

# Playwright Discovery Program



## Resource Guide for Teachers

**VSA arts**

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Alternative formats of this guide are available upon request.



*Promoting the creative power  
in people with disabilities*

**The photos published throughout this guide are from  
the following professional productions of former  
Playwright Discovery Program award-winning scripts:**

***Wolves Can Hear a Saxophone (1994)***

Written by Clarence Coo

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

***The Purple Heart (1994)***

Written by Adam Goldberg

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

***Well Into August (1995)***

Written by Amber Pollina

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

***The Boy Who Walked Backwards (1996)***

Written by Jesse Hove

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

***Goodman's Candy Bars (1996)***

Written by Josh Ben Friedman

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

***Gretty Good Time (1998)***

Written by John Belluso

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

***The Dirt Makers (1999)***

Written by Edward Mannix

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

**On the cover:**

***Mind Invasion (2002)***

Written by Tiffany McCrea

Directed by Paul-Douglas Michnewicz

Photo by Scott Suchman

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# INTRO- DUCTION

## VSA arts

*VSA arts* promotes the arts for children and adults with disabilities, strengthening the human spirit and improving quality of life for everyone.

*VSA arts* is an international nonprofit organization founded in 1974 by Jean Kennedy Smith to promote education and lifelong learning opportunities in the arts for people with disabilities. Nearly 5 million people participate in *VSA arts* programs annually through a worldwide network of affiliate organizations across the nation and in more than 60 countries.

*VSA arts* programs in music, dance, drama, creative writing, and the visual arts develop learning skills, encourage independence, and promote access and inclusion.

*VSA arts* believes that the arts play a vital role in the lives of all people. They give us a universal language through which we enhance education, communicate experiences, and unite diverse cultures. *VSA arts* serves to communicate the power of the arts as a means to positively shape the lives of people with disabilities.

## The Benefits of Teaching Playwriting

The art of playwriting is perhaps our earliest form of entertainment and education. Playwriting teaches language skills and improves literacy – from grammar and vocabulary to handwriting and spelling. One can develop critical thinking skills, while constructing character and plot. Also, the opportunity to express oneself in a creative medium can build knowledge of new subject areas, such as disability issues.

Playwriting can also be used to teach social skills. Whether writing a play together, providing constructive criticism to fellow playwrights, or performing in a play, collaboration and cooperation are imperative to the project's success.

A less tangible but equally vital aspect of teaching playwriting is the opportunity for personal exploration. The theme of disability can elicit discussions on such topics as prejudice, civil rights, and the definition of disability itself. This theme can have great importance to teenagers, as they struggle with issues of personal identity and physical

appearance.

## Resource Guide

The purpose of this *Resource Guide* is to introduce you to the *VSA arts* Playwright Discovery Program and to share teaching strategies and exercises that have been proven successful in developing students' playwriting skills. This guide should serve as a tool to enhance your ability to creatively bring disability awareness to your classrooms, improve literacy and language skills, and develop critical thinking skills in your students. You may find this guide helpful in fulfilling educational objectives during Disability Awareness Month.

This guide is designed to lead you and your students through the playwriting process. Playwriting exercises are presented to familiarize students with the various components of a play. The activities encourage experimenting with language and storytelling techniques. They also address how to view writing with a critical eye and how to develop theme, plot, dialogue, and characters. In addition, the guide offers ideas on how to showcase the plays that are created in your classroom.

*VSA arts* hopes that you will consider making the Playwright Discovery Program a regular part of your syllabus each year. Further, *VSA arts* invites you to use this tool to encourage students to submit scripts in consideration for the annual Playwright Discovery Award.

## Playwright Discovery Program

The *VSA arts* Playwright Discovery Program challenges students of all abilities to take a closer look at the world around them, examine how disability affects their lives and the lives of others, and express their views through the art of playwriting. Through playwriting, students can advance their awareness and understanding of disability by exploring the experience of a person with a disability.

