Yale University President’s Public Service Fellowship

Proposal for Fellowship Placement • Summer 2020

• Organization: Yale Repertory Theatre/Yale School of Drama’s Dwight/Edgewood Project

• Full street address of organization (Fellows must be provided with a desk and computer at placement site and cannot work remotely): University Theatre, 222 York Street, New Haven, CT 06520-8244

• Website: https://www.yalerep.org/productions-and-programs/youth-programs

• Name and title of person who will be the Fellow’s direct supervisor (the supervisor must be available to supervise Fellow on a daily basis): Emalie Mayo, Project Coordinator

• Phone number and e-mail address of proposed direct supervisor: 2-1591; emalie.mayo@yale.edu

• Placement dates (8-11 weeks between Tuesday, May 26 and Friday, August 7, 2020):

Placement must begin on Monday, May 10th, ending Friday, July 10th, 2020

• Are placement dates flexible? If so, please describe: The dates between May 10th and June 20th are not flexible, due to the specific program start and end dates dictated by the New Haven Public Schools academic calendar.

• Proposed work schedule (placements should be equivalent to full-time and not more than 37.5 hours/week): Actual hours may vary but generally the day runs from 11:00 am–7:00 pm Monday- Friday, with some weekend/evening responsibilities; the 7.5-hour day span may vary during technical rehearsals, which stretch to approximately 10 hour days.

Placement Description

• Organization description (mission statement, population served. 150 words or less.):
Dwight/Edgewood Project (D/EP) is a community outreach program created in 1995 by Yale School of Drama/Yale Repertory Theatre. Modeled after the acclaimed 52nd Street Project in New York, D/EP pairs children in grades 6-7 from New Haven's Barnard Environmental Studies Magnet School with YSD students. Over an intensive four weeks, students learn how to write a play, while experiencing success and empowerment through the arts on Yale’s campus. The youth, identified by the school’s administration/teachers, are interested in storytelling (but not necessarily theater) and can sustain the rigor of the program. The children are mentored by YSD students through the entire creative process, beginning with a blank page and culminating in a performance of their original works, produced and performed by their YSD mentors. Additionally, the program offers participating YSD students an opportunity to hone their teaching skills while providing a valuable way to connect with their neighboring community.

- **Write a 1-2 sentence summary of the work that the Fellow would be conducting**

  The Fellow will mentor middle school student participants: most are paired 1:1 with a student, or support several students, throughout the program in various capacities. Additionally, the Fellow will provide critical administrative support for the program’s Management Team and Yale Rep’s WILL POWER! initiative. School of Drama student preferred.

- **Write a more complete description of the specific project you propose and list the duties/outcomes expected of the Fellow. (Suggested length: one to two pages.)**

  Dwight/Edgewood Project’s 26th season will continue to celebrate not only the program’s longevity but also our public school partnership. These two elements will serve to enhance an already strong arts education initiative while committing to its core objectives. D/EP offers Yale School of Drama students the opportunity to share the love of their craft with the community in which they reside while learning valuable skills that often transcend their specific program of study. Also, D/EP gives the middle school participants who are given the title of Playwright on day one, the skills of how to write a play and all the elements involved by taking their written word from the page to the stage. Most importantly, D/EP offers them an avenue where their voice is validated. All components are within the context of a larger company where different generations come together in pursuit of a common goal.

  D/EP is a four-week after school program with a time-tested curriculum:

  Week 1 is about Company Building and Theater Making. Playwrights and Mentors learn about each other through theater games and social/emotional activities, followed by learning about technical theater through activities led by the Design Mentors. The objective
of this week, beyond getting to know one another, is to begin building a theater vocabulary, which will be incorporated into their learning process in week 2.

Week 2 is dedicated to the Playmaking curriculum. Led by a Teaching Artist - typically a former D/EP participant, and guided by the Mentors, the Playwrights learn the step-by-step process of playwriting through visualization and writing exercises. At the end of week 2, every Playwright will have written a practice play that is read out loud by the mentors. This week also ends with the one-on-one pairing of Playwright and Mentor; this partnership will grow over the weekend writing retreat that begins at the end of week 2.

