

PS 147 Kids Get Dramatic With Help From Playwright

by Christopher Henderson

Assistant Editor

After 10 weeks studying with playwright Candido Tirado, sixth-grader Ashley Ukwubiwe is ready to pitch her first screenplay.

Ashley is eager to take the next step after completing an in-school theater course with the award-winning dramatist at PS 147 in Cambria Heights. On Tuesday, at the conclusion of the program, Tirado brought in professional actors to perform short pieces written by Ashley and her classmates.

Immediately following the performance, Ashley pitched her screenplay, which follows a young girl with an amputated leg, to Candido. Although she wrote the script before the course, she credits Tirado with giving her more confidence.

"People think we can't write like adults. But we can, and we have," she said.

Tirado's course is part of a nonprofit

program called Arts Connection that provides arts curriculums for schools throughout the city. Arts Connection annually reaches about 95-125 schools with courses in visual arts, literary arts, music, theater, and most recently film and video production, according to program manager Lonnie Harrington.

"We try to produce a marriage of art and what is being taught in the classroom," he said.

PS 147 is using Arts Connection in every grade. Kindergartners and first-graders are learning puppetry, the second-grade is creating models of the Brooklyn Bridge, fourth graders are putting together a banner, and the third- and fifth- grades are studying dance. Principal Anne Cohen and Gifted and Talented Teacher Maxine Coltoff brought the program to the school.

"We're trying to show them how art can enrich their lives," Coltoff said.

Tuesday's performance gave the children a chance to see their work put on in front of an audience of their peers. More than 100 students packed into the school's multipurpose area.

After jostling for seats, students settled in and watched actors Marilyn Torres, Danny Rivera, Dominic Colon and Nickaruy Rodriguez perform their plays.

Each piece involved a person, an animal and an object. The student-writers created Oz-like scenarios where a Dr Pepper bottle rejects a place in the refrigerator and a wrestling mat complains about body slams.

"I try to get them to think about drama. I introduced the concept of conflict," Tirado said.

The idea for scenes based around talking objects came from a student.

"One kid wrote a play about a bed trying to get him up so he could go to school. It was so creative I introduced it to the rest of the children.

"Children are very funny and very lively. They have a great sense of humor," he said.

Tirado, a two-time recipient of the New York Foundation of the Arts Fellowship, has worked with Arts Connection for several years. He teaches classes once a week taking the students through a series of writing and acting exercises.

One lesson involves the students pairing off and writing a script one line at a time by passing it back and forth. In another exercise, the children improvise an entire scene.

Once the course is complete, he brings the actors in to allow students to see their work done by professionals.

The program gives the actors, who read the scenes without any preparation, a chance to work on their craft.

"Kids are the best audience," said Colon, who has a role in the upcoming Samuel L. Jackson film, 'Freedomland.' "You can tell very easily what works and what doesn't work."

His partner, Torres, added that children notice when a performance is not going well.

"You can't give them anything less than you would give a regular audience," she said.

For his part, Rivera appreciates that theater programs have improved from his days as a student.

"When I was in elementary school, it was an after-school program with a teacher. Now it's more professional. They brought in an actual playwright. It's more serious now. The kids need it more."

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— Ashley Ukwubiwe, sixth-grader