### Eligible playwrights must:

- be in grades 6 through 12
- submit a one-act play that explores an aspect of disability
- complete an application form that includes a brief autobiographical narrative and a script synopsis
- comply with all Playwright Discovery Award rules and submission procedures



# DISABILITY AWARENESS

As a companion publication to this *Resource Guide*, please refer to the VSA arts publication, *Access and Opportunities: A Guide to Disability Awareness*. It is a valuable resource for those who want to gain additional knowledge about disability, including updated information on the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), tips for positive interactions with individuals with disabilities, and factual information about specific disabilities.

Before beginning the activities in this guide, use the questions below to help your students explore their feelings and ideas about individuals with disabilities. These questions will assist you in sensitizing your students to the concerns of individuals with disabilities. Encourage your students to participate in an open classroom discussion and to pay close attention so they can use their answers to develop ideas for their scripts.

As your students begin writing plays and developing a plot and characters, they will most likely need to learn about the specific disability they are describing. The aforementioned publication is a good start, but students should be encouraged

to also conduct more extensive research at the library, on the internet, or by interviewing an individual with a disability, an accessibility specialist, a medical professional, or a rehabilitation specialist.

- What is a disability? Identify some examples of physical, mental, emotional, and learning disabilities. What types of challenges do individuals with disabilities face each day? How about their family and friends?
- What do you know about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)? Why was it introduced and passed? What rules would you create to make the lives of people with disabilities easier?
- Imagine how you would adapt your lifestyle if you had a particular disability. Identify the disability, its probable impact on your life, and as many effective coping techniques as you can imagine.
- If one of your friends or family members were to suddenly develop a physical, mental, emotional, or learning disability, how do you think you might react and how would your life change?

- What is the difference between a visible disability and a hidden disability? Why do some people feel uncomfortable around people with visible disabilities? How might feelings of discomfort be overcome? How do you feel when you meet someone with a visible disability?
- Do you treat people who have disabilities differently than you treat people who do not? How and why do you treat them differently and what can you do to avoid doing so?
- When we think of people who have disabilities, we often think of what they cannot do, rather than what they can do. How can we be more positive in our thought process?
- People with disabilities are sometimes featured in TV and movies. In what ways have these characters been depicted? Are these depictions accurate? How would you portray characters with disabilities?



**The Purple Heart**



**Well Into August**

## PLAYING WITH WORDS:



Well Into August

*Speak the speech, I pray  
you, as I pronounc'd it to you,  
trippingly on the tongue; but  
if you mouth it, as many of  
our players do, I had as lief  
the town-crier spoke my lines.*

—HAMLET



Well Into August



# Activity 1

## PASS THE PHRASE

**PURPOSE:** To increase understanding of the power of language by exploring the flexibility of words. This will help students learn the subtleties of dialogue.

**STRUCTURE:** Students sit in a circle. Maximum recommended group size: 15

**GUIDELINES:** Beginning with the teacher, pass a simple phrase from one person to the next. The words must remain the same, but the intonation should change each time to create different meanings.

**EXAMPLES:** You can use all common phrases, but some examples are:

*Hello.*

*Leave me alone!*

*What's that?*

*Can I have some, please?*

*Guess what...*

*Get out.*

*Help me.*

*What's wrong with you?*

Continue this activity until the idea becomes clear. Conclude the activity

by asking students to comment on different meanings of different intonations and to create scenarios to support their conclusions.

**SIDECOACHING:** By using phrases like *Different, always different* or *Don't add any other words* or *Try other choices besides shouting*, students will stay focused on experimenting with context and intonation. They will learn that commonplace language can have many meanings.

**VARIATION 1:** Try a simple dialogue, passed from one to the next in a similar fashion. One dialogue might be:

Person 1: *Hello.*

Person 2: *Can you help me, please?*

Person 3: *What is your problem?*

Person 4: *Can't you see?*

Person 5: *I gotta go.*

**VARIATION 2:** Use the same simple dialogue, but this time, have the students ad lib in order to further develop the scene. Let them pair off and give them three minutes to decide on how the scene will proceed.

# Activity 2

## NEUTRAL SCENES

**PURPOSE:** To explore subtext and to endow a simple script with complicated meanings.

**STRUCTURE:** Students work in pairs.

**GUIDELINES:** Using the following simple script, students working in pairs develop skits that infuse different meanings into the dialogue. Each team must answer all the questions the text poses by their action and intonation.