At the end of week 2, the full company of Playwrights, Mentors, Teaching Artist, Designers, Directors, Producing Director, General Manager, and Project Coordinator travel to a camp in northeastern Connecticut for a weekend retreat from Friday evening to Sunday where the Playwrights, supported by their Mentors and the Teaching Artist, will write their original play. The weekend also features games, waterfront activities, campfire songs, s’mores, as well as more opportunity for this company of artists to strengthen their relationships.

In Week 3, it should be noted that the adult company members who attend the retreat do not get a day off before we jump right into this week’s activities of design, rehearsals, prop making, and set building. These activities fully include the Playwrights into the entire process: drawing their ideas, painting props, watching rehearsals, and giving notes. Mentors are assigned acting roles in two of the eight plays (acting in their Playwright’s play and one additional play). The week will end with final run-throughs of all eight plays, where everyone gets to see the progress each team has accomplished.

Week 4 includes Technical Rehearsals, Performances, Receptions, and Strike. This final week is a whirlwind; the adult company rehearses in the morning, then again in the afternoon when the Playwrights are present, as lights, sound, and costumes are added. The Playwrights will also spend time out of rehearsal to record voice-overs, which serve as the introduction to each of their plays during performances, create thank-you projects for their mentors, and join an activity lead by a visiting Teaching Artist. These activities offer the Playwrights the chance to come back together and become artists once again. Past years have seen physical storytelling of an element of their play, basic fight choreography, and peer interviews. The Playwrights then share what they learned with the adult company before the final dress rehearsal.

Week 4 culminates with performances of all 8 original plays for families, teachers, and friends; 4 on Friday night, 4 on Saturday night, each night concluding with a reception. Following Saturday’s final reception, the Playwrights will say their final goodbyes, and then the entire adult company will strike the production.
The next two weeks are dedicated to closing the program; the Fellow is a critical part of this process. Once D/EP has been “put to bed”, the Fellow will then assist the Producing Director, General Manager and Project Coordinator with any remaining D/EP requirements (final reports to funders, delivering packages of materials to the Playwrights, debrief meeting with Barnard School, inventory of materials, etc.), followed by possible research associated with Yale Repertory Theatre’s academic-year youth initiative, WILL POWER!

Although D/EP appears to be fully structured, it is important to note that each year is enhanced by what is learned the previous year. Since 2012, two training sessions with a social worker from the Yale Child Study Center are offered to the adult company, providing them with tools to better respond to some of the challenges experienced by children from the New Haven community. Additionally, each new company of adults offers the program new insights and experiences. D/EP’s success is based on building on what has worked while leaving room for the gifts each Mentor and Playwright brings to the table.

- List specific skills/experience required for the project:

The Fellow should:
- Have an interest in and enjoy working with middle school aged children from New Haven
- Enjoy the challenge of acting as they may perform in at least two of the original plays
- Assist in creation and implementation of introductory theater curriculum, i.e.: leading theater games, encouraging Playwrights to be their most creative selves
- Assist in the creation of scenery and props, production load-in and strike
- Work both collaboratively and independently; take direction from peers serving in managerial positions
- Computer literacy is a must, i.e., the creation of digital photo archives, signage, handouts, etc.
- Must be self-motivated, flexible, and have good organizational, interpersonal, and time management skills
- Administrative office skills very helpful
- Will assist in the closing of the program by creating final reports, sponsor correspondence, participant correspondence

- Additional requirements (e.g., a car or weekend working hours). If a car is required, include information regarding parking arrangements and mileage reimbursement):

Pass a required background check
- Preferred: Valid US (including US territories) or Canadian driver’s license *(NOTE: company vehicles & parking are provided)*
- If a licensed driver, must complete Yale University driver awareness training class
- Program includes work outside of the regular work week; includes mandatory weekend writing retreat off campus, theater load-in on one weekend, as well as one Saturday rehearsal, performance and strike (attendance mandatory)
- Hours may vary throughout the program and may involve some evening rehearsals, meetings, and/or administrative work

- Briefly describe the work that Yale PPSF Fellows have done with your organization in the past and present. If you have not worked with Yale Fellows, describe any work that Yale students have done with your organization:

Since D/EP's inception in 1995, students from Yale School of Drama have played crucial roles in the development and continuity of this initiative. Those YSD students are often trained to serve as Mentors to the young D/EP Playwrights, work one-on-one with each child, actively lead classes/workshops/group theater games, and participate in the mandatory two-day retreat where the original plays are developed under the direction of a Teaching Artist.

