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For young actors, plays mirrors reality

They, too, must face tough choices

By Lynda Gorov
GLOBE STAFF

For the umpteenth time on a recent weeknight, James Vesce had had enough. He had a play to direct but too many of the actors were tardy and too many of the ones who were on stage were talking. Others had simply vanished.

The cast knew they were in trouble when Vesce called them into a circle. A circle is never good. After weeks of rehearsals, the young actors and actresses didn't know all of their lines, but they knew that much.

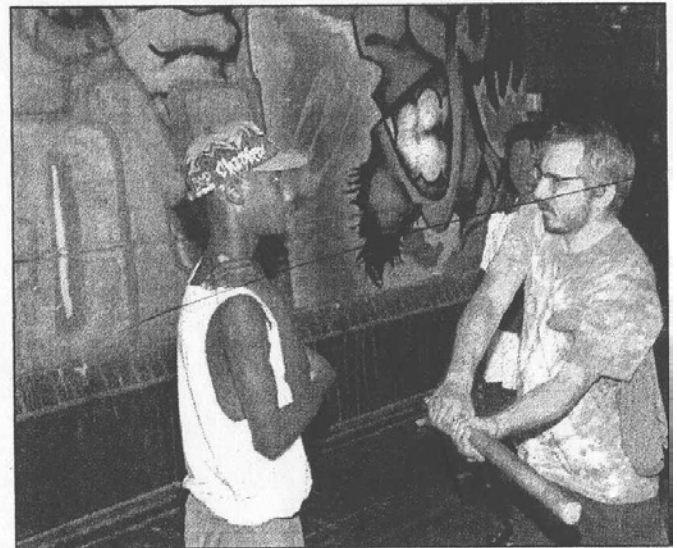
"You guys have got to work with me," Vesce said to the circle. "You're not even listening now. Great. It's all over. The fastest a play has ever been over. You should be proud."

Smirks erased, heads down, the

cast members took the director's outburst like professionals, which they are not. Instead, they are teenagers searching for direction. Many of them are tempted by trouble, some are touched by tragedy, and all say they are trying to do right on stage as well as off.

Staging the play is more than a story of art imitating life: It's a reflection. Opening Thursday at the Strand Theatre in Dorchester, "Brother to Brother" follows two teen-agers - one heading to college, one dealing drugs at home - and their attempts to influence their younger brother between the show's hip-hop dance numbers.

As cast members say they do most every day, the characters must choose: good or bad, school or street, THEATER, Page 20



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / LANE TURNER

Director James Vesce (right) rehearses with Jihad Scudder, 14, who portrays a boy facing tough choices in the play "Brother to Brother."

Play reflects young actors' tough choices

THEATRE

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fast fun or a future.

That goes for actors from middle-class homes as well as those from poorer families. The actors living with both parents express the same anxiety over off-stage pressures as those who have no contact with their fathers. Most can name a friend or classmate who was shot or stabbed. The sister of one lead actress, Renee Singletary, was murdered.

"Every day you start off wanting to do something positive, hoping you don't get into trouble," said Jihad Scudder, a 14-year-old from Dorchester who plays the younger brother. "Your friends might be encouraging you the wrong way, and you never know what's gonna come up. But you do your best, you know."

Some rehearsal days, the best meant changing diapers between scenes, as 15-year-old Jovonne Wirts had to do when she got stuck baby-sitting her two young nieces.

Wirts, who is dancing in the musical drama, has just one scripted line: "Oops!" But she hasn't missed a practice yet.

For 18-year-old Barbara Ceptus, the best meant taking a 10 p.m. train to Medford, where she is in a summer program at Tufts University, and returning the next day for rehearsals in Roxbury.

The other night, Ceptus, who plays the protagonist's girlfriend, mentioned that she hadn't had dinner in a week. She was commuting at the same time supper was served in her dormitory.

Eon Goddard's best meant juggling another play and a young son in the weeks since he won the role of the nasty brother.