*Hey, how are you?*

*Can't you tell?*

*I didn't know.*

*It's true.*

*Can I do something?*

*(whispers something)*

*I can't.*

*Why not?*

*You know.*

*Then just forget it.*

*Do you remember that time?*

*No.*

*Sure you do.*

*Would you just forget it.*

*I gotta go.*

*See ya later.*

### SIDECOACHING:

Ask questions like:

*Where are they?*

*What are they trying to remember and*

*why doesn't #2 want to remember it?*

*How is #2 really doing?*

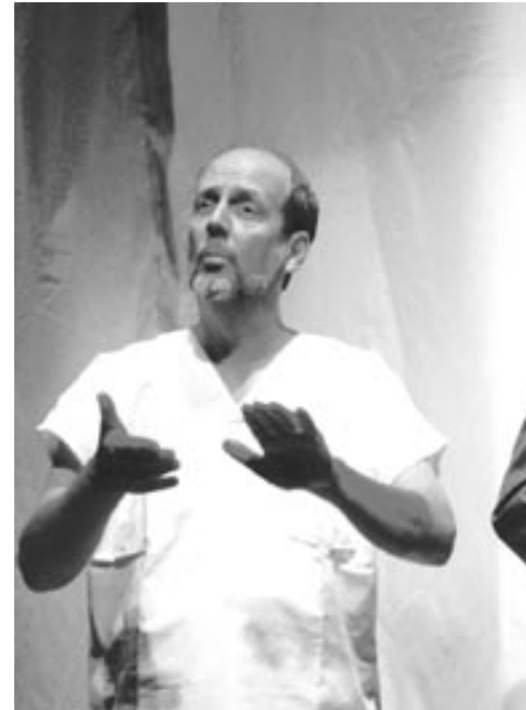
*Where are they going?*

*What does #2 whisper to #1?*

*Why can't #1 do it?*

**VARIATION:** Each pair can expand this neutral scene by adding stage directions and dialogue in order to explain each choice they make.

**HOMEWORK:** Students write a one-page dialogue between two people that has no inherent meaning until played on the stage (a neutral scene).



Gretty Good Time

# Activity 3

## THE METAPHOR AND SIMILE GAME

**PURPOSE:** To introduce and explore the poetic power of metaphors and similes, tools which are commonly used in playwriting.

**STRUCTURE:** Students work alone in timed intervals.

**GUIDELINES:** Discuss with the class the meanings of metaphor and simile. After this has been thoroughly examined, read aloud a series of metaphors and similes. Have students write down the ideas and images that come to mind around each phrase. Allow students two or three minutes to write as many ideas as they can about each phrase.

**EXAMPLES:** Discuss a few common metaphors and similes such as “she is like a rose,” “busy as a bee,” “sharp as a tack,” or “cool as a cucumber.” Focus on the multi-layered meanings of these sayings.

**SIDECOACHING:** Tell students that this activity is not about the quantity of writing they do or correctness, but rather to let their minds run with an idea. Let them know that

if these ideas become interesting to them, they can pursue them in their journals at home.

**VARIATION 1:** If the students like discussing these phrases, set up a charades game where each team challenges the other to act out metaphors and similes of their own selection.

**VARIATION 2:** See the Cliché Game later in this guide.

**HOMEWORK:** Students write a one-page character sketch out of a metaphor or simile of their own choosing.



# PLAYING WITH STORIES

*My story being done,  
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;  
She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;  
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.  
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd  
That heaven had made her such a man.*

—OTHELLO

## Activity 4

### CIRCLE STORIES

**PURPOSE:** To encourage collaboration and teamwork while building a story together – the beginning of plot development.

**STRUCTURE:** Students sit in a circle, preferably in chairs. Maximum recommended group size: 15

**GUIDELINES:** Starting with the teacher, each participant contributes a portion of a story. Two or three sentences should be the maximum. Everyone should contribute something even if it is “and then...” Go around the circle until the teacher hears an appropriate ending. Students should never use the names of people they know.

