
HELLO
my name is
BOBBI


HELLO

At Play with Philadelphia Young Playwrights

Bringing Theater Arts to a New Generation

CARLA CHING

IT'S A COLD OCTOBER MORNING in a suburban Philadelphia school auditorium. Teaching artist and playwright Bobbi Block puts out a single chair, and asks the thirty or so teachers and teaching artists in the room to gather into a semi-circle. As we crowd around and crane our necks to see Bobbi, she asks for a volunteer to come up and sit in the chair. Nicole bounds up and Block instructs, "Nicole, you're going to do something very simple. You're very tired. And you're waiting for a bus." Without blinking, Nicole sits on the edge of the chair and puts her head in her hands. Laughter erupts from the group. Block says, "And that's a scene." I can feel the excited "Aha!" ripple through each of the participants. *Yes, of course. We have a character—Nicole. We have a setting—the bus stop. And we have a situation—Nicole is exhausted and desperately wants to sit down. This brief improv contains all the basic building blocks of a scene. How simple.*

"Not very interesting, though, right?" Block asks. We all have to agree. Nothing's happening yet. It's just a woman waiting for a bus. Block calls for a second volunteer. Cecilia comes up and Block asks her to sit in the chair. Now when Nicole strolls up to the bus stop, still exhausted and wanting to sit down, she finds the seat taken. One chair, two people. And what happens when two people want the same thing?

Block asks Cecilia and Nicole to act this out, pursuing their objectives—to sit in the chair. Nicole tries everything she can think of to get the seat. First, she simply asks. Then, she tries to make Cecilia feel guilty for causing her suffering, but the guilt-trip doesn't even get a passing glance from Cecilia. A change seems to come over Nicole's face, and the gloves come off. She pushes hard to get what she wants, using flattery, bribery, and threats, but still Cecilia holds her ground. Tension mounts and it feels like something very dangerous is about to happen. Block freezes the action and explains, "Nicole wants the chair. Cecilia is in her way. This is the definition of conflict." An audible murmur spreads across the room. "The struggle to get what one wants is dramatic action." *So, that's how you teach dramatic action. And we learned this simple lesson in ten minutes.*

Block's presentation is the kick-off event at the Philadelphia Young Playwrights' annual Artistic Team Retreat, where PYP's teaching artists and classroom teachers come to both teach and learn, setting the

Teaching Artist Bobbi Block facilitates a workshop at the PYP 2010 Artistic Team Retreat. Teaching artist Justin Jain, teacher Nicole Ritacco, and teaching artist Dwight Wilkins at the retreat. Photos by Paola Noguera.

Carla Ching *is currently a T&W fellow and a former English teacher at JHS 117, Little Red School House/Elisabeth Irwin High School, and Hunter College High School in New York City. She's been a teaching artist for the New Victory Theater, TDF, Lincoln Center Institute, The Public Theater, American Place Theater, and the Women's Project. She's also a playwright and proud member of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab, the Women's Project Lab, and artistic director of 2g.*

foundation for their residencies. As a theater teaching artist from New York City, I've heard about PYP's innovative school-based playwriting program, which serves K–12 students in the greater Philadelphia area. The program seeks to empower students by allowing them to tell their stories, and to introduce theater and theater arts to new and diverse constituencies. It is known not only for the work it does with students, but also for the strong emphasis it places on collaboration between its teaching artists and classroom teachers. I'm beginning to see how these legendary partnerships are formed.

The bus stop exercise we just did together is a "PYP classic," Block tells us, one of their bread and butter exercises. I can feel the excitement in the room. We all want to learn more.

Block's workshop is a succinct introduction to PYP's underlying philosophy on how teaching and learning happen. "A hallmark of PYP is teachers and TAs teaching each other, rather than us telling them 'this is how you do it'," says Amy Hodgdon, PYP's Director of Education and Programs. Glen Knapp, PYP's Executive Producing Director, takes this a step further when he describes the roles of teacher, teaching artist, and student as the three points of a triangle, where at any given moment during the playwriting process, "each participant can move around that triangle and be both a teacher and a student and acknowledge and respect each other as such."

