



**StarTribune** **Where they're at; Three theaters got together to develop a script with teens from all over the Twin Cities. The result, based on the their own lives, shows that kids in different circumstances and neighborhoods face similar issues.(VARIETY)**

Article from: [Star Tribune \(Minneapolis, MN\)](#) Article date: [March 20, 1998](#)

Author: [Preston, Rohan](#)

As the cast and crew of "Where I'm At" hurried into the Southern Theatre a few days ago, the stage resembled a crowded construction site. Gaping window frames, wood beams, a ladder, scaffolding and five types of fences make up the skeletal set that is a metaphor for this work-in-progress, which premieres tonight at the Southern.

But the work being done here is largely interior - character-building and personality development - as the nine teenagers who play themselves in "Where I'm At" sort through peer pressure, friendship and identity issues.

"I was born to a Cree grandmother, Finnish mother, African-American father and I'm gay," says Sam Brose, 18, as other cast members hurl slurs at him. "I've always been laid-back - not aggressive - and I'm not the type to shout at the world," says Brose. "This is an opportunity to say those things I never say."

"Where I'm At" meets adolescents on their terms. The play reveals teenagers from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds confronting similarly complex issues. Since the script centers on their concerns, often using their words, it shows teenagers not as space aliens, slackers or weirdos but as sensitive, angst-ridden, three-dimensional beings. Indeed, while the play's language is their own, it resonates with very adult concerns about image and health and fitting in.

The ensemble in this joint venture of Child's Play Theatre, Pillsbury House Theatre and the Southern Theatre is impassioned and forceful. They deliver with honesty. And it is clear that they are being themselves - even if they heighten their mannerisms for the stage - as they do scenes where they are judged by their clothes or language or style.

In one segment, an actor describes friendship in terms of a baked potato or a singing, dancing chocolate cake. One is a staple, the other fills you up with sweetness.

"Teenagers get imprisoned in something - I was trapped by an eating disorder [as a teen] and this [play] is part of the liberation from such prisons," said director Heidi Hunter Batz, of Pillsbury House Theatre.

"I think of this show like adults and teenagers being on separate sides of a window looking at each other," said Dylan Bullard, 15. "This breaks through that glass."

By the end of rehearsal, the personalities of the actors, which were at first tentative, emerge distinctly, with steely confidence.

"I don't think that doing this play has been therapeutic so much as empowering," says dramatist Djola Branner by phone from Austin, Texas, where he is starring in Sharon Bridgford's "Blood Pudding." Branner, who won a 1997 Jerome Foundation playwriting award, wrote the script after observing the ensemble improvise for a month.

"They basically brought all the pages in and I bound them into a book," he says. "I wish that I had had a vehicle to move through some of this stuff the way these kids have; I'm impressed by their level of introspection. Though some of the realizations have been painful for some of these young people, it has also given them reasons to celebrate."

Many motivations

The players offered varied reasons for doing "Where I'm At."

As 17-year-old Dave McGill wrestled with issues of poverty and self-image in one scene, it was clear that he is not just going through his lines. "I guess I was overweight because . . . eating is a good way to swallow pain." Afterwards, McGill, who lives in Bloomington, said that he would return to high school to get his diploma because of this project. "I've

learned so much about myself - including what real hard-core acting is - I'm going back to school," he said.

Liz Hammet, 14, of Minnetonka, said of her devout Christianity: "It's good to not have to whisper about my faith - to get my faith out in the open - and to have everyone know that God is behind me."

Keenan Christopher, 16, of Minneapolis, rapped about being misunderstood.

One of the main goals of Vutheary Taing, 17, a dyed-blond actor from St. Louis Park by way of Thailand, is finding her "own rhythm and harmonies," even as she is viewed as interchangeable with others from Asia. In the show she says, "If I keep on mixing . . . I will find harmony."

Muzique Broadnax, 14, of Bloomington, talked about missing her jazz-musician father, whom she rarely sees, filling his absences with activities and excellence. "I've taken gymnastics and ballet and I've always been open," she said. "Acting and making people happy is my destiny. My role models are my mother and Maya Angelou, because both are so strong."

But 13-year-old Jesse Sanders-Greenberg of Minneapolis has come to the opposite conclusion: "I've always been pushed around by other kids - trying to fit in - and it never worked," he said. "I finally figured that if everyone was going to make fun of me, I might as well wear what I want to wear and act how I want to act - be myself." He dyed his hair flamingo-red.

Video, live music and real-life experience The scenes are punctuated by Ustry Alleyne's two-minute video projections. There are six of these MTV-esque sequences, using blurred images from rehearsals and the ensemble members' family photo albums. Michael Crosswell's propulsive music underscores much of the performance.

After the rehearsal, Dylan Bullard said, "It's a lot easier to express yourself once you find your passion. And with my dad supporting me like a backbone, I've found what I really love to do."

Added Mikala Bierma, 14: "I find it hard to express myself on stage, but I don't really feel that naked up there, because these issues are bubbling under my skin."

Vutheary Taing wants to make vivid both her challenges and solutions: "I want to show the world something that they can feel, that they can have fun."

Even though they are young, the cast performs with experience. Bullard, who lives in Plymouth and attends Armstrong High School in Robbinsdale, exhibits seasoned passion as she belts out songs. Broadnax, who attends Hubert Olson Junior High School, incorporates hip-hop signatures in her jazz dance and ballet.

"Teenagers don't have many opportunities to come together in a way that seriously empowers them to say what's on their minds with other people," said the play's co-producer, Steve Barberio, producing director of Child's Play Theatre, which two years ago embraced the new goal of serving adolescent audiences, not just younger children.

"Kids from all backgrounds face very similar fears and concerns - insecurities and security risks. If a child comes from a one-parent family, his or her experience might be different, but that child can relate to another from a two-parent family where one of them is a workaholic.

"Our aim is to build bridges through theater," Barberio said, "to bring people together through a shared experience that is inspiring and enlightening."

COPYRIGHT 1998 Star Tribune Co. This material is published under license from the publisher through the Gale Group, Farmington Hills, Michigan. All inquiries regarding rights should be directed to the Gale Group. For permission to reuse this article, contact [Copyright Clearance Center](#).