**EXAMPLES:** Begin a story like this: One day I woke up and discovered that my stomach was missing. Instead of a belly, I had a bowl of green jello. Try to avoid serious beginnings. The more imaginative, the better.

**SIDECOACHING:** Since the tone of the story will be taken from the first person, the teacher should be the

leader. Students should be allowed to say anything, even if it makes no sense. The students will eventually tell each other if it makes sense or not.

Use phrases like: *Say anything at all*, *Your input is important*, and *Listen and plan what you’re going to say* to guide your class.

**VARIATION:** Introduce ideas like “unfair” or “trapped.” The next story students should have something to do with things that are unfair or trapped. This can lead to a fascinating story relating to disability issues. (See Activity Seven)

**HOMEWORK:** Students write a short story about disability. This can begin in prose form, and could become the basic plot for a script.

# Activity 5

## HOW DOES IT END?

**PURPOSE:** To explore the concept that the ending of a story is as important as the beginning in the overall structure of a play.

**STRUCTURE:** Students work in small groups of three to five members.

**GUIDELINES:** Pass out a copy of a newspaper or magazine article with a dramatic human interest subject. The article should be very detailed and should have the conclusion omitted. Each group should have the same article. Have students complete the story, incorporating as much of the details from the beginning as possible. Each group should work alone without overhearing the other groups.

**EXAMPLES:** Distribute the following: *Local high school student and accomplished musician, John Doe, suffered wounds to his hands and upper arms due to an automobile collision. Mr. Doe has studied piano for 11 years and has planned a career as a concert pianist. Doctors have not been*

*able to determine whether this talented musician will ever regain the use of his hands.* The results of this activity will depend upon the article you choose. The following elements must be included: strong characters, familiar settings, unusual circumstances, and a series of events.

**SIDECOACHING:** Focus on the details by asking questions like:  
*Is there anything in the story that is unusual?*  
*Who are these people?*  
*Why did this happen?*  
*How does it end?*

**VARIATION:** After each group has read and/or performed their story ending, repeat the exercise using a different article for each group.

**HOMEWORK:** Students select a story that addresses the issue of disability. This story can come from the news or from their lives. Ask students to write a play synopsis and develop characters for the story. This assignment may take several weeks.



# Activity 6

## A THOUSAND-WORD PICTURE

**PURPOSE:** To develop ideas about characters and stories from visual cues to help pique their imaginations and begin character development.

**STRUCTURE:** Each student writes alone, either at home or in class.

**GUIDELINES:** The teacher passes out a photograph or picture of a painting to each student. Their task is to represent the situation in the photo through dialogue. It is important that the teacher chooses all the pictures and that each picture has at least two characters.

**SIDECOACHING:**

Ask questions like:

*What happened just before this picture was painted?*

*What happened right after this photo was taken?*

*Who are these people?*

*Why are they in this place?*

*How does this scene end?*

**VARIATION:** Upon completion of this activity, the students can act out the scenes they have written and

respond to the following questions:  
Is the picture accurately recreated?  
Is the tone or mood of the picture reflected in the dialogue? Does the story reflect the picture in every detail?

**NOTE:** The success of this activity depends on the quality of the photos that are selected. If you use paintings, they should be realistic works. Photos out of publications such as Life Magazine's books of photos ([www.lifemag.com](http://www.lifemag.com)) or *The Family of Man* book series work very well.

**HOMEWORK:** Students build on the play synopsis and characters they developed in activity five by writing a dialogue between two or more of the characters.

# PLAYING WITH IDEAS



Well Into August

*If this were play'd  
upon a stage now, I  
could condemn it as  
an improbable fiction.*

—TWELFTH NIGHT



# Activity 7

## TRAPPED

**PURPOSE:** To explore the definition of theme in playwriting.

**STRUCTURE:** Students work alone after a brief class discussion.

**GUIDELINES:** In a group discussion, ask the following questions around the theme Trapped/Free: *What does it mean to be trapped? What are some examples of people who are trapped? What is the opposite of trapped? How do people get trapped? How do people become free? Do our bodies trap us? What does it feel like to be trapped? Does our mind trap us?*

This discussion should last until the idea is fully explored and everyone has had an opportunity to contribute. Then ask students to write a brief scenario in which someone is trapped by their mind or body.

