

TAVIS theatre project reaches out to youth

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A theatre company specializing in conflict resolution through dramatization created a piece for Toronto police officers involved with the force's Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) in North York and York,

Toronto-based Mixed Company Theatre created the specialized piece to assist in the training of police officers assigned to the city's priority neighbourhoods in 12 and 31 Divisions to help improve community relations.

Using interactive Forum Theatre, Mixed Company's troupe presents worst case scenarios that police officers may encounter, giving them a chance to rehearse for reality.

TAVIS works to help reduce violence in troubled neighbourhoods by working with community members and service providers in identifying crime, developing strategies to address the issues, implementing the plans and monitoring the effectiveness of the plan.

Founded by late Nobel Peace Prize nominee Augusto Boal in 1983, Mixed Company Theatre's Forum Theatre is an interactive approach involving the audience in developing real life strategies for dealing with social and personal issues.

Mixed Company Theatre, which has developed over 100 Forum Theatre productions performed for students and the general public, created a specific production for TAVIS officers, said Simon Malbogot, co-founder and artistic director of the organization.

"We created a piece dealing with the kind of things that can happen in these communities and work towards solutions that would de-escalate instead of escalate the situation," he said. "A youth in a TAVIS community could be asked five, six times for identification by an officer and that could be frustrating for the youth and if the situation isn't handled right it can escalate. We are creating not just a personal story but a universal story."

Malbogot said the scenarios are derived from real life stories he's heard, including one where a young man running home was stopped by police after shots rang out in his neighbourhood.

"The mother hears shots and she calls the police but she also calls her son," he said. "The son runs home but is stopped by police, who asks where he is going. If the situation isn't handled right the son could find himself arrested."

Malbogot said Mixed Company Theatre plans to expand on the 40-minute production created for TAVIS officers and will present their new piece at community centres this summer with the hope of eventually bringing it to city high schools.

Productions usually focus on diversity, family relationships, peer pressure, sexual and mental health, racism, leadership, violence and drug and alcohol abuse.

Following each scenario presented to the public, the audience is encouraged to find alternatives to how things were handled, Malbogot said.

"We use theatre as a tool to engage for positive change," he said. "It's important we don't come across as adults preaching. It's up to the youths to make their own decisions."