

# PROJECT UPDATE

Volume 37

July, 2001

## Don't Ask!

How many great plays by kids can you fit into one evening? We're Just Askin'... we only ever try to do ten at a time. Which is exactly what we did back in March at HB Playwright's Foundation with the Winter 2001 Playmaking plays, better known as *Just Askin': The Curiosity Plays*.

Ani Kehr's *Friendship* started off the evening on a raucous note, as hippie chick **Maria Tucci** and tough guy **Josh Lewis** duked it out over their deepest darkest fears and the value of meditation (of course, they made up in the end). In **Wonkezeh Newenle's** Tai Chi nail-biter, *Gonlap Disagrees*, **Reed Birney** played a Jackie Chan wannabe who thought he could win the big tournament. His brother, **Gonlap (Arthur French)**, thought somewhat differently. Next up was **Katherine Acosta's** *I Want, You Want*, featuring **Tanya Gingerich** as an enthusiastic lottery winner, and **Keira Naughton** as her diabolical (and covetous) next-door neighbor. In *The Drain*, **Edwin Toro** examined the problems with finding a bag of marijuana lying around on the basketball court. **Marissa Copeland** and **Teagle Bougere** were the substance-abusing athletes. The act closed memorably with **Suzette Santana's** *Single Beauties*, in which **Lisa Leguillou** was not quite a quick enough study for her singing partner, **Edie Falco**. Luckily, she shaped up in time for the big show.

To kick off Act II, **Barry Myers** provided another sober reminder that it's not easy being green in *The Woodsman and The Tree*, in which Woodsman **Robert Colston** made life pretty tough for Tree **Anthony Barrile**. **Nikki Rosario**



CARA MARCOUS

followed with her family drama, *If You Could Understand Me*, which pitted **Jennifer Ostrega**, and her cat, **Phlegm**, against really (really, really) overprotective Mom, **Nedra Gallegos**. In *The Diseased Monkey*, **Alex Kehr** pointed out that, nature being what it is, predator and prey can't even be friends in Heaven. **James Naughton** was the unfortunate title animal, with **Frank Wood** as the equally unfortunate Cheetah who ate him for lunch, and suffered the consequences. In **Ariana Casablanca's**

*Amanda and JJ*, **Myra Lucretia Taylor** and **Godfrey L. Simmons, Jr.** were the title couple who proved that you can find true love in a dance club. To close out the evening, **Stephanie Bast** and **Kevin Geer** played siblings in **Joshua Joya's** moving *Paint Brush*, showing that strong family ties can transcend anger, frustration, and the decapitation of a favorite teddy bear.

In case you're curious, the strong guiding hands behind this wonderful set of plays were our stalwart dramaturg/directors: **Liliana Amador**, **Jessica Bauman**, **Michael Bernard**, **Michael Dolan**, **Peter Jay Fernandez**, **Gus Rogerson**, **Maury Schott**, **Ashby Semple**, **Liz Tuccillo**, **Joe White** and **Saudia Young**. We're also grateful to awesome composer **Rusty Magee**, whose versatile piano churned out tunes to match the ingenuity of the kids' lyrics (that's hard). We would have been (literally) out in the cold without the generosity of our Kent, Connecticut hosts for the weekend away: **Sam and Lynn Waterson**, **Dave and Susie Ott**, and especially the fabulous **Graham family (Stephen, Cathy, Timothy and Juliet)**, who provided the time and space for the budding playwrights to do their thing.

If you're now desperately askin' when the next Playmaking show is, you'll have to wait till December... but, we promise, it will be worth the wait! MS-Z

## ALIEN INVASION SURPRISINGLY FUN

Normally, when you see space travelers awakened from cryogenic hyper-sleep you can count on a bloodbath, with creatures exploding out of people's chests during dinner.

Not so at **52001: A Space Benefit**, the Project's annual gala held on Monday, May 7, 2001. Thankfully, the only things bursting forth from the trekkers were songs and jokes.



GRB



Now Touring England: **Judy Agosto (Miranda)** and **Larry Nathanson (Prospero)** in *The Tempest*. Watch for a full report in our next issue.

The interior of the **Altman Building** was transported into the future by the innovative decorations of **Great Performances** catering, featuring alien trees and glowing orbs as centerpieces. In keeping with the space theme, **Ronnie Davis** of G.P.



