

GIVING AWAY THE THEATRE

The Youth Onstage! Community Performance School: A Study in Building Bridges Between Theatre Professionals and Inner City Youth

by Dan Friedman

Youth Onstage! of which I am artistic director, is a theatre that produces politically-engaged plays with young performers, aged 14 to 21. We are located on 42nd Street in the heart of New York City's commercial theatre district. Youth Onstage! (YO!) is a program of the All Stars Project, Inc., a 20-year-old non-profit organization that has generated a number of successful performance-based youth programs.

The All Stars Project runs two other two youth programs:

- The All Stars Talent Show Network, which involves young people between the ages of 5 and 25 from the poorest neighborhoods in producing and performing in talent show events (auditions, development workshops and talent shows).
- The Development School for Youth, a leadership training program for inner city teens between the ages of 16 and 21. Executives from major corporations teach workshops (e.g., in Dressing for Success, Capital Markets 101, Resume Writing and Public Speaking) during a 13-week core training program. The corporations also sponsor students in 8-week paid summer internships.

Common to all three programs are:

- 1) a learning model based in a developmental understanding of performance, both on and off stage, aimed at fostering emotional and social development.
- 2) the creation of partnerships between youth and adults.

Youth Onstage! is the newest of these programs. In its first year and a half of existence, it has produced:

- Crown Heights, which looks at the violence between the Black and Jewish communities of Crown Heights, Brooklyn.
- two Hip-Hop Cabarets, cultural hybrids that brings together the energy and creativity of hip-hop with the tradition of European political cab-

aret.

- Casper Hauser (A Language Game), a non-linear experimental piece that looks at the ways in which language can trap us and the ways in which we, as the creators of language, can make new meanings.
- Robin Hood: A Political Romance, a play that looks at the gap between the rich and the poor and what can be done about it. The play has a design staff in their early twenties and a young cast of 22 actors, singers and puppeteers.

The production of experimental political plays with young actors is only part of the Youth Onstage! mission. We eventually want to not only produce politically-engaged plays with young casts, but to produce plays written, directed and designed by young artists. As currently constituted, the American theatre is neither producing a new generation of politically engaged theatre artists, nor is it attracting and developing its artists from across America's diverse economic and cultural strata.

Among other things, Youth Onstage! was set up to address these shortcomings. In the summer of 2004 YO! launched Youth Onstage! Community Performance School to facilitate this development. The school provides an integrated set of performance and theatre courses free of charge to a student body composed primarily of working class "inner city" youth. Teaching these courses (which include voice, movement, character de-

velopment, improvisation, stage management and theatre history) on a voluntary basis are theatre professionals and teaching artists. Since its establishment, the casts of our shows are increasingly being drawn from students at the school.

Youth Onstage! and its sister programs in the All Stars Project are supplementary education programs, providing out of school learning experiences for young people, many of them from poor and working class backgrounds. More privileged youth have school newspapers, drama clubs, music and sports lessons, family trips to shows and museums, travel to other states and countries, etc. Many have spent the day at the office with their parents. These types of activities (supplementary education) are critical to development. Columbia University's Edmund Gordon suggests that they provide "human development capital" to children and young adults, teaching them, among other things, how things work in the world.

So part of what Youth Onstage! is designed to do is teach young adults how the theatre works. But it is also about changing how the theatre works, that is, it is also about having an impact on who creates theatre, who it is created for and how it relates to community and the market place. In the long term, the goal of the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School is to "give away the theatre" to those who normally would not have access to the necessary training. This "giving away," we feel, has the potential to change not only the lives of the students, but the very nature of theatre in America.

Thus Youth Onstage! is a number of things at once. It is a supplementary education program that is also political youth theatre that aims to have an impact on theatre in general and on the world. It is a youth theatre that doesn't do "plays for young people;" instead it stages controversial plays with adult content and concerns. It is, finally, a theatre whose major reason for existence is not theatre at all, but the development of the young people and adults involved, along with the communities of which they are a part.

The training we offer is not fundamentally different than what you might find at other conservatories and university acting programs. It is not that we believe that the theatre or our students will be transformed by a new acting technique or performance style. What is different is how the school has been created, its intimate relationship with communities throughout the New York area, and the composition of its student body. To get a handle on what the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School is doing, we have to take a look at its origins. While Youth Onstage! is less than two years old, it grew out of two well established grassroots cultural organizations that began some two decades ago, the All Stars Talent Show Network and the Castillo Theatre.

