

GIVING A POWERFUL VOICE TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S STORIES

by Eryn LeMesurier

Youth actor Rhoddy Richardson connects to his audience through interactive drama

The profession of acting has always fascinated people, and clichés about actors abound. At present, we are enamoured with a new spin on the stereotype: actors as philanthropic crusaders. As a realist, I figured the media's "actor giving back" angle showcased famous thespians lending one helping hand while stroking their ego with the other. However, my cynicism was profoundly

challenged when I met Rhoddy Richardson, a Toronto Playback Theatre actor who is redefining what it means to be a performer contributing to the community.

Playback Theatre is a form of interactive drama where audience members share personal stories, and the actors replay these stories through improvisation. The youth company performs for other youths at schools, camps, and other settings throughout Toronto. Rhoddy notes that Playback performances are an education tool, saying, "We all learn from each others' stories. We can take from the stories that touching that fire will burn us." No doubt, the lessons and cautions that parents and teachers have trouble con-

veying to kids resonate much more powerfully when presented as authentic narratives acted out by young people such as Rhoddy. "The youths are very receptive, and they can put themselves on us. We act as a background for them because we have experienced the things they are experiencing," he says.

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This past summer, the company performed for youths at a summer camp in the Jane and Finch region, a project Rhoddy called "a great success." For these kids, many of whom felt like their voices went unnoticed, Playback Theatre provided an empowering platform to be heard. Bestowed with the authority to determine the performance's narrative and even cast the actors as the characters in their story, the kids come away with a sense of strength. Rhoddy remarks, "The kids speak into us and we project everything they say. We are like a megaphone for

their story and it is projected and hits everyone in the audience. They are often surprised by how loud it is. When it's that loud, they notice things in their story they didn't see before."

It's striking to see just how committed Rhoddy is to Playback Theatre, taking his role as actor very seriously. "[The kids] are trusting you with so much, with the sole expression of what happened to them," he says; "I play it back as honestly as I can, and when I play it back I know I have touched and affected them." It's clear that Rhoddy considers his performances as imbued with responsibility, perhaps because he recognizes the influence acting had in reshaping his own life. Like many of the youths he mentors, Rhoddy's undirected energy as a teen eventually got the better of him, and he was kicked out of high school. After struggling to gain re-admittance, he was eventually accepted at Crestwood, where he discovered his love of acting. His drama teacher suggested he get involved in the Playback Theatre, and it proved to be a fitting partnership between a free spirit and a free-flowing and interactive mode of theatre.

Just as he could not have predicted that acting would have been his saving grace,



it is equally hard for Rhoddy to know just how far Playback Theatre's reach extends. "The performances bring a huge smile on people's faces, and a smile is something so incredible. It alters their whole course of life and it can totally change the direction they were headed. Everything creates a strong ripple ... one smile enlightens another smile, creating another." While we are often tempted to evaluate charitable organizations based on quantifiable results, Rhoddy and Toronto Playback Theatre show that social contributions can be immeasurable and simplistic, but by no means less valuable.



Rhoddy Richardson doing his improvisation



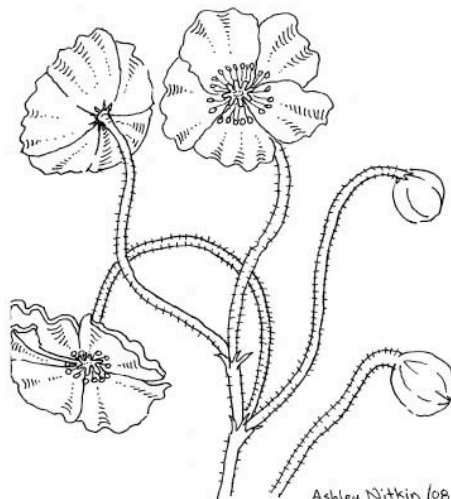
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