor/singers get on stage and sing the songs.

Theater songs are famously hard to write; these writers would agree.

The lyrics come first. Then the student sits with a composer who asks a lot of questions. What rhythm is right for this character? What is the character feeling?

Then the composer suggests a song type. It isn't meant to be exactly right. "There is such a hierarchical imbalance here, if the composer . . . goes right to what he thinks is cool, the (student) writer will say, 'That's great. We're done.'"

Instead, the composer suggests a few styles that are exactly wrong, "and the kid says, 'That's not right at all.' Then the composer says, 'OK, what's the direction we should go?' and the child

reacted "hugely," Bruce says. "Music has a power that is hard to match."

One girl insisted her character do a rap song, not an acceptable musical theater style in the workshop. "We make it very clear the first day that we're writing musical theater songs, not radio songs," Bruce says. "We talk about the difference."

The girl got upset and told the composer, Fraser, to pick any style he wanted. "So Doug picked a style that was just smarmy. All major chords, sweetness and light. She put her hands on her ears and screamed. It was exactly the right reaction. Doug said, 'OK, what direction do you want to go?' " The girl started participating in the musical process. "They ended up with a really great song."

After a style is chosen, the composer will work with the student to find a melody that fits. "There's lots of interactive work," Bruce says. But the final word is always the student's.

Most are high school age, but one middle-schooler, Jonathan Venecio, wrote a song with Kubik called "I'm a Catfish Pure and Simple" that was a big hit.

In fact, audiences at the concluding performances of the musical theater workshops have

reacted "hugely," Bruce says. "Music has a power that is hard to match."

There was cheering after Wade McCollum belted out Yousuf Kargbo's rock 'n' roll song, "A Bear With a Plan," to Fraser's music. And after Michele Mariana and Michael Stone sang an anthem called "Glory and Fame," written by Nina Burch and Marv Ross, "there was a standing ovation."

If you'd like to hear some of these showstoppers, you have two choices: Keep your eye out for a free workshop performance on the PlayWrite Web site (www.playwriteinc.org) or buy a ticket for \$75 and attend the fundraiser Monday night at the Gerding Theater's basement studio in the Pearl District.

Discover a budding Rodgers or Hammerstein. Give a standing ovation. Watch a life get changed, and sing along.

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