WENDY STULBERG

*Tiffany and Fran as hapless astronauts.*

devised the family-style menu of Saturn Fried Chicken, Laser Lite Salad and Roast Vulcan Beast – which tasted just like beef.

Over 500 guests watched as General Leigh Speaking (**Tiffany Butler**) and Major Spacecase (**Frances McDormand**) zoomed about the cosmos in search of comedy. Their big opening number was interrupted, however, by visitors from the distant future **Chore Boy** (**Michael Feliciano**) and **Borax** (**Oliver Platt**) who warned of the dangers of comedy on the development of the adolescent psyche. To muddle matters further, **Spongemop** and **Lestoil** (**Jeremy Butler** and **Maria Tucci**) turned up next, claiming that the other visitors were out to destroy the Project. Now hopelessly confused, the space cadets called on the help of the interstellar arbiter (a glass ball with the voice of **Dan Castellaneta**) and its bearers **Octavia Rodriguez** and **Lewis Black**. They revealed that **Borax** was an evil alien vulnerable to the sound of laughter. He was then vanquished by means of jokes submitted by the audience.

This space opera by **Michael Bernard**, **Willie Reale** and **John Sheehy** was directed by **Jonathan Bernstein**, with the help of Creative Consultant **Becky Browder**. The set was designed by **Kevin Roach**, the lights by **Greg MacPherson**, sound by **Tom Morse**, and the costumes by **Crystal Thompson**. **Rusty Magee** wrote the musical score and the performance was stage managed by **Hank Meiman** with music direction by **Rusty** and **Virginia Pike**.

The entire event was tremendously successful, our highest grossing party to date. Especially helpful in making it that way were **Tom Cruise**, **Arthur Dantchik**, the **Dawkins Family Foundation**, **Entertainment Weekly**, **Heidi Ettinger**, **Wendy Ettinger & Derek McLane**, **Louis & Patrice Friedman**, **Angelina Fiordellisi & Matt Williams**, **Cathy & Stephen Graham**, **Jeremy Posner**, **Frances & Colin Greer**, **Laura Valeroso**, **Jenny Wiener & Mosaic Entertainment** and **Jeffrey Yass**. As the guests left, they were rewarded with gift bags in the form of backpacks donated by **Gap Inc.**, and filled by **Au'Some Candies**, **Coleman Company**, **Gap**, **Noggin**, **Scholastic Inc.**, **Sesame Workshop**, **John A. Vassilaros & Sons Coffee** and **Watkins Inc.**

JS

## Re-playing It For Laughs

Old Noah Webster couldn't have written a better definition of that fine English word "picnic" than the one provided on May 19 by the Project's annual Replay Picnic,

held this year at our Two-on-Two stomping grounds, the country seat of our good friends **Maria Tucci** and **Robert Gottlieb**. Fourteen hardened Project playwrights- **Britney Castro**, **Octavia Rodriguez**, **Jeremy Butler**, **Angel Matta**, **Samantha Padilla**, **Kimani**



JOHN SHEEHY

*Bruce McVittie takes flight as J.J.*

**Lewis**, **Anthony Mejia**, **Mark Gamero**, **Mike Grullon**, **Stephen Galimidi**, **Wendy Rivera**, **Lizette Natera**, **Leah Galimidi**, and **Akeem Frazer**- spent eight weeks under the expert guidance of Playmaking Director **Michael Bernard**, learning the finer points of drama and putting that knowledge together with their brilliance to whip up their stellar second efforts. They then led a caravan of eager adults up the Taconic for a day of play acting and, of course, pick-nicking. Highlights included **Bruce MacVittie's** long awaited return to the Project stage (in this case, the side porch) as a kid with several hematomas on his posterior in **Jeremy Butler's J.J. Tries To Fly**, **Megan Sandberg-Zakian's** main squeeze **Kurt Wooton** as **Knicks** coach **Jeff Van Gundy** (who answers the phone by saying "Van Gundy"), in **Angel Matta's Knicks Lost** directed by the Project's genius of the sports play **Peter Herdrich**, and **Catherine Mueller's** epic star turn as a voluble addict in



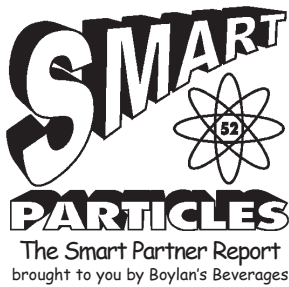
WAITING

*Mike Grullon and Angel Matta reviewing scripts with director Peter Herdrich*

**Leah Galimidi's They Call Her Mrs. B.** Suffice it to say that everyone involved outshone the hot sun and then found some shade so they could consume large quantities of fat and sugar. After digesting, so as to avoid cramps, a whole bunch of folks threw themselves into a COLD pool. Thanks to our excellent hosts. It was fun. GR

