

Grantee Name:

Childsplay, Inc.

Project Title

To support New Plays for Young Audiences Symposia

Project Progress and Successes

During the past year, Childsplay and the Indiana Repertory Theatre presented the first Write Now workshop and convening, a re-imagined version of the Bonderman Symposium. This first festival demonstrated significant success in maintaining the essential elements of the Bonderman while responding to the current needs of the Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) field.

The first Write Now was held in Tempe, Arizona in March 2013, with the workshops held from March 9 -- 13 and the national convening from March 14 -- 17, 2013. Four plays were selected from a national call for script submissions and developed over the course of a weeklong workshop with a director, dramaturge and actors. The selected scripts were: *The Smartest Girl in the World* by Miriam Gonzalez, *The Boy Who Loved Monsters* and *the Girl Who Loved Peas* by Jonathan Graham, *Birdsong* by Nicholas Kryah and *Bloom* by Andrew Morton. This diverse selection of scripts addressed a wide range of themes, including sibling rivalry and family secrets, the importance of imagination in a technology-driven world, a grandparent's memory loss, and urban gardening in an economically depressed inner-city. At the time of this report, three of the four plays are scheduled to be produced or workshopped by theatres across the country, demonstrating the success of this program in facilitating productions of new work on a national scale. Following the week of development, 86 theatre practitioners from around the country came to Tempe to join in conversations about the workshopped plays and about the state of new play development in TYA. In addition to readings of the plays, attendees shared in a series of town hall discussions, heard a welcome address from Doris Duke's Ben Cameron and participated in a plenary on new play development lead by Jason Loewith, former Executive Director of the National New Plays Network.

In our grant proposal, Childsplay and IRT identified four key goals for the re-imagined Symposium. At the halfway point of our program, having completed the first Write Now Festival, we have seen the following progress in meeting these goals:

- 1) To facilitate the development of new scripts that speak to the diverse range of childhood and family experiences from a contemporary perspective, including plays for elementary school aged audiences

During the reporting period, Write Now offered an intensive development period for four new scripts for young audiences. The four plays spoke to different age groups and reflected a wide range of themes that speak to the experience of being a child today. Three of these plays were intended for elementary school aged audiences and one script was developed for high school aged audiences. *The Smartest Girl in the World* by Miriam Gonzalez depicts a Latino family struggling with a child's serious illness, told from the perspective of his younger sister. *The Boy Who Loved Monsters* and *the Girl Who Loved Peas* plays with humor and a fantastical pea monster to explore imagination versus technology in a story for younger children and their families. *Birdsong* uses fantasy to create a story about

a young girl and her grandmother -- and what happens when her grandmother begins to lose her grip on reality. And Bloom, for high school audiences, explores the impact of economic recession on young people, set in a Flint, Michigan urban garden. While very different, each play reflected a unique experience of growing up in today's world that will resonate with young people across the country.

2) To engage a broader representation of the field in a conversation about new plays by convening traditional TYA theatres and theatres for adult audiences (LORTs, ensemble theatres, playwriting centers, etc.) at the Symposium and by disseminating the results of the Symposium through formalized presentations at other national gatherings and publications for the field.

The first Write Now event brought together 86 theatre practitioners from across the country together in conversation about new plays. In attendance were representatives from ten TYA companies, including the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis, Adventure Stage of Chicago and the Dallas Children's Theatre, eight LORT companies or companies that serve both adult and child audiences, including the Kennedy Center, La Jolla Playhouse and the Center Theatre Group, and eight universities, including Northwestern University, the University of Texas and Eastern Michigan University. There were playwrights, directors, producers, academics, performers, and educators in the room together, engaged in conversation about new plays for young audiences. This diverse group of participants helped to build a dynamic conversation over the course of the event. Childsplay and the IRT plan to continue the conversation about New Plays and Write Now through publications and presentations at national gatherings over the next year.

3) To create a stronger environment for developing new work by fostering collaborations between theatres and introducing new playwrights to the field.

Theatre practitioners from all over the country attended this event, bringing together many artists and administrators who might not have connected otherwise. The nature of the event led to a number of conversations between producers and artists that indicate future collaborations.

The fact that three of the plays featured in the first Write Now are being produced or workshopped by theatre companies this year speaks to the value of this type of program in fostering support for increased new play development through collaborations. Several attendees reported on their evaluations that they had begun conversations about future partnerships. Additional showcase readings and a Playwrights Slam introduced another 15 voices to the field, giving newer playwrights wide exposure to a variety of potential stakeholders. Childsplay has chosen to develop a play that was brought to our attention during the Playwrights Slam and other attendees expressed interest in these new works.

4) To create a common language of shared values about new work from perspectives of playwrights, producers, academia and schoolteachers.

One of the major successes of Write Now was the plenary, led by Jason Loewith (formerly with the National New Plays Network). During the plenary, our community of TYA practitioners including playwrights, directors, producers, performers, academics and educators came together to start building a common language of shared values around the development of new work for young people.

The dialogue that ensued demonstrated both the diversity in the room and the shared goals when it comes to supporting new theatre for young audiences. This conversation will be continued and refined at future convenings, as one of the goals to come out of the conversation was to establish a National New Plays Network specifically for TYA.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

One of the challenges Childsplay and IRT faced in producing the first Write Now Event was generating attendance to the convening. We had originally projected approximately 150 attendees at Write Now. With 86 people attending, this was still on par with previous Bonderman Symposia. We attribute this lower attendance rate to marketing a new event to the field while also trying to communicate the specifics of the convening. We also competed with another conference for TYA practitioners, One Theatre World, that was also held in the spring of 2013. We know that many people could not afford to attend both events, but had hoped to attract a broader industry wide contingent.

Another challenge has been finding ways to continue the conversation now that the event is over. The Write Now experience generated strong enthusiasm, conversation and planning among all attendees. But as everyone returns to their jobs after the end of the program, some of these plans have lost momentum. As organizations, Childsplay and IRT find ourselves facing the question: How do we continue to follow up on the conversations and actions that are instigated at this event? With two years between Write Now convenings, how do we make sure that we don't lose track of the important ideas, partnerships and collaborations that are cultivated? As we approach our planning phase for the 2015 event, we look forward to building in opportunities for follow up throughout the months between gatherings.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

We will be taking our learnings from the first Write Now into our planning phase of the second event, scheduled to be held in Indianapolis in 2015. While we anticipate that the first event will help to generate word of mouth and excitement about future Write Now gatherings, we will also begin marketing programs earlier and through a more widespread effort. Knowing that Write Now will always be held in the same year as One Theatre World, we have already begun to survey our attendees about ways in which we can mitigate the attendance loss and create incentives for attending both convenings. The long term goal is build a program that has relevance and value to theatre for young audiences practitioners, generating a sustaining long-term audience.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

Write Now Website

www.writenow.co

Publications

<http://www.kjzz.org/content/1303/write-now-makes-kids-critics>

<http://rakstagemom.wordpress.com/2012/05/08/new-plays-for-young-audiences/>

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Jenny Millinger
jmillinger@childsplayaz.org
(480) 921-5770