



Photo by Nicole DeLawder.

# The directors' apprentices

BY DANA GAVIN | WEEKEND@THEHUDSONVALLEYNEWS.COM

Audiences in the Hudson Valley know that Powerhouse, the collaboration between Vassar College and New York Stage and Film, features both lauded professional playwrights and actors bringing new work to life.

What may go slightly under the radar is an equally rigorous program dedicated to cultivating the next generation of actors, directors, writers and designers. The Powerhouse Theater Apprentice Training Program accepts young people from around the world, and offers them classes in acting, voice, movement, directing, and Soundpainting; workshops to learn and create performances and the chance to see all of the great live theater in the evening.

The 2009 season featured the work of Duncan Sheik; playwrights Deborah Assimwe, Lewis Black, Beth Henley, John Patrick Shanley and Cheri Steinkellner; directors Thomas Kail, Anthony Luciano, Emily Mendelsohn, Erica Schmidt and Tomi Tsunoda; and featured actors Sandy Binion, Drew Cortese, Michael Early and Deirdre O'Connell.

This year, I sat down with six apprentices for a chat in the Jade Parlor in the main building and asked them to describe their experiences after four intensive weeks of learning and creating.

Josh Joya was an acting apprentice in 2008, but after attending a separate playwriting program with 52nd Street Project in New York City, he was intrigued: "I wanted to develop that muscle, so I came back this year as a writing apprentice."

Faculty, such as Tom Pacio, are instrumental in recruiting talented artists who may be unaware of the apprenticeship program. Nineteen-year-old Sarah Ivins, part of the newly created design program, met Pacio at Pitt (University of Pittsburgh), where Pacio was completing his graduate studies: "He painted a pretty awesome picture of what this was like and who would be here and the opportunities to hone my skills as a designer, as well as an actor and director even, because I am in the classes with the directors. It seemed like an opportunity I shouldn't pass up!"

Actor Christopher Adams-Cohen, 18, came from California to participate. "I was looking for a program that would give me an idea of what it would be like to be a part of a collaborative company," he said. "And I've never experienced anything like this before. It's a great way to get to know myself as an artist before I go to college (at UCLA)."

"My interest in performing arts began with dance, though my interests have definitely shifted into theater," said Leslie Ann Roth of Oakhill, Virginia, who currently attends Amherst College. "I was really looking for a summer experience would be totally immersive. What we get here is a really unique fusion of a collaborative company and a conservatory regime; we learn to condition our instrument and keep ourselves healthy."

"Making sure you take the time for yourself, balancing the social aspects (is important)," said Victoria Santos, of 2009 writing apprentice who returned to work in the box office.

"The focus is all on the work," said Adams-Cohen.

"Zach (Staszweski) and I are shadowing John Patrick Shanley," said Joya, "and just to see that process is (amazing). He's directing and he wrote it, so he has to be the playwright at the table reading, then the director when they are on their feet, and the dramaturg throughout the whole process, while he's making decisions about set pieces. It's great to see everyone support someone who is hungry to share their idea. I've even had that experience here too, especially with the site-specific pieces, where I was writing a play, and it wasn't complete, because I had all these ideas but I wasn't making decisions. Leslie was one of the actors and herself and all the others came together and started to bring ideas and make decisions. That taught me a lot about what it is to sit down and collaborate with a group of people who are hungry to continue working."

Staszweski, who at 24 was the most senior member of our group, is a directing apprentice and also has his own production company, Stasz/Pruitt Productions.

"Even that ('Pirate') is in the spirit of Powerhouse," said Staszweski. "It's still collaborative. He's still changing lines, using their actions and decision to work his own script. working on lines, working with the actors."

Watching the professionals in action has given these young artists a sense of freedom, because they see their adult counterparts facing the same challenges and working with the same trepidations they feel.

"I was so relieved in rehearsal: Nothing is set in stone, you aren't facing critics," said Santos of the cocoon-like environment that Powerhouse strives to create.

"He (Shanley) brings in this pink 'husband' pillow," said Joya, and Staszweski nodded in agreement. "He starts to pet it while their reading lines. And he's laughing about his own stuff and he's really involved. That alone makes puts me at ease – I don't feel like a nutcase, and it gives me permission to get that involved in my own work."

Speaking with Mark Linn-Baker, one the three founders of Powerhouse Theater (and perhaps best known for "My Favorite Year" and "Laughter on the 23rd Floor"), was an excellent bookend to my conversation with the students. Linn-Baker is directing "1940's

Radio Hour," a one-night-only performance that will feature a mixture of performers from the professional company and the apprentice company.

"One of the impulses behind doing the radio hour," he explained, "was that it was something to do with the apprentice and professional companies. It's a great opportunity to work with each other: Great for the apprentices to be working next to the professionals, for more obvious reasons; but it's also great for the professional company as well. We get a chance to remember why we do what we do – where we got started. We get asked the questions that we asked when we got started, and it's refreshing."

For Linn-Baker, this project is also about coming back to the first years of the Powerhouse project, and about returning to the heart of the original mission of the experiment.

"When we first started, 26 years ago, the apprentices and the professionals were much closer in age. It was much easier for us to work together," he said. "The apprentice program is so strong – I'm so proud of what has become of both the apprentice and professional company. It's an indispensable place to train, for young people, and for the professionals to work in a supportive environment. Crossovers were many more, (and we've) been seeking a way to re-establish that connection, and this seemed to be a wonderful way (to do that).

"1940's Radio Hour" was originally "a Broadway show," said Linn-Baker, but it was developed in workshops at the Yale Cabaret. "I was in one of the early companies, as well as Meryl Streep. We'd learn songs from the '40s, improvise characters and had a great time simulating a radio show."

In developing the work for the combined cast (who are, of course, busy with many other projects of their own), Linn-Baker chose to return to the initial concept. "I've stripped it back to along the lines of the original workshop. We've been rehearsing it in pieces."

Written by Walton Jones, "1940's Radio Hour" features period music and appropriate sound effect and suggests a live holiday broadcast.

"It's one night only, as if it were a live radio broadcast from Poughkeepsie" in December of 1942, said Linn-Baker.

"It should have all the excitement of never having been done before because ... we will have never done it before!"

**"1940's Radio Hour"**  
 8 p.m. | Saturday, July 31  
 Free to the public with  
 advance reservations.  
 Vogelstein Center for Drama  
 and Film  
 Vassar College, 124 Raymond  
 Ave., Poughkeepsie.  
 845-437-5599