

Mapping the field of young playwrights programs in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The production of plays written by young people has been in practice at theatre companies and arts organizations in the United States for nearly forty years. However, while young playwrights programs have emerged across much of the country in the past decade, the field has not been adequately addressed in the literature. This paper addresses the scope and variety of young playwrights programming and compares the praxis of organizations engaged in the work.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 35 years, opportunities for young artists aged 18 and under have grown considerably in the United States. These young playwrights programs seek original scripts written by experienced and novice youth writers for adjudication and potential production performed by amateur and professional actors in front of a local or national audiences. Additionally, arts organizations engaged in this work have anthologized

select student pieces. Scholars made note of the young playwrights field as programs emerged in the 1980s (Swortzell, 1983; Tanzin, 1983) and marked the importance of the developing field (McCaslin, 2006; Swortzell, 2000). Organizations like the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) and Young Playwrights, Inc (YPI), have in the past produced online documents that encompassed the field, but these resources were limited by time and availability of information and an update was warranted.

Two years ago, I sought to literally map the field by creating an online resource that would readily provide information about and access to the variety of programs available to young playwrights across the United States. Beginning with a resource compiled for AATE, I conducted an internet search to gather details about the programs previously listed in addition to opportunities found through a Google Alert that gathered news about programs that included the search term: *young playwrights*. I contacted the administrators of these programs via email and asked them to verify or update the data via an online survey and the results were published in a Google map in April 2015. This map was updated one year later, and it is from this resource that I compiled the following information about how these programs define and carry out their work with young playwrights.

BACKGROUND

As American composer Stephen Sondheim tells the story, it began once upon a time, in the late 1970s, something “exhilarating” happened as he attended the theatre in London. The production was the annual Young Writers’ Play Competition at the Royal Court Theatre, about which he had previously read and tried to create a similar program in the United States as president of the Dramatists Guild. That attempt failed so severely that Sondheim lost hope in the project. However, seeing the young playwrights in action at the Royal Court brought him back to the States with a “renewed vigor” to try again (Sondheim, n.d.). To ensure the success of the program, Sondheim hired Gerald Chapman, the leader of the festival at the Royal Court Theatre. Under Chapman’s guidance, the National Young Playwrights Festival debuted in 1982 and surpassed the composer’s expectations (Sondheim, 1983, p. vi-vii).

The Festival sought original scripts from students aged 18 and younger from the New York City area, but received 732 scripts from

young people in 35 states (Chapman, 1983, p. 1). Submissions doubled the following year (Chapman, 1986, p. 11). According to Chapman (1983), the festival plays were “produced at the highest possible professional standards” at Circle Repertory Company, “a theatre with a recognized national reputation” (p. 1). This involved pairing young playwrights with a professional playwright who mentored the student through a five month process of development. After an initial script consultation and series of revisions with the mentor, the young playwrights arrived in New York for a reading of the script by professional actors before an invited audience. After the reading, the young playwrights worked on revisions of their scripts until they were ready for production at the festival (Chapman, 1986, p. 12-18).

The National Young Playwrights Festival was a groundbreaking event as Chapman (1986) would later recall: “Never before in this country had the work of a child or teenager been staged with such professional experience” (p. 8). Chapman’s (1983) rationale for this level of rigor was to match the depth of a child’s natural “status of their creativity” (p. 6) in creating a play and to emphasize the impact of that act of creation on each young writer (p. 7). It is important to note that while Chapman’s work would have a major impact on the field as many theatre companies looked to him for guidance in the development of their own young playwrights programs, his was not the first to produce plays written by American youth. The Marilyn Bianchi Kids’ Playwriting Festival, produced by the Dobama Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, predates Chapman by four years having been in operation since 1978 with a mission to “[encourage] kids to celebrate the fun and joy of live theatre” (Dobama Theatre, n.d.). Chapman similarly sought to capture the joy of theatre by introducing young people to playwriting via acting, which he recognized as being inherent in the ways that children played. He also saw the professional productions of the Young Playwrights Festival as “a clarion call to the theatre community” (1983, p. 7) meant to inspire them to take up the work of young writers with the same professionalism as afford to adult writers to provide children with a venue that both encourages their personal growth and creates a forum dedicated to their special desires and needs; “an alternative structure to children’s theatre as a way of making the theatre real and alive for children, a place of their own” (p. 9). In addition, Chapman expressed that the encouragement of young artists could only benefit the future life of the art (p. 10).

Chapman’s philosophies about young playwrights’ work and his

productions done with the Guild prompted a number of regional theatres and artists within the United States to seek out his input in developing their own regional programs (Janney and Galbraith-Jones, 1986; Philadelphia Young Playwrights, n.d.). Within a few years of the first national Young Playwrights Festival, similar series sprouted in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, San Diego, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. Additionally during this time, the Guild's program was incorporated into a new play development company focused on student-written work named Young Playwrights, Inc. (YPI), which would produce the national competition for years to come.