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Work and Play

For the next exercise, former classroom teacher Cathy Dunn takes over and presents us with an assortment of forty suitcases, duffel bags, and knapsacks, inviting each of us to pick one and explore it. I pick a stuffed, worn backpack and as I pore over the bag, looking at it from every angle, I feel like I'm doing something dangerous—spying on someone else's life. And that is exactly what I'm meant to do. Dunn begins to ask us questions:

- *What's inside?*
- *Why is it important?*
- *Why is it not important at all?*
- *Who owns it?*
- *What is surprising or inappropriate in the bag?*
- *Does something inside baffle or scare you?*

Dunn asks us to consider these questions and write about the contents of the bag from the perspective of its owner. I imagine that inside my chosen backpack are fishnet stockings, makeup, two hooded sweatshirts, a leather jacket, two journals, a snow globe ring, a rosary, a gun, a puka shell necklace, purple socks, a photo album, medicine, and a map. I decide the owner's name is Bethany and everything she owns in the whole world is in this bag.

In the next phase of the exercise we are asked to choose an object from a selection of items Dunn has arranged on the floor. I pick something wrapped in newspaper, because I am intrigued by what is inside. When I peel back the paper I find a bottle of calamine lotion. I am told that this is the last item in Bethany's bag. It reminds me of the Tim O'Brien short story "The Things They Carried," where what each man carried tells the story of his life.

Cathy asks us to consider the same questions from before. I ask myself why Bethany might carry calamine lotion. Is it a medical condition? Is it just in case? Is this magic lotion to her? Armed with this information, I am now placed in a pair with Cecilia. Cathy asks me to tell the story of my object, as Bethany. I turn to Cecilia, and while I feel a little nervous improvising on my feet, I am able to assume the persona of Bethany and explain, "I have bad eczema, you know. Like, brought on by stress? And, being on the road and all,

I can't afford the meds to take care of it. But this keeps it from getting too bad. This makes it so I can sleep." Slowly, but surely, Bethany's voice begins to reveal itself and this surprises me. I also get to listen to Cecilia's character's story about her object and am impressed by the specificity of the back story she creates for her object—it turns out to be a family heirloom.

Dunn then asks us to write individually in answer to the following question: *What might this character do to get this object back if it was lost?* And it dawns on me: Bethany has become a flesh and blood character to me. I know her voice, her situation, and what she wants. With all those elements, I can write in her voice. I can write either a monologue or a scene for her because I have been taken through a step-by-step process to build a character.

I am floored later when Hodgdon tells me that this is a new exercise. "Every year, I come together with TAs and teachers to build the retreat. The suitcase exercise was born out of our collective brainstorming. Then, TAs and teachers take it into their classroom and make it their own, adapting it to their students' needs and to where they are in their playwriting journey." This method of developing and refining exercises reflects PYP's philosophy of giving teaching artists and teachers an integral role in the process, welcoming and incorporating their feedback every step of the way. "No exercise is presented to work forever," says Knapp. "We'll say, 'This is new. We want you to test it with us. It's not prescriptive, but a possible way that it might work with your students.'"

The work done on retreat has other clear benefits as well: "Retreat is based on the premise that you're learning by doing," adds Knapp. "TAs and teachers come to see that what we hope to achieve with our students is possible. We want them to come away from the retreat saying, "I understand how my students feel when learning this because I have also had to stare at the blank page and share my work in public."

Along with the engaging new exercises they learn at the retreat, teachers also are given a thick packet of resources designed to help them extend and add to the work done by the teaching artist. But perhaps most importantly, says Knapp, all the participants in the retreat come away with a renewed sense of mission. "Every young person is an artist," Knapp explains. "A teacher has to reorient her way of thinking so she's not working with a group of students, but moving individual creative artists along a pathway."

