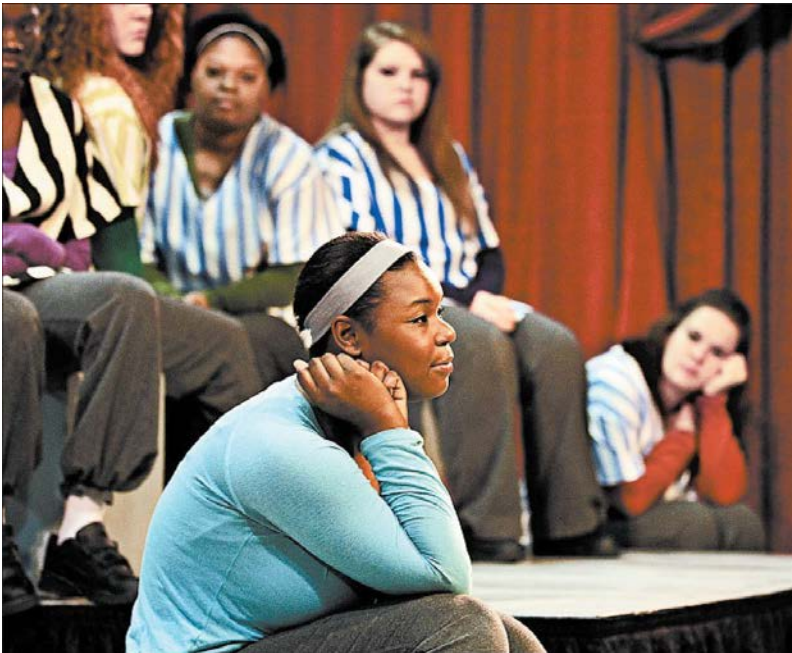


Reality onstage

Girls in custody find a conduit for their stories in a musical show, 'Finding Asia,' the result of months of hard work and self-discovery

By Melissa Harris | Tribune reporter

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Storycatchers Theatre works with girls at the Illinois Youth Center Warrenville to produce a musical based on their experiences. "Finding Asia" is their recent work.

The last time the girl felt safe, she was crouched inside her foster family's barn, talking to her best friend, a rooster she named Dommation. She was a child of alcoholics and a recent victim of a gang rape — and her story is one of at least a dozen woven together in a new musical staged inside the state's maximum-security facility for girls in Warrenville. The girls wrote and performed their stories under the direction of Storycatchers Theatre and its artistic director, Meade Palidofsky. Sharing their traumas on paper, then with each other and finally before an audience becomes a form of therapy. And gathering the courage to perform builds confidence.

"Her stories were so horrific," Palidofsky said of the girl who befriended the rooster. "And at a certain point, when you're putting these plays together, you're looking for something happy, and I just said, 'Did anything good ever happen to you?' So she wrote that story about the rooster."

Palidofsky, 62, started the Chicago-based theater company, originally named the Music Theatre Workshop, in 1984 with the aim of staging school musicals written by teens and based on their experiences.

After expanding the program to detention centers in 1990, the Chicago Foundation for Women pointed Palidofsky to the Illinois Youth Center Warrenville because of its openness to outside programming and because a girl's average stay there is six months or more, enough time to build trust.

Palidofsky soon discovered that most of the girls at the center had been victims of sexual abuse.

In a paper published this year in the *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, Palidofsky and her co-author, clinical psychologist Bradley Stolbach of the child trauma center at Chicago's La Rabida Children's Hospital, reprinted the story of a girl who participated in an early writing session:

"One night I woke up to see my Mom and a man in the kitchen ... I saw the man tying something around my mother's arm and then he grabbed the needle ... and then injected my Mom. I was only 5 ... I turned to my sister Tammy and pointed,

'What are they doing?' She looked scared and screamed, 'Ana, no!' "By the time I looked back, the man had already grabbed me ... His eyes were bloodshot and I could smell the alcohol on his breath as he leaned me over the couch. Then Tammy was shouting, 'Get off her!' She jumped on his back. He threw her to the ground like she was a doll. 'Is that what you want?' he yelled at (Tammy). 'Get off my sister!' I cried. It didn't do any good. He raped her. It seemed like forever. When he was done, he beat her again and again. And he spit on her.

"Tammy would be 23 now but I was told by my adopted Mom that she was beaten to death when she was 17 — by her boyfriend."

'Be louder than ever before'

Storycatchers' newest musical, "Finding Asia," is the story of a girl who is released into her grandmother's care from the Warrenville center. When an argument erupts over rules, Asia runs away with her pet rooster to meet her new boyfriend, whom she met on Facebook, in Chicago. It turns out the boyfriend lied about things. For starters, he's 35. And the party where she meets him turns violent.

Asia's friends and sister, Summer, set out in search of her. They find her locked in a closet at the party. And after witnessing so much violence there, Asia realizes that she must choose between high-risk, drug-fueled partying and life within the strict but safe confines of her grandmother's home. Asia chooses her family.

Storycatchers' Fabulous Females program at the Warrenville center involves five months of storytelling and staged readings; three months of playwriting, acting and singing classes; and three months of rehearsals, culminating in November performances.