Last year, Goddard, 23, persuaded his mother to move with him from the South End, where trouble teased him on too many street corners. Goddard, who had his first encounter with the law in junior high and is on probation for assault, says he hopes to return to college and major in theater.

"Acting is something I always wanted to do, but I never had the guts or the time, because I'd be hanging out, messing up," said Goddard. "Then I started thinking, 'You're getting old, Eon, and you're nothing.' Sometimes I feel like my life is dead. But I want to make something of myself. Least I got to try." "So I'm in the play."

3 brothers, 1 dilemma

The plot of "Brother to Brother" is straightforward: Between the dance numbers, two half-brothers named Anthony and Tyrone battle for the soul of their younger brother, Kevin.

Anthony, a poet who lectures his white teacher on black history, wants Kevin to think college; Tyrone, a dropout, wants him to sell drugs. Kevin, torn, wants to please both of them.

The ending of the play, written by Vesce, will be familiar to anyone who has seen "West Side Story." It is giving little away to say that one of the brothers dies.

"I got two brothers at home, man," Tyrone tells a white drug dealer who eventually recruits him. "One... he looks up to me. And my other brother, he's an educated man... I can't let him down. Naw, I gotta be an example for the community."

The play does not work out that way. But sometimes life does.

In more ways than one, 17-year-old Marlon Carey is the hero of the play. He is the star, the bright brother who spouts poetry, some of which Carey wrote. He is the one the adults working on the show say for certain is going places, the one the other actors would envy if they were given to envy.

In "Confidence," a poem he wrote in 1994 that is the play's centerpiece, Carey set out to explain himself and his peers:

You see me? You see my dark skin? My baggy jeans hanging just right so my shorts peek out? You see my dark hooded sweatshirt? I bet you see a criminal... (in the making... Well, I still don't see me. I am a young African Prince.

Poetry aside, Carey concedes he is less sure of himself than he puts on. An average student, he knows he's talented; he has a singing group, improv, and polished Vesce's dialogue until it was street smart.

But during a break from his internship at the Museum of Science, Carey's inner conflict surfaced unexpectedly that he confessed he wanted to die last fall.

Kicked out of their Dorchester apartment after a spat with his mother — an argument over his attitude that he accepts much of the blame for — Carey went to live with friends. The pressure of having dreams dashed overwhelmed him.

"I couldn't handle it, but I couldn't kill myself; all I could do was exist," said Carey, who barely knows his father. "So at midnight, I went for a walk in Franklin Park, hoping someone would get me, shoot me right there."

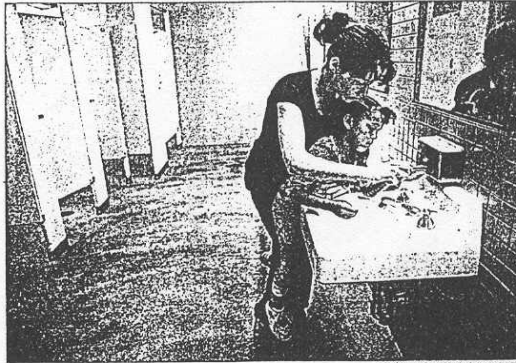
After his plan failed, Carey confided in a teacher. "He told me that lots of people expect me to make something of myself."



The cast of "Brother to Brother," which opens Thursday at the Strand Theatre in Dorchester, smiles for the camera.

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EON GODDARD
Actor



Actress Katie Goulland tends to a niece whom she had to baby-sit while rehearsing.



In the drama, Jihad Scudder plays Kevin, a boy who is torn between the choices presented by two older brothers.



During a rehearsal last week, director James Vesce takes a break with cast member Jay Morong, who plays a drug dealer.

Still, like the other actors, Carey is quick to say that he's not perfect. Among their confessed crimes: shoplifting, carrying a knife, setting a school locker on fire, drinking and drugging.