## Gotta Get an Otto!

On Monday June 4, The 52nd Street Project was honored by New York City's **Castillo Theatre** with an **Otto Rene Castillo Award for Political Theater**, otherwise known as an Otto. Fellow honorees at the event included the **Steppenwolf Theater Company**, the **Bread and Puppet Theater** and playwright/poet **Sonia Sanchez**. The Project, nattily represented by **Gus Rogerson**, **George Babiak**, and **Megan Sandberg-Zakian**, was especially pleased to have as one of its presenters **Willie Reale's** old pal **Dominic Chianese**, known to HBO viewers as **Uncle Junior** on *The Sopranos*. The only problem is that now everybody knows the Project has mob connections. **John Sheehy** has volunteered to take the rap (he is the bag-man, after all) and should be out in 10 to 20. GR



Smart Partners **Felicita Jerez** and **Liliana Amador** have a lot in common. Both have Spanish last names (Felicita's means "sherry," Liliana's means "lover") Both were born in Latin America (Felicita in Guatemala, and Liliana in Colombia) and enjoy learning about their roots. And both

recount the same experience as the most memorable of their Smart Partner year.

Earlier this year, the team read aloud "*I, Rigoberta Menchu*," the life story of a Guatemalan indigenous rights activist who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Her compelling book opened their eyes to the rich culture of indigenous people and their terribly violent treatment under the military-led Guatemalan government in the 1970-80's. (All of Rigoberta's family members were tortured and killed before she escaped into exile.)

It was remarkable, then, that days after completing her book, Liliana and Felicita were standing face-to-face with this inspiring woman. (Rigoberta in N.Y. to raise money for her foundation for indigenous peoples' rights.) Liliana was proud that Felicita, the only teenager in the audience, boldly raised her hand to ask if the violence was still going on in Guatemala. Rigoberta explained that while conditions have somewhat improved, the struggle still continues. She added with tears in her eyes that most people don't realize the majority of victims were children no older than Felicita. The remark made an indelible impression on the Smart Partner team. *JF-A*



Felicita Jerez, Julie Feldman-Abe, Liliana Amador, and Rigoberta Menchu

### Sport, Food and Literature

Some jumped barefoot for balls, others worked on their putting skills at **Smart Party 2001**, the end-of-the-year celebration on the riverfront at Pier 25. Smart Partners enjoyed beach volleyball and mini-golf alongside stunning river views. After burgers and ice cream, the newest edition of *Fivey*, the Project's literary magazine, was handed out -- hot off the press. A beautiful silence descended over the group as partners pored over the kids' articles, poems and stories exploring "Our Hell's Kitchen." That's the kind of party we like, where everyone is reading! (Pick up your own copy at the Clubhouse.) *JF-A*

## WANTED:

### Smart Partner Adult Volunteers

If you have 90 minutes free once a week (September through June,) a love of learning and a heart of gold, please contact Director of Education **Julie Feldman-Abe** at the Project. Adults are guaranteed to learn as much or more than their S.P. kid!



The following foundations, corporations and government agencies recently made generous grants to the Project. We are grateful to them for their support as well as to the many individuals who help sustain the Project's programs year-round.

Bear Stearns	\$10,000
Capital Group	\$5,000
Comedy Central	\$2,500
Department of Youth and Community Development	\$12,000
Educational Foundation of America	\$10,000
Entertainment Weekly	\$5,000
Rosetta W. Harris Charitable Lead Trust	\$1,000
Hennessy Foundation	\$7,500
Ann M. Martin Foundation	\$12,500
Mosaic Entertainment	\$20,000
Newman's Own	\$4,000
New World Foundation	\$5,000
Staging and Design	\$1,250
Surdna Foundation	\$40,000
TaxPro Financial Network	\$1,000
John A. Vassilaros & Sons, Inc.	\$2,500
West Bank Cafe	\$1,000
Yorke Construction	\$2,500

### The Return of The Project Jackets

Well, maybe. We're trying to see if there is enough interest to warrant placing an order for some more Project jackets. If you'd like to be the proud owner of one of these splendid garments, give **John Sheehy** a call at the office.