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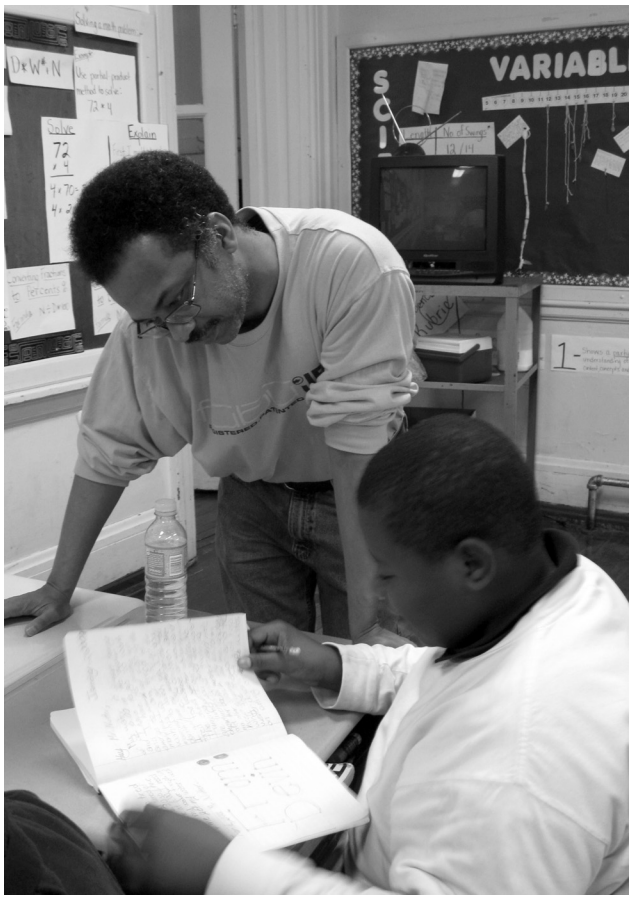
Bringing the Work to the Classroom

Carrying the excitement and engagement of the retreat into the classroom requires TAs and classroom teachers to continue the collaborative work they have started there. "Communication and collaboration before, during, and after each workshop are key," says Hodgdon.

For newly-formed artistic teams, the retreat sets the tone for a fruitful and hopefully ongoing conversation. TA Brandi Jeter spoke of using it as a launch pad for collaboration. "The classroom teacher I met at the PYP retreat let me know that her class had been exploring 'heroes'—what a hero is, what it takes to be one, etc. We decided that I would focus my lessons on that theme with the hope that students could make a more concrete connection."

Teachers and teaching artists alike find that their collaboration is deepened when they are able to work together for multiple residencies. TA Justin Jain spoke about his second-year partnership with Julie Lenard at Independence Charter School. "Julie and I were paired together as an artistic team last year and discovered that we have a great working relationship." Lenard chimed in, "I have a milder, quiet energy and he brings



Teaching Artist Dwight Wilkins works with a student in a Philadelphia elementary school during a PYP workshop. Photo courtesy of PYP.

a whole new vibe to my classroom. He makes the kids so incredibly comfortable with what they're doing. Our energies work really well together." Jain continued, "This year, we've made changes and revisions in our approach to teaching the course. One thing we both agreed would be beneficial for the students was a more rigorous and in-depth approach to the brainstorming process. As such, our first few workshops together are about getting the students excited about theater-making and activating their imaginations to come up with ideas that they can later revisit as they begin to craft their plays." PYP recognizes that this kind of dynamic enhances the classroom experience and tries to keep teaching artist/teacher teams together so that they can refine their practice over time.