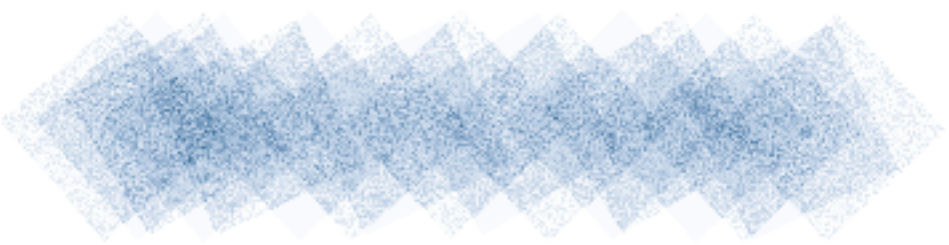
**NOTE:** Young writers are generally interested in this theme and will have many ideas as long as you shift regularly from “trapped” to “free.”

**SIDECOACHING:** After the scenarios have been read, encourage students to expand the theme by asking questions like: *What exactly is trapping this person? How do they escape? How do they feel about being trapped? How do others treat them?*

Steer students away from definitions of the word “trap” which imply “mousetrap” or “car chase” and toward the definition of “limitation.” Likewise, steer them away from the concept of “freedom” which suggests “liberation” and toward the word “unhindered,” and away from “escape” suggesting “get away” and toward “struggle.”

**VARIATION:** Repeat the above exercise using the theme of unfair/justice.

**HOMEWORK:** Students continue to work on the play they started in activities five and six by creating a scene around the dialogue. Are any of the concepts explored in this activity evident in their scripts?



**PURPOSE:** To explore the implications of “journey” as it relates to character and story within a play’s structure.

**STRUCTURE:** This activity can be done as a homework or classroom assignment.

**GUIDELINES:** Ask students to write a monologue in which the lead character, or protagonist, goes through an inner journey or change from one way of being to another. Or, students may write a dialogue in which a character goes through a physical journey or trip and encounters obstacles that must be overcome. Ask students to read or perform their monologues or dialogues in class.

**SIDECOACHING:** Examine the idea of “journey” by asking questions like:

*Where does your character begin?*

*What are the hardships or obstacles?*

*Where does your character end up?*

*Why does the journey happen in the first place?*

**VARIATION:** Students may combine the two types of journeys in one short play.

**HOMEWORK:** As students continue their plays, ask them to review the plot and determine at what point the protagonist goes through an inner journey or change. This may become the climax of the plot.



**The Dirt Makers**

# Activity 8

## JOURNEY



Goodman's Candy Bars



Well Into August

# SAYING IT BETTER



Gretty Good Time



The Dirt Makers

*What's in a name? That  
which we call a rose by any  
other word would smell as  
sweet.*

—ROMEO AND JULIET

# Activity 9

## CHANGE THE PHRASE

**PURPOSE:** To examine the process of rewriting a script.

**STRUCTURE:** Students sit in a circle. Maximum recommended group size: 15

**GUIDELINES:** Pass a phrase from one person to next, each time modifying the text slightly to reflect a more specific meaning.

**EXAMPLES:** The phrase might evolve something like this:

*I can't.*

*I can't do that.*

*I don't know how.*

*I know how, I just don't want to.*

*I want to, but I'm not able to.*

*I want to, can you help me?*

*Can you help me?*

*Help me, I'm trying.*

*I'm trying, but I need your help.*

**SIDECOACHING:** Lead your group away from changing the words and toward modifying the meaning. After each round, ask them what the difference is between each phrase.

**VARIATION:** Ask students to suggest phrases from their own scripts.

**HOMEWORK:** Students examine their scripts and select dialogue that would benefit from rewriting. After students have rewritten a portion of dialogue, ask several students to read their original dialogue and the rewritten piece to the class. Was the rewrite successful? Does the dialogue benefit from being more specific?



