

THEATRE FOR CHANGE: Young actors unveil the lives behind life on the street

Voices not to be ignored

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Janice stares at her mother incredulously. The teen's eyes begin to moisten and she wrings her hands nervously.

She has just revealed that Nick, her mom's latest boyfriend, cornered her and tried to force himself on her. That's why she refuses to live with him.

The accusation is met with disbelief. Her mother unleashes a flurry of acerbic insults, accompanied by a stinging backhand.

"Mom, do you want Nick or do you want me?" asks Janice.

Her mother's response is chilling: "So long." It is made more acrid when she flicks her wrist toward the door — a gesture that lands Janice on the streets.

The gripping scene can be tough to rehearse, says Melinda Horner, 23, who plays Janice in *Voices*, which documents the stories and struggles of five young adults.

Like her character, Horner eventually ended up on the streets after her own mom chose to stay with a physically abusive man. This, despite an ultimatum from Horner, who was only 14 at the time, that either he went or she would.

"The other day I broke down in tears," Horner said after a run-through at St. Luke's United Church on Carlton St., the rehearsal space of the Cobblestone youth troupe. "There was this wall that came crashing down within me and I just started crying. I kept having to tell myself that I was playing a character."

For Horner, where the stage ends and the past begins can be a blurry line. But that's often the case with Cobblestone, a 12-year-old program run by Mixed Company Theatre that lets street kids and homeless youths tell their stories.

Each year, young adults audition for a handful of spots after hearing about Cobblestone on the streets or in the shelter system.

Those who make the cut often work with award-winning playwright Rex Deverell developing narratives and exploring issues important to them. Then it's up to Deverell to take their stories, find patterns within them and shape the raw material into a whole that makes sense.

"If I do it right, the actors recognize their stories and see themselves in a wider context," explained Deverell, who also wrote *Voices*. "The process says to them, 'You are worthwhile and you are neither ignored nor ignorable.'"

It's thrilling to watch kids throughout the process "find their

stories and hear their voices through characters on stage, it gives them the feeling that they're being heard."

Typically, each troupe performs the production it has developed, but last year's group broke up before *Voices* made it to stage — a few moved on to school, one got a job and another simply disappeared.

So, a new crew, made up of former street kids, budding actors and a professional actor, was assembled to bring the play to life and begin touring it next week.

Voices tells the bleak tales of the denizens who gather one night at a 24-hour coffee shop: Janice has been kicked out because she's fleeing Nick's perverted clutches; Louis grapples with feelings of worthlessness; Jerry struggles with coming out to his friends; Venus wrestles with an addiction to shopping that leaves her unable to pay rent; and Bertha, a coffee shop employee, battles with regrets over having given up a daughter for adoption.

Voices is presented through "forum theatre," a kind of interactive staging that presents worst-case scenarios and encourages spectators to become "spect-actors" by offering solutions to the problems presented. The audience sees the play once, uninterrupted. Then, during a second run, audience members interrupt scenes and offer ways characters could have resolved problems, often getting up on stage and acting themselves.

Voices will tour throughout high schools, community centres and shelters starting Monday through Feb. 10. There will be two public performances, at 8 p.m. Feb. 9 and 10, at the Alchemy Theatre, 133 Tecumseth St. For details, call 416-515-8080.

Young adults hear about Cobblestone on the streets or in shelters

legs and find their feet," said Deverell, adding he rejoices in their successes, such as finding a home, finding a job or going back to school.

But he also understands the lure of the street for kids — some of whom, with one small misstep, fall off the "tightrope" they're walking.

"Sometimes you kind of ache for people for whom (participating in Cobblestone) was a high point in their lives, because you know they have valleys to go."

His sentiments are, in part, echoed by Simon Malbogot, artistic director of Mixed Company, who describes theatre as a "tool for social change," particularly when it comes to disaffected youth.

"We want to provide them with self-esteem. When they see their



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Mecca, right, playing Venus, struggles with an addiction to shopping that has left her destitute as, from left, Sefton Jackson, Mark Purvis, Melinda Horner and Waawaate Fobister proffer consumer enticements. The young actors are part of a unique troupe that distills the experiences of street youth into interactive theatre.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Waawaate Fobister wields some temporary lighting as Sefton Jackson reacts to Jerry's (Mark Purvis) revelation that he's gay in *Voices*, fashioned by playwright Rex Deverell out of real-life stories.



COLIN MCCONNELL

Artistic director Simon Malbogot debriefs his young actors at Cobblestone's rehearsal space in St. Luke's United Church.