As the residencies progress, teachers and TAs are encouraged to further alter their implementation of the playwriting curriculum to fit the needs of their students. Ruth Aichenbaum, a classroom teacher from William Penn Charter School who has worked with PYP for many years, says the modifications she's made over the years include teaching more playwriting craft herself in order to give the PYP teaching artist "time to hold longer, more productive revision conversations with each student."

In addition to check-ins with both TAs and teachers about program successes and challenges over the course of the residency, PYP also provides the artistic teams with opportunities for additional professional development, such as theater outings, meetings with playwrights, or workshops with members of Philadelphia's Pig Iron Theatre Company. "We're trying to deliver a program to students," says Knapp, "but there's a realization that we have to develop TAs and teachers and nurture them as well."

Student Response

Both TAs and teachers remark on the positive changes they see in their students when doing this work. Some talk about the process, the discipline, and the artistic rigor that their students learn. Lenard recalls that one of her favorite moments was when some professional actors came in to her class to act out one of her student's plays. "My student was having a lot of trouble continuing to write—she had been writing for two months (the longest she had ever spent on one project), and she was beginning to resent her play. Seeing the actors act out a scene immediately gave her some fresh ideas. When she suggested one, and the actors took the suggestion and improvised a scene, she told me she felt like a 'professional.'"

Teaching artist Dwight Wilkins recalls a student by the name of Kevin in West Philadelphia who was so excited by the program when he was in fifth grade that he wrote his own play over the summer going into sixth grade. "We had his class rehearse and perform his play as part of our end-of-year program at the school," says Wilkins. "His play also won third place in PYP's annual Playwriting Festival. This is an amazing feat considering that he wrote his play on his own over the summer."

Aichenbaum has seen similar student engagement

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over the years during her school's playwrights' festival—the culminating event of the residency. "All of the forty-four fifth-grade students gather on stage to talk to the audience about their playwriting experience," she tells me. "It's so clear from the students' stage presence, and the way they answer questions and discuss their plays and the writing process, that they have been transformed into confident, articulate writers and playwrights—and into talented actors, directors, set and costume designers, and publicists as well."

Sarah Mukhtar, an eighth-grade student in a PYP residency during the 2006–2007 school year, recalls that "as the year gradually advanced, I realized PYP was not just a class—PYP was about discovering who I am. I did not know who I was or what I was trying to say. I was an outsider to myself." Mukhtar's first play was about a girl who wanted to be a fashion designer, and when her teacher asked her whether the play was really about herself, Mukhtar says she was amazed. "How did she know this, this information sheltered deep inside of me? I realized then that the central character was me. Her troubles were my troubles. Her aspirations were my aspirations. These words were not from my brain. . . . The hundreds of [pages] I handed in and acted out were from my heart, my autobiography. . . . I was a completely renovated person. I now knew who I was, and what I was trying to say."

Perhaps it is experiences like this that draw PYP alums back to work with the organization. Tony Award-winning playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes, who had her first play produced at PYP when she was in high school, is now a board member and mentor to young students. Genne Murphy, a playwright who won first place in PYP's 1999 Playwriting Festival, is now the PYP General and Program Manager. "I get to be a part of the process from idea generation through full production," says Murphy of her ongoing work with PYP. "This keeps me rooted in playwriting as an art form and as a tool for social change—communicating with the larger world."

Knapp says that both these functions are essential to PYP's mission. "Being in a city where violence is daily in the news, there's no way that can't seep into our schools. In our recent year-end survey, close to eighty percent of students said that their playwriting work helped them to look at something from another person's point of view. That's the basis of my passion for this kind of work. When you can play out conflicts in a theater setting, and explore varying perspectives, there's an immediate respect for another voice. Art is humanizing. That's the argument I want to continue to make. At its core, it humanizes us . . . to build a more civil society." Whether the students go on to become professional playwrights or not is not really the point for PYP. The point is to light their imaginations, to make sure their voices are heard, and to help them learn to work collaboratively and see the world from other people's points of view. Both the students and the world around them can't help but be changed for the better by the experience.