

BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

NY Students Look to FutureStage

By Lewis Beale

Raquel Almazán vividly remembers her “gotcha” moment — the instant she realized the students she had been teaching at a Bronx high school had finally caught on to the nuances of dramatic structure. “One of the students was reading a play she had written, in which the two lead roles die in a car crash and then two policemen show up played by the same actors,” said Almazán, a temporary dramatic-writing teacher at Adlai E. Stevenson High School, which is part of the Fidelity FutureStage program. “And the kids went, ‘Wow.’ And they started using words like ‘foreshadowing’ and ‘There’s a parallel world here.’ And all I could think was, Wow, they get it.”

This is exactly what Fidelity FutureStage set out to do: provide junior high and high school students the chance to write and stage their own plays, as well as learn about the theatre from leading professionals and by seeing Broadway productions. The program, which started in November, includes 600 students in 10 New York City schools, from Stevenson in the Bronx to Hillcrest High School in Jamaica, Queens. As a bonus, 10 of the budding playwrights will see their short works produced at a gala to be held tonight and Wednesday at Off-Broadway’s New World Stages in Manhattan.

FutureStage is part of a larger initiative called Inspire the Future, which began in 2003 and has donated musical instruments to students around the country. A spokesperson said FutureStage may be expanded to other cities, but nothing has been decided yet.

“This program is different from anything we’ve done in the past, because we don’t usually have the opportunity to take the kids to Broadway and perform in an Off-Broadway theatre,” said Alice Krieger, co-founder of LEAP (Learning Through an Expanded Arts Program), one of the organizations working with FutureStage. “But what’s really exciting

is that the kids involved in the winning plays, those kids are really turned around. The fact they’re going to be performing for so many people has made them really excited about going to school.”

LEAP is partnered in FutureStage with Fidelity Investments, a large financial services firm that has sponsored shows such as the recent Broadway revival of *Sweeney Todd*, and the Frankel/Baruch/Viertel/Routh Group, producers of *Hairspray*, *Stomp, Company*, and many other theatrical hits. The idea came from Steven P. Akin, president of Fidelity Personal Investments, who wanted to do something educational to promote theatre. They approached LEAP, which has a 30-year history of using the arts to teach academic subjects.

The Frankel/Baruch/Viertel/Routh Group provided the students with free tickets to a number of Broadway shows and also helped recruit well-known professionals such as composer Alan Menken (*Little Shop of Horrors*) and director-choreographers Susan Stroman (*The Producers*) and Kathleen Marshall (*The Pajama Game*), who lectured at the various schools.

Although many of the students who participated were already in drama or creative writing classes, “very few had gone to a Broadway show,” said Almazán, who has taught 50 students at Stevenson. “Most of the kids have very little experience with theatre,” Krieger added. “They haven’t been to the theatre or written a play. They’re starting from scratch.”

The program began with weekly classes in playwriting, then progressed to lessons in production and set and costume design, as well as guest lectures from Stroman and others. Each student was required to write a 10-minute play, and some of them turned out to be “natural storytellers,” Almazán said. “The most exciting thing was working with the creative-writing kids, because they were really disciplined, which lent itself to [multiple]

drafts. They understood the concept of rewriting.”

Eventually instructors chose six semifinalists from each class, and LEAP and Fidelity chose the 10 finalists. Overall, the plays’ subject matter runs the gamut “from family issues to...a play about the Mets,” Krieger said. “A lot of the plays deal with deciding what is the right thing to do. These are real-life choices in their lives.”

That’s certainly the case with Cristina Colon, a 17-year-old senior at Stevenson, whose play, *In My Shoes*, is one of the 10 finalists. It’s about a girl who comes out to her family and is then shunned by other students. Eventually she is beaten to death, but she comes back to life and gives an affecting monologue about gay-bashing. Colon was moved to write about the subject after attending a school class on homophobia. “I know how hard it is,” she said. “I could understand because I’m a lesbian.”

Almazán said Colon’s play stood out not only because it was structurally sound, but because it dealt with important issues and even had an interesting character arc. “Her structure was stronger than the other plays [in class],” said Almazán, “and she really beat everyone out in terms of content as well. Her play wasn’t just about gay activism; it was about the structure of the Latin family and how the character transformed. In terms of content, she wasn’t afraid.”

FutureStage is not just about the big winners, though. All the plays written by participating students are set to be performed at their respective school auditoriums. Krieger would like the program to be expanded, both in the number of working sessions and the amount of theatre the students see. But, she added, “the whole thing for me is watching these kids mature and grow through this program.”

The student plays are for invited guests only. To learn more about LEAP, go to www.leapnyc.org.