

THEATRE: Breaking the Cycle of Violence Through Drama



Photo/JOHN HANLEY

Performers take to the stage during, 'DISS', an anti-gang violence presentation mounted Friday evening at York Memorial Collegiate by the Mixed Theatre Company and the Toronto Police Service.

By FANNIE SUNSHINE
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A theatre company specializing in conflict resolution through dramatization has teamed up with Toronto Police Services' Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) to create an anti-gang violence production for the city's at-risk neighbourhoods.

Mixed Company Theatre's production DISS launched Sunday, Aug. 16 at York Memorial Collegiate Institute and has also been shown at Scarborough's Mary Shadd Public School and David and Mary Thomson Collegiate Institute. It will take to the stage Wednesday, Aug. 19 at Bloor Collegiate Institute in Bloor West Village, Thursday, Aug. 20 at Sir Sandford Fleming Academy and Friday, Aug. 21 at Westview Centennial Secondary School, both in North York.

According to Mixed Company Theatre, DISS presents the worst-case scenarios of gang involvement, catalyzing audience members to express their voices to ultimately make communities safer.

The youth in the production will perform raps based on their experiences with violence while a DJ spins live beats throughout the show.

"We work on breaking the cycle of violence," said Simon Malbogat, co-founder and artistic director of Mixed Company Theatre. "Our shows have focused on bullying, assault, cyber bullying so the next logical step was looking at gang violence. Before you know it, you can get caught up in a gang and then everything spirals out of control."

Working with TAVIS officers and some 50 young people from across the city, Mixed Company Theatre created a universal story of a young boy who suddenly finds himself involved with gang life.

"He was taken into a gang and they would rob stores," Malbogat said. "First it was a little shoplifting and then it was armed robbery. He was new to the area and didn't know many people. We are trying

to get the message across to be careful right from the get-go, who you make friends with, and the choices you make. We are creating a universal story and then asking the audience to come up with ways to change it."

After identifying the neighbourhoods to showcase DISS, Malbogat said the Toronto District School Board was contacted for space allowance for shows this month, adding he hopes to tour DISS in schools this spring throughout Toronto.

"We want to tackle snitching," he said. "Right now the mentality is snitches get stitches. We want to work on how we can change attitudes. A number of audience members said you have to get the community involved. Everyone sees it when the neighbourhood gets involved and can work at eliminating the problem."

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.

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

Mixed Company Theatre recently created a specialized piece to assist in the training of TAVIS police officers assigned to the city's priority neighbourhoods in York and North York to help improve community relations.