Educational theatre scholars quickly took note of the success and impact of the program at Young Playwrights, Inc. In an article about the first festival, Tanzin (1983) echoes Chapman's claim by noting how:

The Young Playwrights' Festival [is] designed, not only to help young playwrights in learning their craft, but to take them seriously. It is a way of saying that there are adults who believe in what young people have to say about their lives. [...] By giving young writers an opportunity to express their fears, concerns, fantasies and joys through theatre, we are enriching their lives as well as our own. As one adult playwright in the project said, 'I wish they had this program when I was a kid. (p. 11)

Swartzell (1983) also observed the success of the program remarking that:

The majority demonstrated that these are genuine plays by true dramatists with an exciting range of subjects and important concerns. Their works are of interest to general audiences from Off-Broadway to the gang on the local street corner. We applaud Gerald Chapman and the Dramatists Guild for this splendid beginning and for proving the Young Playwrights Festival can happen here. (p. 26)

More than a decade later, Swartzell (2000) would return to the topic of the Young Playwrights Festival and consider its impact on theatre for young audiences by suggesting that plays written by children may offer professional playwrights with examples of what young people would most like to see on stage (pp. 685-86). In the eighth edition of her seminal work, *Creative Drama in the Classroom and Beyond*, McCaslin

(2006) lauds the growth of young playwrights programs and the recognition of children's writing as literature (pp. 270-71). Additionally, she suggests that, "It is too soon to tell whether or not this is a trend, but some unusual opportunities have been made available to both elementary and secondary school students and their teachers to learn more about this form of writing" (p. 270).

The growth of the field demonstrates that programs for young playwrights are more than a trend, but an established field within the larger educational theatre community. While data on the founding years of programs listed on the Young Playwrights Map are incomplete, it is estimated that a little more than half of these program were created in the past 15 years (DeVivo, 2015).¹ Early programs derived their structures and procedures from Chapman's model at YPI, but is that model exclusive to the field or have these newer programs developed other means? How do the script solicitation, adjudication, selection and performance processes of these programs compare with one another? How are youth engaged in the process of rehearsing a script? Is there a common definition for young playwrights programs across the United States? To better understand the field I first turned to existing online resources including a list of playwriting opportunities for high school students published by the AATE Playwriting Network on their website. The document, which is no longer available online, had not been updated for at least a decade.

Using the AATE document as a guide, I conducted an internet search for updated information about each listed program. I also created a Google Alert for news about any program that used the term: *young playwrights*. Connections to these programs were made via email and Twitter where the hashtag *#youngplaywrights* proved particularly useful in gathering data and interest. My plan was to publish a list of young playwrights programs, but after speaking with some of the student writers in the New Jersey Young Playwrights Festival, I realized that the information might be better used in a more interactive and visually-pleasing medium. Using Google Maps, I uploaded the details about each program for young writers: company name, program name, age and location restrictions for eligibility, submission deadline, performance publication deadlines, contact information, and a link to the program website. After months of searching and data entry, the first Young

¹ This is current as of September 2016.

Playwrights Map went live in April of 2015. After the initial publication, I contacted each organization listed on the map and asked a program administrator to confirm or update the data provided. The map has been updated twice since it debuted: once in the fall of 2015, and again in April of 2016. At that time the map included 69 individual organizations offering playwriting programs for youth across 33 states.²

Using the April 2016 update of the map, I gathered information from the website of each listed program in an effort to survey the field. I took particular interest in discovering how the programs define the scope and goals of a young playwrights program, how scripts are created by or collected from young writers, the process of selecting plays for presentation or publication, and how those plays are publicly presented. What follows are brief summaries of my findings.

DEFINING A YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS PROGRAM

When creating the map, I found that the ways in which organizations approach the work created by young playwrights extend from the same tenets Chapman expressed, but with varying degrees of involvement by youth throughout the rehearsal and production processes. However, the definition of a young playwrights program, as framed by criteria I set forth when creating the map, includes any opportunity for youth ages 18 and younger to write and submit an original theatrical script for production and/or publication by an arts organization.³ There is a rich history of playwriting in the classroom that requires further consideration (McCaslin, 2006, p. 270), but for the purpose of the map, which is a resource for young writers seeking opportunities, those classroom programs cannot be included here.

Theatre companies with young playwrights programs are more likely to produce the work through an education/outreach department than as part of the production season. However, there are four companies dedicated to producing only youth-written work: Young Playwrights, Inc., Philadelphia Young Playwrights, Young Playwrights Theatre (Washington, DC), and Semicolon Theatre (New York). Semicolon Theatre is further differentiated as an organization founded

² Individual programs have been added through July 2016 as I have become aware of them; however, a formal update of all map data will not occur again until January 2017.