15+ YSD students have now worked with D/EP through PPSF in several capacities: Producing Director, General Manager, Designer, Production Stage Manager, and Mentor. In each of those roles, the Fellow was a critical piece in ensuring the success of the program, either by assisting with the general management, partnering with an individual student, creating the world of our Playwrights’ work, assist in the close of the program, as well as providing support to Yale Rep’s annual WILL POWER! initiative following D/EP’s close. In past years, our Fellows were critical in executing many administrative tasks throughout the entire program and beyond its close. The Fellows allowed us to get tasks done efficiently and are included in our weekly management meetings about the direction of the program both in the present and the future.
At 25 Years, Dwight/Edgewood Gets Magical

Lucy Gellman | June 21st, 2019

Actors/mentors David Mitsch and Adrienne Wells with playwright Antwain N. Johnson, Jr.
Lucy Gellman Photos.
A rapping dolphin helps out a snake who just wants to do right by his grandfather. A talking, bilingual wad of purple gum gets stuck in the talons of a tropical bird—deliberately. A dinosaur and furry monster spar to heavy metal, then realize they have a lot in common after all.

An alien gives his prized possession away to a slug, so the slug’s government won’t take her three babies away. Two gorillas jam like there’s no tomorrow. And all of them do it without ever leaving a room in New Haven.

These are just some of the stories that populate the 25th annual Dwight/Edgewood Project (DEP), a collaboration between the Yale School of Drama (YSD) and eight students-turned-playwrights from Barnard Environmental Studies Magnet School. For four weeks, students work one-on-one with a mentor from the Yale School of Drama to pitch, write and edit a play, which is then fully produced and acted by their mentor and one other YSD student.
The program includes a weekend spent at a sleep-away camp, during which students both work on writing and learn about aspects of theater including sound, lighting, and production. It concludes with two nights of performances this Friday and Saturday at the Off Broadway Theater in downtown New Haven. Both performances begin at 7 p.m.

Friday night will include four short plays by students Celis Bell, Michelle Sagun, Julissa Gasca, and Jyce Relaford. Saturday night includes performances from Isaac Dones, Olivia Mack, Adriana Tristanis, and Antwain N. Johnson, Jr.

“It becomes a family really fast, and it’s like they’re all coming home,” said Emalie Mayo, who has served as DEP project coordinator for the last five years. “It’s amazing to watch shy kids come out of being really, really quiet to being confident, taking criticism, and giving notes—that’s the backbone of the program.”
Top: Alex Lubischer in Michelle Sagun’s *Evil Ruby*. Bottom: Actors JJ McGlone and Alexandra Maurice with playwright Celis Bell.

This year, students have transformed the small theater into a place where magic can happen at any time—and frequently does. As the lights go down for the first time on Celis Bell’s *What You See Vs. What Is Me*, viewers are transported to an underwater kingdom, where Snappy The Snake (JJ McGlone) and Whalley- Anne the Dolphin (Alexandra Maurice) come face-to-face with each other.

Snappy is timid and lisping through sentences, desperate for affection; Whalley- Anne literally sparkles in shimmering blue, but worries that she won’t make any friends in her new school.

It’s a friendly meet cute with a middle school temperament: the two orbit each other with awkward and barbed conversation, confiding in their journals when everything seems to be going downhill. They try again until they’re finally
getting somewhere. Whalley-Anne explains that she was hurt by an insult, because she’s always been self conscious about the size of her big blue head. Snappy tells her he’s been reeling from the death of his grandfather, who was strangled by a human while out for a swim.