The All Stars Talent Show Network, which I have already mentioned, involves some 13,000 young people each year in neighborhood talent shows in New York City, Newark, New Jersey, Atlanta, Oakland (California) and Amsterdam (Holland). The Castillo Theatre produces experimental political theatre for a diverse audience drawn from neighborhoods throughout the New York metropolitan area. Neither project has ever taken government funds nor relied on corporate or foundation money. That, I believe, is fundamental to their ability to create and sustain new kinds of community-based cultural and educational activities. The All Stars Talent Show, the Castillo Theatre and their progeny, Youth Onstage! and the Development School for Youth, have been built through a process of community outreach and grassroots funding that has provided them with both a unique independence and a remarkably diverse audience and artist base drawn from all over the New York metropolitan area.

The founders of these programs—and I am one of those with roots in the Castillo Theatre—initially met as community organizers and political activists. Our primary interest then, as now, is human development, not aesthetics. We are looking for ways to provide opportunities for people and communities to grow culturally. We felt acutely the lack of participation in cultural

events by ordinary people and how little power they had over the production and distribution of culture. We began searching for ways to address that disempowerment.

The big question—which was political as well as economic—was how to fund these projects. This was the early 1980s; Ronald Reagan had just been elected president and was cutting back federal funding to the arts, particularly to community-based arts projects. As controversial political activists we weren't going to get that money.

More to the point, we didn't want that money or the dependency that came with it. We saw dozens of community-based theatres and other cultural projects that had been active in the 1970s evaporate virtually overnight as their National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and/or state council for the arts funds dried up. We were determined to establish cultural and educational projects that were independent of established institutions and so avoid the politicking that goes with dependence on such funding sources.

So we did what we, as community organizers, knew how to do; we set up tables on street corners and started talking to passers-by. When it got too cold on the street, we moved to the subway platforms. We set up a canvassing operation, going up and down halls in apartment buildings knocking on every door. On the weekends we rented cars and some of us went to the suburbs and canvassed. We worked neighborhoods all over the New York metropolitan area.

For the first decade or so of the All Stars' and Castillo's existence we ran this operation seven days a week. We were all volunteers and this street work was done in the evenings after our paying jobs and for at least eight hours on Saturdays and Sundays. We set ourselves quotas. We needed a certain amount of money to produce our season and so if we didn't, for example, make the amount of money needed on Saturday in eight hours, we stayed out on Sunday for ten, twelve or whatever it took.

After the first ten years, the All Stars and Castillo together had a database with names and

phone numbers of hundreds of thousands of people who had given ten dollars or more. So we gradually made the transition from being on the street all the time to running what is primarily a phone operation. Now we have thousands of supporters who give regularly. We still go out in the streets in the summer, but it is no longer our major means of outreach or funding.

Three important things emerged from this history:

- We have remained independent. None of the programs now under the umbrella of the All Stars Project Inc. has ever taken a penny of government money and has never been dependent on corporate or foundation financial support. It is this model of independent funding that allows Youth Onstage! to produce controversial plays and for its school to be free to all, regardless of their families' economic background. The spirit of volunteerism that built Castillo and the All Stars Talent Show Network still fuels all our work. The teachers at the school, for example, are all volunteers.
- Our street performance created the most diverse audience in New York City, most of them people who are not regular theatre-goers.
- An understanding of performance as a method of development, off stage as well as on, also emerged from our experiences on the street. This understanding emerged, at least in part, through the juxtaposition of our street work and our theatre work.

You see, some of us found this grassroots fundraising to be humiliating. Asking for money on the street, no matter how much we believed in the cause, felt, to some of us, like begging. For others (particularly men), it was difficult not to react when people on the street were dismissive or hurtful. We came to this work with various levels of social skill, and for some of us it was hard to even look a stranger in the eye, never mind engage them in a cultural/political conversation.

It gradually occurred to us that what we were doing on the street was a performance. On stage we were doing all sorts of odd things, de-

picting characters who were wildly different than ourselves. Why couldn't we do that on the street? Why did we have to "be ourselves," to be stuck in our already formed social roles, when organizing on the street? Couldn't we create characters that built on our friendliness, humor and passion for what we were building? We could and we did. We began to approach this fundraising work as a performance and that is what allowed us to sustain and develop it for so long.

