

Theater helps kids through real-life stages

By Beth Ashley
USA TODAY

Mary is borderline failing in school but has made up her mind to do better. Today there's a test. She has studied for it; she's ready.

Tad isn't going to take the test. He has failed so often and heard so many times he's stupid that there doesn't seem any point.

He feels threatened that Mary may take the test and succeed.

In the hallway, he badgers her: "Hey — forget that test. Let's cut class and have fun."

Mary: "I don't know. Can't we go after school?"

Tad: "I thought we were tight. Just come on. Don't you want us to be friends?"

Mary and Tad are actors in a play in a high school classroom. The incident is fiction.

Or is it?

The scene onstage freezes, and the actors step out of the action to discuss what's happening between Mary and Tad.

Kids in the audience ask questions.

In a replay, the actors explore ways for Mary to stay friends with Tad and still take the test.

Kids talk about peer pressure and how it affects them.

Says Miles Grose, 29, an actor in the Educational Network of Artists in Creative Theater (ENACT), "if you can get kids to think and come up with some options, you've been successful."

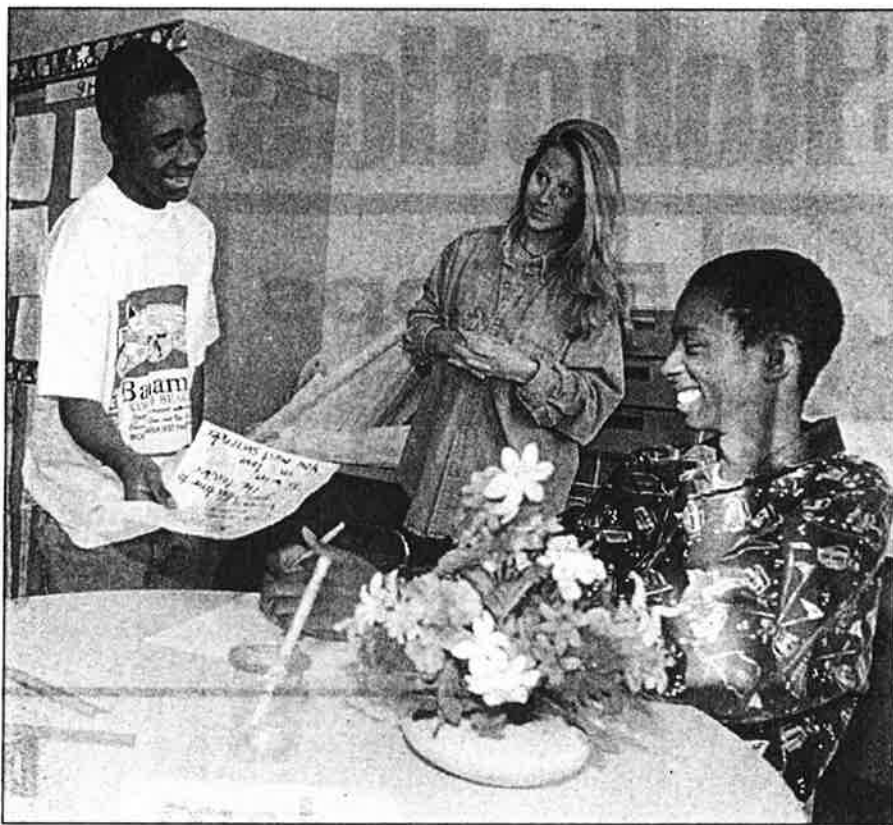
For some teens, their problems are too complex to understand, too tough to overcome.

And increasingly, theater companies are helping them deal with those problems around the country.

Bryar Ted Cogle, theater consultant for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, says theater has become a "truly powerful" tool to teach ethics, responsibility and discipline.

Richard Morse of Principia College, Elmhurst, Ill., who researches educational theater, says theatrical programs "provide a safe center, a haven, a place children can feel confident they are protected."

The topics that theater programs tackle run the gamut:



Life-like art: Kennell Grant, left, and Joseph Spence act out a situation while Susan Vanech, a member of ENACT, supervises. ENACT helps kids confront such issues as violence, racism and teen sex.

By Jim Cooper, AP

Communities step up to help out

In communities across the country, theater is being used to teach and to heal, according to *Coming Up Taller*, a report compiled by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Among programs cited:

► In Virginia, Theater IV performs plays that explore child sexual abuse, teen run-aways, alcohol and drug use.

► In Los Angeles, drama professionals conduct improvisational workshops where kids act out scenarios involving family conflicts and life

in the streets.

► In Montana, high school kids teach elementary school children about child sexual abuse with a play called *Touch*, created by the Illusion Theater of Minneapolis.

► In Arizona, a partnership of educators, artists, law enforcement personnel and executives back A.P.P.L.E. Corps, which makes grants to arts programs, many with anti-drug themes.

► In Kentucky, teen offenders are diverted from the formal court system into

Theater in Diversion, a 10-week program to teach concepts of authority, justice and responsibility.

Coming Up Taller went to donors and community leaders nationwide. "Several donors have used the report to shape their funding guidelines," chairman John Brademas says. "Some federal agencies have developed initiatives that combine the arts and the humanities with creating safe schools and preventing substance abuse and violence."

► In New York City, ENACT helps inner-city kids confront violence, racism and problems of teen-age sex.

► Nationwide, actors from Brown University help high-schoolers look at date rape.

► Along the eastern seaboard, actors in Periwinkle National Theater for Young Audiences, based in Monticello, N.Y., help kids resist the lure of hard drug use.

More and more, arts groups,

supported by private and public money, are reaching out to young people at risk. The National Endowment for the Arts underwrites dozens of programs that link the arts with delinquency prevention and

the building of self-image.

Some programs teach kids artistic skills: acting, singing, dancing, playing music.

Others, such as ENACT and Periwinkle, tackle problems with in-school performances, helping kids find solutions.

ENACT was founded 10 years ago by drama therapist Diana Feldman to teach conflict resolution through drama. Actors perform at correctional institutions and day treatment centers; for three years they have performed at inner-city New York high schools.

The teams have presented skits on stealing, cheating, drug use and sexual activity.

Actor Steve Satta says most teen conflict arises from a wish for control, accomplishment and love.

"Why have sex? To feel loved, close — also to feel cool. OK. Can you get those same feelings without forcing some one to have sex with you?"

Sunna Rasch of Periwinkle National Theater began using drama 30 years ago to teach kids about poetry. When a school principal confided that fourth- and fifth-grade students were using drugs, she wrote a drama called *Halfway There* as a tool against alcohol and drug abuse. More than 800,000 students have seen it. Former first lady Betty Ford has endorsed it.

Halfway There explores why young people try drugs, but it's mostly about "feelings of rejection, alienation, lack of self-esteem and peer pressure, which are what lead to drug abuse," Rasch says.

A campus crisis in 1990 over allegations of widespread sexual assault led to Brown's Anti-Sexual Abuse Project (ASAP). Former dean Toby Simon helped organize a student group to perform skits and lead discussions about sexual violence in New England high schools and colleges.

This year, Brown alumni took the show nationwide. Onstage, ASAP members perform scenes showing how benign situations can segue into sexual assault.

Performing for kids — and helping them confront their problems — is a bonus for professional actors, actress Susan Vanech says. "It's the most satisfying work I've ever done."