

## **Interview with YPT's Executive Director Brigitte Moore and Artistic Director Nicole Jost**

### **What inspired YPT, after 17 years in existence, to create this book?**

**Brigitte:** This project was a long time coming. When I joined YPT in 2006, we had just begun the process of sorting and organizing the boxes and boxes of plays generated by our students since YPT founder Karen Zacarías taught her first playwriting class in 1995. In six years, we created a huge digital and hardcopy play library shelving hundreds of plays. We realized that these plays – and the students who dreamed them up – were the heart of what we do. And the plays were brilliant – some of the freshest, most insightful and imaginative writing any of us had ever read. They deserved to be shared with a wider audience.

At the same time as we were creating this library of plays, YPT was deluged with calls from teachers, parents arts organizations, and even schools in other states requesting YPT's arts-integrated learning model for their students.

We embarked on this publishing journey as a way to share the work of our students with a national audience, while providing teachers, parents and young writers with YPT playwriting workshops and tools that can be integrated into any student's learning experience. We hope this book inspires readers throughout the country to discover and share their own voices through playwriting.

### **What were your criteria for selecting which plays to include?**

**Brigitte:** All of the plays selected for the book were read and vetted by a professional artistic reading committee of YPT staff, students and theater artists from throughout the Washington, DC metro area. Each play was professionally produced by YPT at least once between 1995 and 2012. Over the past seventeen years, our students created far more amazing plays than could possibly fit in a single book, but we did our best to present a collection of plays that accurately reflects the diversity of student ages, backgrounds, interests and imaginations represented in our programming.

### **Why do you think this book will be so helpful to teachers, particularly those who don't teach writing or any field related to the arts?**

**Nicole:** YPT's curriculum is based on Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, which are used in 45 states and the District of Columbia. What we are teaching is the same content that is required in schools, it's only our approach that's different. We've found that the arts are a powerful tool for engaging students, particularly those who are struggling to take full advantage of their education. An arts approach can help students see *any* subject with fresh eyes, enlivening and enriching content by giving them the opportunity to put their own unique point of view into their study. We've found that playwriting can be a useful tool to teach history, social studies, science, even math. Our curriculum has been adapted to enable students to explore the history of Jamestown, the

U.S. Constitution, the life cycle of the butterfly...the possibilities are endless.

**What do you think non-teachers will take away from this book? (i.e. kids, parents, aspiring writers)**

**Nicole:** The 30 plays featured in this collection are incredible: by turns inspiring, hilarious and downright wacky. They make for a compelling read for anyone. Our hope is that people of all ages will be inspired by what our young playwrights have achieved.

**If you had to pick a favorite play, or one that most inspired you or blew you away, which one would it be and why?**

**Nicole:** I can't possibly pick one favorite, but one play that stands out is *Society Unjust* by Shannon Marshall. Shannon was one of my eleventh grade students at Bell Multicultural High School in 2010. She had very strong feelings about the rapid gentrification going on in her neighborhood. She was concerned about what was being lost in the wake of so much development. Her play gives voice to that serious issue in a very compelling, dramatic way. She really did her work as a playwright, creating rich and complex characters struggling against tough obstacles. Her use of language is very refined – she actually closes the play with an original poem. It's a great example of how our students are inspired by real-life events and experiences.

**Brigitte:** I love all the plays in this book but one that still floors me is *Money, Money, Money* by Paul McCoyer. Paul wrote the play when he was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and it is so layered and smart. On the surface, it's a laugh-out-loud hilarious play about two kids and a lemonade stand, but when you dig deeper, you see how it's actually this clever satire of capitalist culture.

**What do you love most about working for YPT?**

**Brigitte:** Leading this organization is my dream job. I'd been looking for a way to combine my passion for social impact with my art, and was impressed with YPT's ability to transform DC area classrooms using playwriting and theater. The work we do here is so pure and so inspiring, and I love telling people what I do for a living. I have a feeling that I'll look back on my time here and realize that it was the most important work I ever did.

**Nicole:** One of the mantras we have as a staff is "students at the center." We have a culture where everyone keeps our students in mind, whether we're teaching, having a staff meeting, writing grant proposals or filing paperwork. It's powerful to feel, at all times, that you are working for the good of DC area youth. Our students permeate our thoughts, and that helps us bring our best to the table. It's inspiring to come to work every day.

**What's been the most inspiring/encouraging thing you've heard from a young playwright?**

**Brigitte:** Every time I hear a student say, “YPT is the reason I am so passionate about writing,” or “YPT showed me that my ideas are important,” or, “My experience with YPT was the first time I felt like adults were really listening to me,” I am instantly reminded of why the work we do is so powerful.

**Can you relate an “aha” moment where you saw a dramatic turnaround in a student who thought he/she had no potential to be a playwright?**

**Nicole:** When we first met playwright Mariana Pavon Sanchez, she was struggling to learn English and, understandably, didn’t believe she could write an entire play in her second language. The “aha” moment for Mariana was when her teacher and teaching artist encouraged her to write about her own life. This is actually a very common phenomenon among our young playwrights. It was very powerful for Mariana to be able to speak her own truth. She was able to feel a sense of authority over her text because it was based in her own experience, which helped her unlock her writing potential. At the same time, I believe it was validating for her to see that others actually wanted to hear her story, that they found it interesting and dramatic. Mariana’s play, *Mariana’s Wish*, was selected for the 2010 *New Play Festival* and performed by a professional cast of actors on a professional stage. When YPT applied for the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, we included a DVD of this performance, and when we were awarded the honor by the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, they specifically asked if Mariana would speak at the award ceremony at the White House. She was the only student from any of the winning organizations who was asked to speak. And all that was based on the strength of her play, and her story.

**Did you learn anything new about the playwriting process from having put together this book?**

**Nicole:** I am constantly reminded that every student is unique as an artist, everyone has their own point of view and process. There’s no one way to be successful as a playwright. The play that Sophie ReVeal wrote, a satiric and hilarious retelling of *Alice in Wonderland*, is nothing like the play that Zainep Mahmoud wrote, an emotionally powerful story of different characters affected by the attacks of 9/11. These two young women’s voices have so much strength and artistry, and they are nothing alike. I often think of my own experience in the ***In-School Playwriting Program*** as a high school student. I created an alter ego character who had all these strengths that I lacked, and as an adult I can see that that was the play I needed to write at the time. So I think of our students in those terms as well: these are the plays they need to write at this moment in their lives.

**What impact do you think exposure to the arts can have on education?**

**Brigitte:** I firmly believe that the arts are a vital piece of any high-quality education, and there is decades-worth of published research to back up this claim. At YPT, we are not only developing the next generation of great playwrights, we are developing the next generation of great thinkers. Over the

past seventeen years, we have witnessed and measured the way a program like ours not only teaches literacy skills and engages students more deeply in their learning, but also empowers them with the confidence, creativity and critical thinking skills they need to be successful in school and beyond – whether they grow up to be artists, business leaders or neuroscientists. At YPT, we dream of a country – of a world – where the arts are a core part of every student’s education. It is in the spirit of this vision that we published *Write to Dream*.