Gretty Good Time

# Activity 10

## THE CLICHÉ GAME

**PURPOSE:** To introduce and explore the positive and negative aspects of clichés and to encourage a more specific use of language.

**STRUCTURE:** Students work alone in timed intervals.

**GUIDELINES:** Discuss with the class the meanings of clichés. The most useful definition of the cliché for this exercise is a metaphor or idea which is over-used and therefore loses its meaning. After this discussion, read aloud some clichés and ask students to jot down quick ideas about each cliché. Have students share their ideas with the class. Then ask them to restate the cliché in a way that reiterates the idea with original words.

**EXAMPLE:** Discuss a few common clichés such as “A penny saved is a penny earned,” “What comes around goes around,” or “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Focus on the dehumanization and repetition of these sayings.

**SIDECOACHING:** Tell your students that this is not about the quantity of writing they do or correctness, but letting their minds create an idea. Let students know that if these ideas become interesting to them, they can pursue them in their journals at home.

Do not spend much time defining the word cliché. Focus on the grain of truth inside a cliché combined with the repetitive and therefore tiring nature of clichés.

**HOMEWORK:** Students review their scripts for clichés or trite language. Students should rewrite these phrases and review the changes with the class.





# Activity 11

## SAY WHAT?!?



Wolves Can Hear a Saxophone

**PURPOSE:** To work toward specific use of language in their scripts.

**STRUCTURE:** Students sit in a circle. Maximum recommended group size: 10

**GUIDELINES:** Give a different common phrase to each student on a slip of paper. Ask each student “*What do you mean by that?*” several times. They must respond by rewording the phrase in as many ways as possible.

**EXAMPLES:** The student’s phrase is *I tried to warn you*. His various rewrites might be:  
*I’ve been telling you that for years.*  
*Why didn’t you listen to me in the first place?*  
*I told you so.*  
*Now look what you’ve done.*  
*What have I been saying all along?*  
*Don’t come crying to me.*  
*Whose fault is it?*

**NOTE:** Again, the quality of the exercise depends upon the quality of the phrase. Each phrase should imply a story or situation.

**SIDECOACHING:** Encourage creative responses by saying: *Is that what you mean exactly? I don’t understand you, say it again. Are you sure?* Do not let them go off into a dialogue. Instead, make them reword the phrase that is on their slip of paper.

**HOMEWORK:** Students continue to rewrite their scripts avoiding clichés and working toward specific use of language.

# CULMINATING EVENTS

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and  
women merely players;  
They have their exits and  
their entrances,  
And one man in his time  
plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.*

—AS YOU LIKE IT

Since a playwright's goal is to communicate a message to an audience, you may wish to consider presenting your students' plays as either a staged reading or production. This can be done in a simple or elaborate way. You can invite other classes or teachers to attend a reading during or after school or present a reading in the evening so that parents can attend.

If you decide to produce a staged reading, you will need actors (classmates, teachers, and/or parents), copies of the script in binders, and chairs. Actors should rehearse a few times to become familiar with the play. In a staged reading, no set is required and the actors read from scripts. Do not ask them to act out the play, but request that they read it clearly and with expression.

While the play is being read, the playwright should listen and take notes. This can be an instructive process since the playwright will hear things that he/she did not perceive from the written word. This can lead to successful rewrites.

You might decide to produce one or more of the plays. Remember two rules of thumb: KEEP IT SIMPLE and RESPECT THE TEXT.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

For the production, encourage your students to create inventive sets and costumes that can be just as effective as those that are costly and elaborate.