It also provided us with a methodology. We have come to believe that performance might have nothing at all to do with being on the stage. We think you can perform at home, at work, at school, in any social setting. With the proper kind of support, people discover that they can, that we can, do things through performance that we never thought we could do. We are not merely who we are at a given moment in our lives. We are also who we are becoming. Growth, learning, change and transformation don't happen to us; we create them.

Supporting young people as they learn and grow, we have come to believe, involves helping them to "practice becoming," which is another way of saying "performing." Becoming involves doing what we don't know how to do, and doing what we don't know how to do involves being "other" than who we are. Each and every one of us did it in our infancy and early childhood—if we didn't do things we didn't know how to do, we wouldn't have grown up. Everyone has the capacity to do things in advance of ourselves, to go beyond ourselves, to be who and what we're not, to perform as other. Babies who cannot speak perform as speakers. With their caretakers, they create environments in which they play with and learn language. They and their families perform conversations and, through this ensemble creative activity, they become speakers. In coming to understand this dynamic, we were greatly aided by the observations and methodology of Lev Vygotsky, an early 20th Century Russian psychologist who noted that children develop by performing "a head taller than themselves."

This capacity to perform—to take "who

we are" and create something new—is the basis of the All Stars Project's programs. The ASP is oriented toward reinitiating young people's capacity to create new performances of themselves and of their communities. In theatrical language, participating in creating the performance "stage" and performing on it is how youth can go beyond themselves to create new experiences, skills, intellectual capacities, relationships, interests, emotions, hopes, goals and forms of community. Thus, performance, when expanded beyond the rarified atmosphere of the theatre can, we feel, be a means of social development and even transformation.

About six years ago we had reached a plateau. The Castillo Theatre was consistently filling its intimate 71-seat theatre in SoHo and the All Stars was expanding beyond New York to other cities across the country. At such a juncture, most non-profit organizations might settle for raising salaries or hiring more staff. However, given our origins as community organizers, that's not what we wanted to settle for. We wanted to find a way to reinvest what had been built, and it seemed to us that the best way to do that was to find a way to bring our community-based, politically-engaged theatre, performance, and supplementary education programs into the heart of New York's theatre district.

It took over five years of raising money, searching for the space, negotiating with the old owner and the city, but in November of 2003 we moved into a newly renovated performing arts and education complex at 543 West 42nd Street. The cost of buying and renovating the center was \$11.7 million, all raised on our own terms. The space is 31,000 square feet in size, contains three theaters, a café, rehearsal rooms (which also serve as classrooms for Youth Onstage!), costume and set shops, a video editing room and offices for the All Stars, the Development School for Youth, the Castillo Theatre and Youth Onstage!, all of which are now under the non-profit umbrella of the All Stars Project, Inc.

The move to 42nd Street has provided,

as we had anticipated, enormous challenges and opportunities. Our production work has tripled and our audiences (along with our expenses) have increased roughly ten-fold. The move also provided a platform that, due its location, was hard to ignore. Castillo, for example, in its first twenty years had never been reviewed in the *New York Times*. The first show on 42nd Street, the Youth Onstage! production of *Crown Heights*, got three television spots, and fifteen print articles, including a review in the *Times*. Since then, productions at our 42nd Street (both Castillo and YO!) have been reviewed fairly regularly in the *Gray Lady*.

In fact, it was the move to 42nd Street that created the conditions for the launch of Youth Onstage! and its community performance school. We now had the space for a second theatre company, for rehearsals of up to three plays at a time and for classrooms. Also, it is much easier for young people from the outer boroughs to reach Times Square by mass transit than to commute to our former downtown location.

Perhaps even more importantly, the 42nd Street location provided, as never before, a means of interfacing with theatre professionals and the theatre establishment. In a certain sense, we had brought our 20 years of grassroots organizing onto their turf and they began to respond almost immediately. At Castillo's 20th Anniversary Gala, which coincided with the move to 42nd Street, we were welcomed by representatives of the Schubert Organization, Disney Theatrical, the Theatre Communications Group and the Times Square Alliance.

The immediate impetus for the school was the *Crown Heights* production. Once we made the move to 42nd Street, we found that, among the 350 volunteers who are now active in various aspects of the operation, an increasing percentage came from the professional theatre world. As we worked to bring *Crown Heights* to fruition with a cast of 18, mostly untrained and inexperienced teenagers, some of these theatre professionals offered to help out. One, a voice teacher at the Atlantic Theatre Company, became

our voice coach and eventually played the one adult role in the play. Another actress, who had recently left the cast of Broadway's *Urinetown* due to a knee injury, became our singing coach. A veteran of the Gotham City Improv Company did improvisation workshops with the cast.