³ Omitted from this definition are school- or classroom-based programs that are not affiliated with an outside organization.

and administered by two young people who created their own company after participating in the national festival produced by Young Playwrights, Inc. (Semicolon Theatre Company, n.d.).

SCRIPT SUBMISSIONS AND SELECTION

Competition-style adjudication of student written work is a hallmark of most young playwrights programs. Scripts received via an open call for submissions are judged by staff members and/or artists from these organizations. Most programs provide written feedback to playwrights whether or not the script is selected for presentation.

Most young playwrights programs use age range and geographic location limitations for submission. Age ranges vary widely with some programs focused on specific grade levels or groups, whereas, according to the theatres' websites, organizations like the Dobama Theatre, [CenterStage](#), [Florida Studio Theatre](#), and the [Prescott Center for the Arts](#), accept plays from students in grades Kindergarten through 12. The most recent call for submissions from the Playwrights Project (San Diego) calls for scripts from "Californians under the age of 19 as of June 1", though, it is unclear if there is a minimum age requirement (Playwrights Project, n.d.).

Organizations like ACT: A Contemporary Theatre (Seattle), Boston Playwrights' Theatre, and The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis hold a modified contest of plays from local schools that participated in the theatre's writing residencies (ACT: A Contemporary Theatre, n.d.; Boston Playwrights' Theatre, n.d.; Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, n.d.). Similarly, the Madison Young Playwrights Program run by Writers Theatre of New Jersey offers free after-school playwriting residencies to students in their local community schools (Writers Theatre, n.d.).⁴

Workshops and classes are offered by a number of organizations to help students generate ideas, learn playscript format, and further develop their stories. These programs can be offered as a courtesy, or as a class with a fee. There are a few organizations that require attendance at a workshop before a student can submit a play. The Coterie Theatre (Kansas City) requires students to apply for admittance into the Young Playwrights Roundtable where scripts are written and

⁴ While those plays are submitted to the statewide New Jersey Young Playwrights Festival, there are also in-school presentations produced by the theatre.

developed under the direction of theatre staff (Coterie Theatre, n.d.). Similar participation is required of playwrights who participate in the Young Playwrights Workshop at Young Playwrights Theatre and in the Youth Company (at MCC Theatre). The difference here is that Workshop and Company members perform the work created by their peers whereas at Coterie, the actors are professionals (MCC Theatre, n.d.; Young Playwrights Theatre, n.d.).

While most young playwrights programs solicit scripts from individual writers, new projects like Young Playwrights for Change, a partner program of TYA/USA and the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) receives plays written by middle school students via member organizations from the United States and Canada. According to the program rules, member companies from AATE and TYA/USA, including any associated non-profit organizations, host a local playwriting competition for students in sixth through eighth grades and nominates one play for consideration in the national competition (TYA/USA Assitej, n.d.). This arrangement is unique to the prevailing model, but has roots in the early history of Young Playwrights, Inc. when independent regional programs like the New Jersey Young Playwrights Festival (NJYPF) had previously forwarded local scripts to YPI's national competition (NJ Teen Arts, 1985).⁵ It is not clear how many other regional young playwrights programs may have forwarded scripts to YPI in the past; similarly, it is not clear how many do so now. However, the practice is reemerging. This method is also employed by Curious Theatre Company in Denver, Colorado which accepts up to six plays from partner organizations for the annual Curious New Voices National Collective. Playwrights accepted into the Collective spend one week in residence at Curious Theatre Company and participate in a series of workshops and discussions that are meant to spark insights into and revisions of the original script. Each play is given a staged reading by professional actors at the end of the week intensive (Curious Theatre Company, n.d.).

In 2014 and 2015, Philadelphia Young Playwrights was a partner organization for the National Collective at Curious Theatre Company. In addition, Philadelphia Young Playwrights (PYP) conducted its own intensive workshop called the Paula Vogel Mentors Project, which ran for three seasons. Each year, five young playwrights are paired with

⁵ Forwarding NJYPF scripts to the national competition is only mentioned in the 1985 report. The reports from 1984 and 1986 do not mention this practice.

professional playwrights who guide the young writers through the development of an original work over the course of a year. Public readings of the playwrights' works in progress are given at the midway point of the residency; a culminating reading of the finished work is then presented in June. In the first two seasons, young playwrights were selected from local schools. For 2016, PYP requested nominations of writers from other young playwrights programs within the region. The Paula Vogel Mentor Project is curated by Quiara Alegría Hudes, a Pulitzer Prize winning and Tony nominated playwright and alumna of the Philadelphia program. The Project completed its final season in 2016 (Philadelphia Young Playwrights, "Paula Vogel Mentors Project," n.d.). This year, PYP will conduct a new program in which selected young playwrights will work on a new play in-residence at the theatre. This program, which is similar in structure to the Vogel Mentors Project, is the first of its kind and will provide unprecedented long-term access to the resources and benefits of a professional theatre company (Philadelphia Young Playwrights, "Become a Resident Playwright!" n.d.).

DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Two common production elements are evident in the programs included on the Map. First, playwrights often receive some kind of mentorship prior to and/or during the rehearsal period. Frequently, young playwrights are paired with a theatre professional who prepares the writer for the rehearsal process. This may be a playwright, but the young writer may also be paired with a director or dramaturg, or, in some cases, a combination of the three. It is not clear from the information provided by young playwrights programs as to how often the young playwrights and mentors meet prior to rehearsal, nor how involved the playwrights may be during rehearsal. The Texas Young Playwrights Exchange at Alley Theatre in Houston specifically mentions that students will "develop their dramatic writing skills through online mentorship with a professional playwright" (Alley Theatre, n.d.). The details of online mentorship are unclear, but they are of interest as the program at Alley Theatre is the only one to specifically mention this work being done digitally.

Second, plays written by young people are most often produced as readings or staged readings performed by professional actors. A few exceptions to this model include the youth companies previously

discussed, as well as programs at Philadelphia Young Playwrights, Syracuse Stage, and Michigan State University's Wharton Center for the Performing Arts, each of which employ actors from affiliated collegiate theatre programs. Moreover, programs such as the Arkansas Young Playwrights Competition and Kitchen Dog Theater's Playwrights Under Process (PUP Fest) cast high school students.

Whether performed by students or professionals, the plays written by young playwrights are described by the producing organizations as readings or staged readings, in which scripts are prominently featured in the actors' hands during performance. Full-scale productions of young playwrights' works are rare. Only [Florida Studio Theatre](#), [The Blank Theatre Company](#) (Los Angeles), and [Pendragon Theatre](#) (Lake Placid) mentioned full productions on their websites.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of young playwrights programs across the United States over the last 35 years is evidence that Chapman's clarion call was resoundingly received. From the first young playwrights programs at Dobama Theatre and Young Playwrights, Inc. to the newly founded playwriting festival at the Theatre of Greater Lafayette (Indiana), the primary focus of a young playwrights program in the United States is the development of young writers' scripts through professional mentorship and public production. Each organization maintains an individual approach to soliciting, developing, and presenting these plays, however, the sense of importance about the work across the field adheres to Chapman's (1983) original goals for engaging this work. It can be easy to marginalize young writers because of their age, but placing young people into a creative process equitable to those experienced by professional playwrights emphasizes the value of their work and seeds the field for future development. These programs expose young people to the rigors of writing and developing a play while emphasizing the importance of the playwright within the future of theatre making.

Collecting, adjudicating, and publicly reading student-written plays requires a minimal amount of resources from an organization that seeks to engage youth and their families within the artform. This work is greatly eased by digital means, which I foresee bringing a greater amount of opportunities to young writers everywhere. This is particularly true when the definition of a young playwrights program is expanded to include

opportunities for student writers within a school setting. In the past two years, I have spoken with an increased number of teachers and organizers who are interested in creating young playwrights programs within their classrooms, schools, and larger networks. These requests are particularly interesting when considering their timing coincides with the implementation of PARCC standardized testing in New Jersey public schools. I am left to wonder how these phenomenon might be linked and what these requests may mean for the future of standardized testing, if anything?

Looking away from schools and into the professional field, it would be beneficial to study how young playwrights programs have impacted our current and future existence. Google Alerts often bring me news of adult playwrights whose biographies list their past participation in a young playwrights program; however, it is not clear how prevalent this youth experience may be among today's professional playwrights. As such, a study of the frequency with which this occurs would be highly beneficial. Of equal interest are the potential connections between formative experiences in a young playwrights program and professional work in theatre for young audiences. That question is of particular interest in light of Chapman's (1983) idea that young playwrights programs may help create a "real and alive" place for children (p. 9), a concept that Swortzell (2000) echoes by stating that young writer's work may offer a glimpse into the kind of plays young audiences want to see on stage. In this light, it was surprising to see very few theatre for young audiences (TYA) companies engaged in young playwrights programs. Young Playwrights for Change marks a significant movement toward joining these two types of youth-drive programs. If more TYA companies would pick up the mantle of young playwrights work, we may then gain a better picture of how each impacts the other.

SUGGESTED CITATION

DeVivo, J. (2016). Mapping the field of young playwrights programs in the United States. *Arts Praxis*, 3, 100-112.

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