## RESPECT THE TEXT

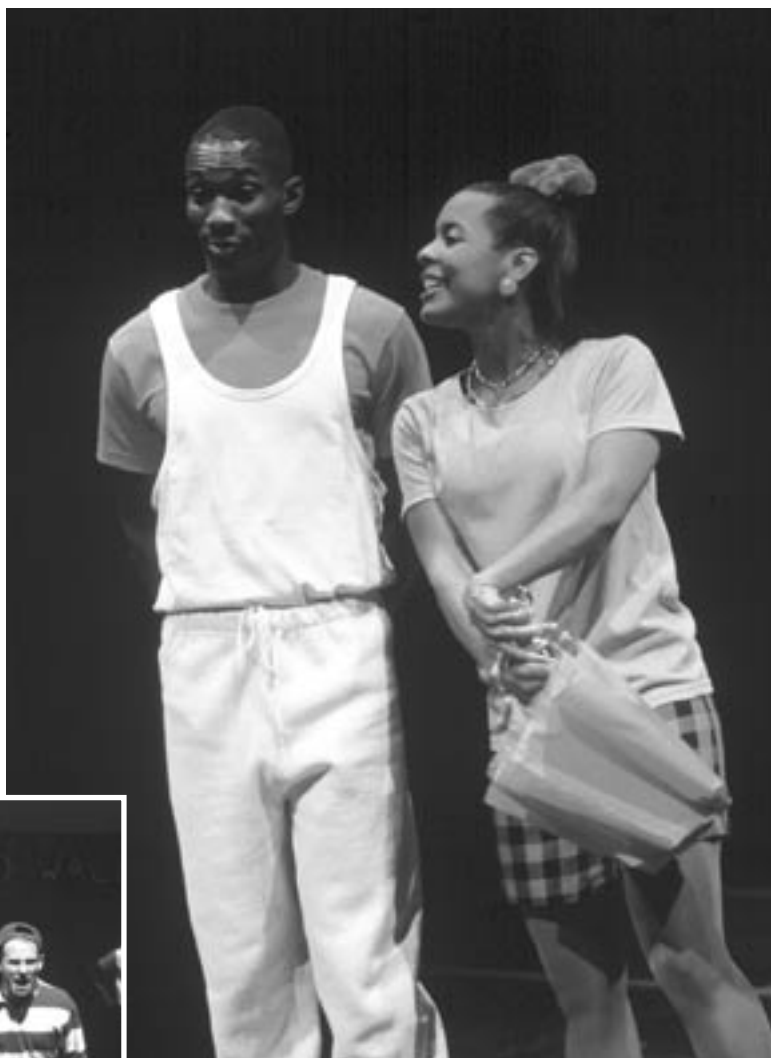
As production demands increase, you may be tempted to tell the playwright how to rewrite the script. This should not happen. Invite the playwrights into rehearsals, let them listen to the play and make their own decisions. You may ask questions about the intentions, characters, or plot developments which may lead to rewrites, but do not tell the author how or what to rewrite.

There are various resources in your community that can be approached for support during the production phase. Many professional theaters have outreach programs or education departments that might assist in conducting workshops, selecting scripts, and/or offering their theater as a performance venue. Don't forget to check out your local *VSA arts*



affiliate for additional resources. Also, local colleges can provide a host of opportunities for your program, from sending guest speakers to providing technical support for a production.

The process of rehearsing and performing an original work can be an enlightening and rewarding experience for everyone involved.



**The Boy Who Walked Backwards**



**The Boy Who Walked Backwards**



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## WEB SITES

American Alliance for Theatre & Education (AATE)  
[www.aate.com](http://www.aate.com)

Arslynx  
[www.artslynx.org/theatre/playwright.htm](http://www.artslynx.org/theatre/playwright.htm)

Baker's Plays  
[www.bakersplays.com](http://www.bakersplays.com)

California Young Playwrights Contest  
[www.playwrightsproject.com/con.html](http://www.playwrightsproject.com/con.html)

City Theatre Company Young Playwrights Contest  
[www.citytheatrecompany.org/youngplay/](http://www.citytheatrecompany.org/youngplay/)

Drama Workshop  
<http://chdramaworkshop.homestead.com/Home.html>

Dramatists Play Service  
[www.dramatists.com](http://www.dramatists.com)

Educational Theatre Association (ETA)  
[www.edta.org](http://www.edta.org)

Playwrights on the Web  
[www.stageplays.com/writers.htm](http://www.stageplays.com/writers.htm)

The Playwriting Seminars (includes script format)  
[www.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/](http://www.vcu.edu/artweb/playwriting/)

Samuel French, Inc.  
[www.samuel french.com](http://www.samuel french.com)

VSA arts  
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