In the course of our three-month workshop and rehearsal period, it became clear that there were growing numbers of theatre professionals who wanted to volunteer their skills to teach young people and were hungry for the socially committed mission of Youth Onstage! Even before the eight-week run of *Crown Heights* was over and the rehearsals for the *Hip-Hop Cabaret* had begun, I started organizing an intensive Summer Theatre Institute that would bring together theatre pros and young people interested in the theatre.

The students for the Summer Theatre Institute—which would meet four days a week for five weeks in July and August—came from a number of sources. A few were veterans of the *Crown Heights* and *Hip-Hop Cabaret* casts. Some applied as a result of my talking to them at orientations and workshops of the All Stars Talent Show Network and the Development School for Youth. Others I had directed in plays at Baruch College and the Nuyorican Poets Café. I also did outreach at high schools and junior high schools where I had teacher or student contacts.

All potential students had to audition. They had to come prepared with one serious and one comic monologue. We weren't looking for talent *per se*; we were looking for young people who were serious about learning performance skills. The audition was a qualifier; if their monologues were memorized, they got in.

Twenty-one students were admitted to the first Summer Theatre Institute and sixteen remained at the end of the five weeks. They ranged in age from 13 to 23. The student body was almost exactly one-third white, one third Black and one-third Latino, reflecting, coincidentally, the demographics of New York City. They hailed from every borough except Staten Island, and virtually all came from working class backgrounds. Enroll-

ment for the Community Performance School's first fall semester was smaller and the average age was younger. However, the basic demographic and geographic mix hasn't changed. For the upcoming spring semester, due to my outreach to many more schools, we have a record 70 new applications as well as an increasing number of former students who want to return.

Meanwhile, I was being inundated with adults wanting to volunteer to teach at the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School. Most I had to turn down because they didn't have professional training or experience. They had good intentions but no performance or theatre skills to teach. Those who did have the required skills, didn't necessarily have any teaching experience, or any experience interacting with inner city youngsters. We had no intention of just turning over our young people to artists who didn't know how to relate to them or who didn't share our approach to performance as a developmental activity. We felt that it was important that our teachers were able to take advantage of our 20 years of youth organizing experience and prepared to embrace our non-competitive, ensemble working method. We also wanted them to approach performance as a developmental activity not solely as a rarified aesthetic activity. They also needed to at least feel comfortable with our political history and orientation.

To address these concerns, we set up a three-session training program with Dr. Lenora Fulani, the developmental psychologist who helped to found the All Stars and who now co-leads the Development School for Youth along with Pam Lewis, the director of youth programs for the All Stars Talent Show Network, and myself. These sessions were modeled on those of the Development School for Youth, in which Fulani and Lewis train business executives to lead workshops for inner city kids. The sessions with Fulani were followed by two study groups to discuss a paper, "Performance and Development," written specifically for our teachers-in-training to familiarize them with our understanding of performance as a developmental activity. These

workshops and study groups succeeded (mostly) in filtering out those who were not interested in the mission and methodology of Youth Onstage! and consolidating those who were. We now hold such training sessions for both new and returning teachers before the beginning of each semester.

The faculty for that first semester consisted of myself and:

- Robyn Simpson, an actress who had just returned from a production at Center Stage in Baltimore, who taught daily voice classes.
- Zenobia Shroff, an actress and dancer, who also works as a teaching artist in the public schools, who taught a daily movement class.
- Brian Mullin, a young playwright, dramaturg, director and actor with a directing degree from Yale, who had recently returned from Oxford, which he had attended as a Rhodes Scholar, with a Master's in Renaissance Literature. He taught a workshop in character development.
- Vicky Wallace, an actress with Castillo who now uses performance to teach English as a Second Language in New York's public schools. She and I taught a daily improv class. During these afternoon workshops the student body, working with me and other teachers, created a show, *The Performance of Life*, which was done for the public twice at the end of the semester.
- Jennifer Cummins, who has stage-managed at the Nuyorican Poets Café and other off-off Broadway venues, taught a weekly class in stage management. Also once a week, I taught the equivalent of an "Introduction to Theatre" class.

On Wednesday afternoons, when Broadway stages its midweek matinees, the class broke into groups to do street performance on the sidewalks of the theatre district under the direction of veteran Castillo street performers. (They didn't raise money, but talked to people about the launching of the school and invited them to buy tickets to *The Performance of Life*.)