Suddenly it doesn’t seem like a far-flung underwater middle school at all, but the locker-lined hallway of any school in New Haven.

Each of the plays have that sensibility, very much alive with wisdom and candor. Several characters become unlikely allies: a cranky male dove who still dreams of his mother (David Mitsch) and young energetic penguin (Doireann Mac Mahon), an evil seahorse who isn’t actually so evil (Alex Lubischer) and acorn-peddling squirrel who loses sight of her family (Adrienne Wells) only after it’s too late, a camo-clad alien named Ivory (Adam Shaukat) who risks his reputation for another creature’s wellbeing.

But not all of the plays have happy endings, stepping around the audience’s need for resolution for something more interesting and much truer to life. In
Julissa Gasca’s extraordinary Connected Wishes, Chicle (a hysterical José Espinosa) is a Spanglish-spitting piece of grape gum who befriends Oliver Okkurrt the Bird (Adam Shaukat), in an unlikely pairing that leaves the two permanently changed, and Chicle’s confidant Bean (played by a cardboard cutout of a lima bean) with a new best friend. It is touching and hilarious until it’s also deeply existential, and hot tears are rolling fast down your face.

Or I, Black Dress, by sixth grader Adriana Tristanis. In the work, Luna and Aria (JJ McGlone and Alex Lubischer, both in drag) are best friends, haunted by the fact that the outside world does not want them to be together. The reason is entirely cosmetic: Luna, dressed in all black, is a shadow. Aria, clad in creams and bright yellows, is a sunlight. And Luna is the only shadow in their entire high school. When she comes back with a new dress that reinforces her shadow-ness, it literally begins to kill her.

It is searingly true to life—particularly in a city that became a national blueprint for urban renewal and redlining—with a macabre ending that keeps the viewer guessing. When Aria expresses outrage at the fact that the two are being pushed apart her plea seems instantly relatable When she delights at the dark quiet
wonder of Luna’s side of town, she is every Wooster Square neighbor shedding their parents’ NIMBYism on Grand Avenue. And when Luna is teased for her appearance, it cuts right to one’s heart.

José Espinosa and Alexandra Maurice in Olivia Mack’s The Weird Friendship.

While there is plenty of middle school humor there too—at least one character pees on himself, and it gets a laugh or ten—students have embraced this power to experiment, taking risks that some theater makers may never reach in their lifetimes.

Alexandra Maurice, a mentor who is a rising second-year at the Yale School of Drama, recalled watching students begin the program last moth with timidity and self-doubt, and grow into a cohort of wonderfully loud and brave playwrights. This year, bravery has been their theme, including a song that includes the lyrics “all you have to do is be brave/even if it’s scary.”

“For me, the best part of this program has been seeing this journey that all of
these kids come in and wrestle with,” she said at a final tech rehearsal on Friday. “When they come in, you can already sense that they’ve been socialized to be small. We give them space to be big and expressive.”

“To watch them trust their own voices, and know that they are enough ... it’s been amazing,” she added.

That sense of being enough has also resonated for Olivia Mack, for whom Maurice was a mentor. In her play The Weird Friendship, Andi The Dinosaur (Maurice) and Harry the “Harry” Monster (José Espinosa) meet on Bedtime Planet, where Andi fittingly clutches at her stuffed animal, sleeps a lot, and changes color when she gets scared.

Both are intrigued and a little skittish—Andi does not look like Harry and Harry does not look like her. There’s also the fact that Harry is from another planet entirely, and wants to get back there. Is it possible they can get past their differences and be friends? Can they take their happenstance meeting as a chance to learn from each other?
When she was working on the script, Mack said she knew she wanted to show the audience that appearances only run skin-deep. She chose Andi’s character because she likes dinosaurs, and made Harry red and furry for the same reason. She wanted their friendship to double as a message to the audience, she said.

“It doesn’t matter what you look like, it matters how you act and how people act around you,” she said. “It doesn’t matter if you’re tall and hairy or small, like a mouse. It just matters how you act.”

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