

# SECTION 2

Reporting on the Arts and Lifestyle In and Around Brownstone Brooklyn

## Teens Find a Home on the Loft Stage

### And Get New Views on Lives In the Process

BY LAUREN ESSERMAN

"Theater technique is the same as life technique," shouts actress Bronwyn Rucker at the teen actors who are taking their final breaths before the scene begins. "You 'gotta know who you are and what you want. And that's really hard."

About a dozen teenagers attend the free and on-going theater workshops that Rucker offers two evenings a week in Park Slope in a program at 199 14th Street, funded by Good Shepherd Services. The activity takes place in the Loft, the home of the non-profit group, Leadership Opportunities For Teens, a place that is very much an open clubhouse for motivated teens.

Rucker's workshop is one of many activities at this location which have included, among other things, organized weekly men's and women's discussion groups, a series on cultural diversity, art projects, AIDS prevention workshops, weekend retreats, car washes, and a visit to City Hall to protest funding cuts. About 250 mostly minority teenagers use The Loft at some point each year: about 40 frequent it regularly; many of them daily. The teenagers are proud that they do most of the performing and membership recruitment themselves.

Rucker has been teaching the Meltdown Performing Arts workshops for three years with occasional funding from East New York Savings Bank, and at present teaching assistance from a young actor named Danny Carlton. Her workshops are among the more popular activities at The Loft. Although kids are free to come and go, many show up every week, and some have been attending regularly since the program began.

#### WHAT YOU SAW WAS REAL

"What you saw on stage there, that was real," said Mary Arbuio, age 17, who was recently introduced to the workshop by her boyfriend and schoolmate Miguel Silva, 18. The scene Mary refers to shows a lonely girl sitting on a park bench, talking about killing herself after her Jewish father called her boyfriend a "spic" and threw her out of the house for bringing him home.

"That was my life. Before I came here I was so angry and I didn't know where to put it." In the scene, a black friend, played by Rudy Williams, 24 (whose speech is somewhat impeded by cerebral palsy) is passing through the park and stops to comfort her.

"You know something? Your father sounds like somebody I know-my father," he says. "Every friend I brought to my house, my father tried to chase away." Rudy urges Mary to stand up against her father's racism and make him understand.

The scenes are mostly improvised. They



Bronwyn Rucker working out a scene with the members of the cast at The Loft. (Phoenix Photos by Rick Russo)

take shape gradually, tucked and pulled by continuous feedback from all members of the group over the course of repeated rehearsals. The topics originate in group discussions about what ever is on people's minds, ranging from safe sex to religion. Racism has clearly emerged as the central theme.

#### TRUST IS FINALLY BLOSSOMING

Rucker says she is amazed by how the trust that she has built over three years is finally blossoming. "For three years I couldn't get them to talk about issues like

racism. I think it was mostly because I'm white that nobody felt comfortable bringing it up. Mary has really been the catalyst for a lot of things in the group. She is incredibly brave. She's open to everything. She came in here talking about racism, and several people were in tears. Since then, a lot of things have opened up."

Privately, Rucker confesses that she is not always sure how far to push this openness. "They're just so open now. And sometimes I worry. I don't want it to be too painful for them."

While she works at tapping into what's really of concern to the kids, she is hesitant to unleash more raw emotion than she feels equipped to handle. Occasionally she'll pause between scenes to pull somebody back to the present if the drama seems to have hit a raw nerve. For instance, after a violent scene about a clash between a group of black and Hispanic students and a racist police officer that ended in a shooting, 14-year-old Damien Powell was visibly tense though silent.

"Damien, are you ok? Did that remind you of something?" Rucker asked.

"Yeah, My uncle," Damien said. Rucker explains later that Damien had once mentioned that his uncle had been subjected to a false arrest.

#### IT'S JUST GOOD THEATER

Rucker is a classically trained actress — not a drama therapist — but in her view, theater is a means of self-expression as much for the benefit of the actors as it is for the audience. "People think theater is about fantasy," she says. "They might call what I'm doing drama therapy. But I think it's just good theater."

In effect, what Rucker achieves in the workshops is to strike a delicate balance between teaching about theater and teaching about life. She tries to teach the kids to use acting techniques to maintain a formal distance from the roles they play, and helps them bring to life characters and scenes that go beyond their personal experience.

"Whassup, Jungle Fever!" says Rodney

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