• We also had weekly guests. Three very different examples were:

- Dr. Susan Massad, named one of the ten best doctors in New York City by *New York maga-*

zine, who talked about using performance to train medical residents.

- Diane Stiles, long time managing director of the Castillo Theatre.
- Ken Kennington, casting director for Disney's The Lion King.

During the fall and spring semesters, while the teaching staff has gone through some personnel changes, the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School has continued to offer this basic set of classes. The "Introduction to Theatre" class is held on Wednesday evenings after school and the performance training classes on Saturdays from 11:00 am to 4:30 pm. We were not able to do the street performance during the school year, and we decided against creating a play through improvisation because of the time it took away from classes, which were limited, by necessity, to twice a week. The fall and spring semesters last seven weeks.

The school was launched very quickly after the move to 42nd Street. However, the conditions for building a bridge between theatre people and working class kids had already been established by 20 years of combining theatre creation with community organizing. Mullin describes the bridge that the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School is creating by talking about the work his students did in class:

"All the students bring their own personal experiences, their cultural backgrounds, their neighborhoods with them. I'm always struck by how far they have to travel to get to Youth Onstage! It was a much longer ride than I would ever have to take. That's how I got this idea that they were bringing their neighborhoods into this space in the middle of Manhattan. In the work we do in Youth Onstage! I feel that they are often showing the rest of the class snippets of what their lives are like through the characters they have chosen to represent. It was almost like a sociological display.

"Certain characters became very vivid for me. I remember Brannon [from Flatbush, Brooklyn] playing the thug, Cathy [from Hunts Point

in the Bronx] doing "Big Luvu" eating his cheese doodles, ... Alexis Finch [from Harlem] with her brilliant portrayal of the male drug dealer. She really embodied him. I was seeing a social picture of New York that I don't know from direct experience. ... For me it was a real portrait of the city."

The experience of connecting across cultural and economic gulfs was expressed by some of the students as coming to understand community in a different way.

"Before [Youth Onstage!] community for me was just the people who live in your neighborhood," reflected 17-year-old Natasha Danielen, who lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "But I don't know anyone in my neighborhood really. We moved there three years ago and one of the few people I got to know, moved. Now I think that community isn't just who you live with, it's who you interact with, who you get along with."

16 year old Mary Holder, who lives in Canarsie, Brooklyn, agreed, adding: "I've learned that community doesn't necessarily mean people who are like you; it's people who you do something with."

The cross-cultural performance and sense of community that both the teachers and students consistently refer to, is one of the primary goals of the school. Marian Rich, an actress and comedian, who studied with Wilford Leach and Julie Bovasso, and spent three years with the Theatre for the New City before helping to found Castillo in the early 1980s, was one of the improv teachers during the fall semester. She puts it this way:

"Theatre is a highly socialized activity, yet the way it's organized in the commercial theatre is completely around the individual actor. I think our approach is much more collective. It's very much focused on creating with and for each other. We don't have any stars in our theatre. I myself as a performer have struggled with that so I really feel very gratified to

teach it—that this isn't really about you. If it's about you, it's not going to work. Every class is, at its core, about ensemble building.”

Achieving this sense of ensemble and community across the gulfs of culture and class was not always easy. One teacher in the fall semester, despite her coaching work with the cast of Crown Heights and her subsequent training with Fulani, became so frustrated by her inability to get the results she anticipated from her class that she walked out of the classroom, marched into my office and quit. Most of the other teachers worked harder to create the necessary environment.

“I came to realize my approach to describing things and engaging people was geared to college-educated actors and had to be changed,” said Mullin. “I had to think outside my jargon, change the way I talked and get down to core ideas. I learned so much from the untutored responses that a lot of the students would give, the questions they would have. I guess I assumed that they would know certain of the theatre’s conventions. For example, there’s the convention of continuing on a scene. You would often find them getting up there [to improvise a scene] and not knowing what to do and stopping and looking over at me for some kind of coaching and I would say, ‘No, just keep performing, keep going. Commit to the character.’”

Most of the teachers have reported remarkable success in connecting with their students.

“I have to say I was very gratified by the level of attention I was able to command in every class,” said Belinda Fevrier, an actress and former producer of an off-off Broadway theatre called Visionary Works. She took on the voice class in the fall semester after Simpson went to social work school. “They seemed very interested in every aspect of what I was teaching them. It gets very technical. It’s about diphthongs and breath control, a lot of anatomical work and exercise to get the body ready for proper speech. They ate up all of it. It was nothing they had encountered before.”