The Blue Denim



The Car Coat

The jackets feature a large embroidered version of the Project's Shel Silverstein logo in green and red on the back. We think that the denim jacket will cost around \$85 and the car coat will be \$150, but we'll have more information later on. We need a minimum of 12 in either style to place the order, so the more, the better. *GB*

The 52nd Street Project  
500 West 52nd St., #2B  
New York, NY 10019

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Fivey is out! Stop by the Clubhouse to pick up your copy.

PROJECT **P.U.** UPDATE

Editor-in-Chief: George R. Babiak



**Martha Velie-Gass & Pat McQuade Ritter**

**MARTHA**

**Occupation:** Teacher/Director for pre-school.  
**Hobbies:** Walking, swimming, reading.  
**Last Book Read:** *Bee Season* by Myla Goldberg  
**Last Trip:** Block Island, naturally.  
**Best Project memory:** "Dancing in the conga line to La Bamba with Willie at the lead at Block Island many moons ago."  
**Credo:** "Take a walk outside every day."  
**Advice to kids:** "Only push the snooze button once."  
**Place of birth:** Danbury, CT  
**Habitat:** Cambridge, Mass.  
**Favorite thing about the Project:** The spirit.

*This issue marks our first-ever dual profile. Martha and Pat (seen here with Project kids Charina Corbett and Tanika Parson) have been chefs for us on Block Island every summer since the first one 16 years ago.*



**PAT**

**Occupation:** Teacher/Director for pre-school (Could this be mere coincidence?).  
**Hobbies:** Gardening, reading, biking, kayaking.  
**Last Book Read:** *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant  
**Last Trip:** The Isle of Shoals, off the coast of New Hampshire  
**Best Project memory:** "Everyone singing together around the decrepit piano in the Biaggi house."  
**Credo:** "Breathe deeply."  
**Advice to kids:** "Take time to watch the sunset and smell the roses."  
**Place of birth:** Providence, Rhode Island  
**Habitat:** Rye, New Hampshire  
**Favorite thing about the Project:** Seeing the kids coming back and growing up. CO

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Last newsletter it was babies. Now it's a downpour of engagements! Our very own Associate Artistic Director, **Michael Bernard**, took volunteer par excellence **Annie Torsiglieri** out to a romantic dinner at Café des Artistes. All week long he had been telling Annie that he had something to ask her but he couldn't remember what it was. While they dined, **Joe Mihalow** festooned their bedroom with candles and rose petals. When they returned Michael went into the bedroom and said, "Annie, I remember what I had to tell you!" Annie came into the magical room and Michael dropped to his knee. You know the rest. In grand project tradition, they will be married on Block Island in the Fall. (Like a certain gossip columnist who also met her spouse in that magical place). Not to be out done by his best friend, **Adam Felber** proposed to **Jeanne Simpson** within weeks of Michael's proposal. You can see the affianced couples in the Tyler Hill One-on-Ones.

On the baby front **Debbon Ayer** and **Rob Morrow** had a lovely baby girl on April 25th. Beginning a new family tradition, they named her **Tu Morrow**. (Cute, huh?) **Tracy Thorne** and **Edmond Lewis** also have an addition to the family: **Mabel Joan** who was born on Feb. 7th and weighed 8lbs, 5 oz!

We would like to thank **Mauricio Feldman-Abe** (who was engaged to **Julie Feldman** before he married her), for giving birth to the latest issue of *Fivey*, the Smart Partner literary magazine (see the little picture above). He has done a beautiful job on the design.

All of us here at the Project would like to congratulate **Mary Testa** for her Tony nomination and **Robert Sean Leonard** for his Tony Award. We always knew they were the best by their stellar work here at The Project. Bob's award was taken from him after the show, and he has been heard to say "If I knew it was going to take this long to get it engraved, I would have scratched my name into it with my teeth."

And finally, don't miss ONCE AROUND THE CITY. This great new musical by **Willie and Rob Reale** has so many Project people working on it, we could have produced it. It is produced by **Ron Kastner**, directed by **Mark-Linn Baker**, dramaturged by **Becky Browder**, designed by **Adrienne Lobel-Baker**, and features: **Jane Bodle**, **Peter-Jay Fernandez**, **Joe Grifasi**, **Michael Potts**, **Stephen DeRosa**, and **Annie Torsiglieri**. It's at the Second Stage Theater on 43rd street through July. We hear it's a very hot ticket!

CO