"Finding Asia" lasts an hour with no intermission. That's 63 pages of memorized dialogue and song for girls so inexperienced that the production's lead actress had seen only one piece of theater in her life, "The Nutcracker." Palidofsky casts multiple understudies to account for girls who are released from the facility, or for those she ejects from the program for everything from lack of effort to assaulting another youth.

The 16-year-old from Peoria who played Asia is locked up for the fourth time, most recently for aggravated battery. (The Tribune is not naming the participants because they are juveniles who have been sentenced for offenses ranging from stabbings to a parole violation for running away.) This is her second completion of the Fabulous Females program among six attempts.



The cast and crew of "Finding Asia" cheer for a good show. The girls write, share and perform the piece, which becomes a form of therapy.

Pianist Myron Silberstein wrote the score and arranged it for himself and three musicians from the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, the training ensemble of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The musicians perform live from a bare riser as the teens and a few pros act in front of them. Ozivell Ecford, a Story-catchers teaching artist, plays the rooster.

This all occurs within Warrentville's recently dedicated Sheila Kalish Memorial Theatre, named after one of Storycatchers' early patrons. Its walls are actually burgundy curtains strung from the rafters of the gymnasium.

On this November day, the gym is freezing. The heater is not working. Audience members are wrapped in their coats waiting for the play to begin.

Backstage the girls are seated in a circle of plastic chairs in the library. Each girl is asked to share what she's wearing on the outside — "my costume," "a smile" — and on the inside — "nervous but excited."

Then they must share a goal for the performance. "Stay focused." "Be positive." "Be louder than ever before." "To not let anything put me down today."

The girl who plays Summer whispers her answers. Elizabeth Gray of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, who plays Summer's and Asia's grandmother in the musical, puts her arm around her.

"Today she is less nervous than yesterday," Gray explained to a reporter. "Yesterday she was to the point of tears and wasn't sure she was going to go on. ... Today, there's a lot of promotion, if you will. (There are) extra people coming in with cameras. That alarmed her, for someone who's such an introvert. 'What's going on?' 'Why are people taking pictures?' ... I explained the importance of sharing our work with those on the outside."

A lighter moment

It has to be said: Asia's Face-book boyfriend stabs her rooster near the end of the musical.

But the play does contain some humor. In one memorable scene, Asia's friend Amethyst "borrows" her grandfather's 1937 Oldsmobile to drive their friends to a party.

Two girls in this year's writing group had copped to stealing their mothers' cars. Palidofsky persuaded one to detail her methods.

And so, in the scene, Amethyst instructs her friends to put bags over their shoes and nets over their hair to avoid leaving any evidence in the car. Amethyst even orders Asia to put a hair net on her rooster.

Amethyst sings:

You wanna ride, you better abide. No smoking cigarettes. No perfume. Don't touch the windows. Keep it clean as a tomb! Put on these gloves.

Friend: Why? It isn't winter?

Amethyst: Maybe your finger will leave a splinter! Don't touch the seat belt. Don't move the seat. Watch the mirrors. No food or drink. No clothes or jewelry that could fall off. Don't touch the radio and please don't cough! Spit out the gum. No pictures, no evidence! Do not text, you're making me tense!

Imagine five girls and a rooster crammed into a 1937 Oldsmobile, wearing hairnets, gloves and bags over their shoes. It was more side-splitting than an episode of "I Love Lucy." And true. Well, almost. In real life the rooster wasn't brought along for the ride.

Progress, and a payoff

A 20-year-old who played multiple roles, including a heroin addict and a cop, said performing helped her build "a lot of trust" in herself. She said it also landed her "a family member" in Gray, who plays the grandmother in the musical, and taught her to "never judge someone you don't know."

The 17-year-old from Rockford who played the role of Amethyst said the play taught her patience and courage. She memorized her lines quickly but didn't want to let go of the script during rehearsals. Palidofsky said she had to literally pull the script out of her hands.

"I don't have patience at all," the teen said, a soft country twang coming through in her voice. "When you practice for the show, you can't just skip to your own part. I wanted to skip to my part and just get it over with. You have to go through the

whole show, and I have ADHD. I thought, I can't sit down for this long. So I had to learn to just sit there, stay calm and wait for my part."

She first performed in Fabulous Females at age 14.

"She used to get so mad and her face would be bright red," Palidofsky said, describing the girl's progress as "huge." The two of them grinned at each other.

The girl who played Amethyst was bubbly and welcoming and actually asked to be interviewed for this story. The girl who played Asia was the hardened girl one might expect.

"How long do you think this is going to take?" she asked as she sat down for an interview.

Palidofsky jumped in, explaining that two caseworkers from the mental health treatment facility where the girl previously resided had come to see the show. The three correspond constantly by letter, but institutional rules prevent the caseworkers from visiting her at Warrentonville.

Palidofsky called high-ranking juvenile justice officials to finagle an exception for "Finding Asia." Otherwise, she said, her lead actress would have had no one come to see her perform.

"A lot of the time, I just wanted to say, 'Forget it,' "the teen said of the musical. "Sometimes I feel like the girls don't take it seriously. Or I feel like I'm getting nagged at too much."

Does she think it's worth it now?

Yes, she said. Because she got to see her former caseworkers.

In other words, she got to see her family.



Elizabeth Gray, right, of the Chicago Symphony Chorus, who plays a role in the musical, works with a nervous performer before the show. The Fabulous Females program involves months of preparation.