All the teachers reported that the students, most of whom had no previous training, were eager to learn the building blocks of performance and responded to being treated like professionals.

“I could tell from working with these kids that this was the first place they had experienced such a supportive environment in which to express themselves,” recalls Simpson. “At first the kids seemed most excited about getting up and expressing themselves for their peers...As the weeks went on, some of the kids seemed to be most interested in the discipline aspect of the theatre.”

For many of the students, this was the first time real demands were placed on them. “The thing I really liked is that the people who were directing this treated us like real professionals,” said 17-year-old Tomara Morgan, from East New York, Brooklyn. “No matter what our background and experience, they treated everyone like an actor and that’s what gave us the push to really want to do more and bring out what we had inside.”

Mullin, who has taught in all three semesters of the school and co-directed Casper Hauser, notes that bringing professional demands to working class kids of color is an extremely important part of the school’s work. “It impacts that we are taking them seriously,” he said. “Something is expected of them. They are expected to get here on time, to have things ready, and there are consequences when they don’t...Even the students that don’t have what it takes to go on to be actors are challenged by doing something hard. It gives them a place to take risks. Getting here on time, taking those long train trips [from the outer boroughs], planning all this around their school schedules, is very hard to do. They get a lot out of doing that, putting in that effort.”

Learning the discipline of the theatre within a supportive ensemble environment had an impact beyond the stage. It is no coincidence that the show created by the students of the Summer Theatre Institute was called *The Performance of Life* and consisted of a series of skits in which

the characters make conscious choices to try new performance in daily life. As Natasha Danielen, who was in Crown Heights as well as the Summer Institute, put it:

“With Youth Onstage! everyone was there because they wanted to be there. We were all working toward the same thing. We all knew we had to count on each other. If someone didn’t show up, it impacted on all of us. So a lot of trust developed. Trust that people would come through, trust that people wouldn’t laugh when we were doing something silly. That really helped a lot. It gave us a common ground, it gave me something to actually talk to people about. It’s helped even afterwards to talk to people I normally wouldn’t. ... Performance on stage really does help you refine your performance in day-to-day life.”

While the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School is not even a year old, its function as a conduit between the institution of the theatre and the lives of young people in New York’s working class and poor communities is already evident. Its impact on the young people, whether they eventually become theatre professionals or not, is, at least on an anecdotal level, also clear. Like all successful supplementary after-school programs, Youth Onstage! expands the experiential and cultural horizons of the young people involved. In particular, YO! puts demands on them to perform as professionals off stage as well as on and encourages them to take performance into their daily lives as a way of going beyond the limited social roles they have been offered.

While this impact is already evident on the relatively small number of students we have

involved so far, it is much too early to say anything concrete about YO!’s long term goal of having an impact on how and for whom theatre is done in this country. Yet the teachers of the Youth Onstage! Community Performance School also clearly hope that the development of their students as socially and politically engaged actors, performers and theatre-goers can effect the general future of the theatre.

“The theatre of today is in grave danger of becoming a strictly upper class medium, with little or no quality theatre available to the middle and working classes,” said Simpson. “A program like this could send creative people, with a perspective grounded in the realities of our society, into the theatre of the future. ... The theatre of the future could be a reflection of the wants and needs of the communities that really need the positive force of the theatre available to them. The fundamentals that these kids learn in the Youth Onstage! program could lay the groundwork for a different kind of theatre movement.”

“It’s exciting to think that we could help develop a generation of young people to be familiar with the theatre in a populist way that is broad in its appeal while sophisticated in its social engagement,” said Mullin. “They would impact not just on the theatre, but on society in general. It would get people engaged in civic performance as well as theatrical performance.”

“What is it that’s unique and special about theatre, about live performance and how can we keep developing that?” asked Rich. “We need to keep trying to answer these questions in the service of human beings developing. Youth Onstage!, as I understand it, is one attempt to find answers to those questions.”

Dan Friedman

Dr. Dan Friedman is the artistic director of Youth Onstage (YO!) and a founder and resident dramaturge of Castillo Theatre on 42nd Street in Manhattan’s theatre district. He has directed in a number of other venues, including La Mama E.T.C. and the Nuyorican Poets Café. Dan, who holds a doctorate in theatre history from the University of Wisconsin, has written about Castillo’s particular brand of political theatre in numerous scholarly and professional journals and is the co-editor of *Theatre for Working Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980*.