

And now for something completely different:



Actor empowers students through theatre



Naomi Tessler, 27, uses theatre to build confidence, literacy and communication skills.

By RITA POLIAKOV
Staff Reporter

Naomi Tessler was always a shy kid, the one hiding behind her older sister.

Then she starred in her kindergarten play. And everything changed.

"I was Snow White," Tessler said. "It truly brought me out of myself. I became very outgoing after that performance. I found my voice through theatre. Through being able to speak to an audience. I realized I can do this all the time."

And she does.

Tessler, 27, holds drama workshops through Branch Out Theatre, a therapeutic theatre company. The actor, who likes to call herself a drama facilitator rather than teacher, uses acting as a way to improve literacy, build confidence, expand communication skills and teach conflict resolution.

Tessler, who has a master's degree in educational theatre, works with all age groups and demographics, from children to seniors.

"I customize workshops based on the needs of my clients... I've worked... with children as young as four to six and also worked with seniors and teenagers and adults," she said. "Theatre is the tool I use to motivate self-expression, creativity and self awareness."

For Tessler, drama is about more than memorizing scripts and enunciating. It's a release.

"I often find that people who come to the workshops, they may speak to you beforehand and say, 'I'm a little bit shy, a little bit hesitant.' When given their chance to express themselves, they use the biggest movements," she said. "[Theatre] is really an invitation to express themselves with creativity. I find many people... are waiting to be invited to use their creativity more."

While Tessler originally studied English literature in university, she also took drama courses at the University of British Columbia and performed in a school play every year. This was partly a result of her summers as a teenager, when she started getting leading roles in her camp's plays.

"I guess summertime for me was where I started getting bigger roles in musicals," she said, adding that she also joined her high school's drama club.

In the summer of 2008, Tessler started seeing theatre in a different light. That summer, she spent two weeks in Brazil participating in a workshop led by her mentor, Augusto Boal. Boal founded Theatre of the Oppressed, which encourages social change through drama.

"Basically it's a different style of theatre. It gives

different populations a chance to voice their communities' experience through theatre," Tessler said, adding that Boal facilitated drama workshops in prisons and mental institutions.

These workshops involve creating a piece of theatre based on community issues. The piece is performed twice, and the audience is invited to come onstage and try to change the plot the second time.

"It basically gives people a chance to empower themselves and their communities, and find ways to work through the oppression they personally are facing," she said.

Tessler uses this style in her workshops, which also include theatre games, improvisation and physical theatre.

While she works in Toronto, the actor has taken her work around the world, including to India and Japan.

In India, she worked with a woman's group as well as an AIDS group, where she used theatre as a way to open up a dialogue about the disease.

"Everyone I met in the group weren't able to share with their family that they had AIDS. They had no support other than the group. The workshop was all about expressing [themselves]," she said, adding that theatre is ideal for this.

"Theatre offers that rehearsal space, that chance for practising. When you put things in the world in theatre, you're stepping outside yourself. You're giving yourself a chance to step into... someone else's shoes."

In Japan, Tessler's experience was a bit of a fluke. She had been teaching English in Japan when

she stumbled into a centre for mentally challenged adults while sight-seeing.

"I thought it was an art gallery. It is, it showcased all art by participants. I walked in and asked if I could volunteer in my broken Japanese. Reluctantly, they agreed," she said, explaining that she facilitated theatrical workshops there for three or four months.

For Tessler, her workshops are about the journey.

"I love seeing people's journey through that shy character to someone who's completely outgoing," she said. "To get them to that state of empowerment... it makes me feel really grateful."

Apart from facilitating workshops, Tessler also acts. She recently finished performing in *Teenage Depression*, a two-woman show produced by Back Burner Productions.

The show, a dark comedy, centres on a teenager who calls into a suicide hotline, where Tessler's character, who hasn't quite finished her training, answers.

"I have no idea what to say. Throughout the course of the play, my friend commits suicide. You see my character go through a humorous... role to a [darker] role," she said.

For Tessler, it's difficult to transition from her role to her everyday life.

"I really tune into the emotions of the character... It was a challenge to get to that space of tragedy and to get out of it," she said.

For more information about Tessler and her workshops, visit www.branchouttheatre.com.



Naomi Tessler, left, runs workshops that include theatre games, physical theatre and improvisation.



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