In her pivotal role as Tyrone's girlfriend, 17-year-old Katie Goulland causes a killing. Off stage, she says she can resist trouble. One of the play's two young white actors, she also says she never backs down from a fight. She means with her fists.

She says her first fight was her first day of kindergarten. At the Catholic school where Vesce once taught, Pope John XXIII Central High School in Everett, Goulland says she fought for respect among students from families with far more money than her parents, a retired United Parcel Service clerk and an elementary school teacher. Goulland is the youngest of five.

"I'm not perfect either; like I'm not going to college, at least not now because I can't afford it," said Goulland, who earns about \$5 an hour at Sears and who pays her \$140a month for rent in Malden. "I'm not used to things working out. You take what you get and you make something better out of it."

From the first tryouts on June 19 to this week's dress rehearsals at the Strand, the rules have been simple and consistent: Show up and James Vesce will find a role for any actor or dancer or rapper, no matter how raw or untalented. Miss a rehearsal without phoning first and that's it. You're out.

So far, one of the female leads and several teen-agers in tiny roles have dropped out or been kicked out, leaving 29 actors and dancers, including six adults.

A group of girls who wowed everyone with their dancing never made it past tryouts. Their mothers refused to let them return from rehearsals after dark.

"A lot of what we do is bluff, because we don't have understudies," said Vesce, who has a master's degree from Harvard Divinity School. "I constantly worry whether I have time to do what I have to do. Maybe because so many of them have so many other, obviously more significant, things going on in their lives than memorizing lines, there's no intimidation factor."

As the college-bound son says during a scene in the family's kitchen, "Mama, you can't catch a boy who's runnin'."

At times, his inability to control his actors has infuriated Vesce, who favors the same baggy shorts as the cast. Donald Taylor, a 20-year-old who has a minor role, described him as "the chilliest white boy I've ever seen. That was high praise."

But Vesce's attempts to create an atmosphere of professionalism have been intense from the outset. Rehearsal 1: He shouted. Rehearsal 6: He shouted louder.

He expects to be stomping and stewing around the stage of the Strand until opening night. He does it partly to put on a play, mostly to teach the teen-agers to follow through.

"Maybe we do need to chill out a bit," said ToRena Webb, 15, a dancer who lives in Mattapan with her mother, a day-care provider, and her father, a State Police officer.

"It's just because we're young," she said. "We're focusing now, because in no time, it's show time. You have to learn the hard way sometimes."

Together with executive producer Seward T. Hunter, the more conservatively dressed authority figure at rehearsals, Vesce's aim over the summer has been to mold the characters in the play, and the characters of his young actors.

That's why Hunter was so upset when Roxbury Community College tossed them off its stage after the cast was nabbed with food — unopened but against the rules anyway. He says he wanted the actors to get the feel of a campus, to link their lives with academia. The play makes that link, too.

But last week, the entire cast was stuck in a cramped room at Dimock Community Health Center in Roxbury, where Hunter is director of ambulatory services; the group putting on the play is known as Dimock Street Voices.

Vesce has directed about half of the actors in Dimock productions before. That means most everyone knew the drill. That didn't mean they followed it. At the first rehearsal, a half-dozen actors struggled in late, despite repeated warnings. The ones who had made it on time could not stop chattering.

Singletary, a 17-year-old who works weekends as a grocery clerk, was busy showing off her "virtuous ring" — a gold band she received at church after pledging to remain a virgin until marriage.

After her sister was killed, she says, she realized she can't control everything, but she can control her body. "As a black person — and many of us are black — I want this to represent our community... I'm talking young people," Hunter told the cast that first night. "Because some of us come from Roxbury or Mattapan or Dorchester doesn't mean we can't bring something to our community."

The circle smiled back at Hunter. The circle appeared to understand. Still, at every practice since, Vesce and Seward have had to have a word with someone; they say it has been for the youths' own good, a part of the production that is just as important as the vocal warm-ups that have the cast repeating nonsensical phrases like "geese cackle cattle low" after Vesce.

"What's up with me? Nothing," Singletary sighed one night after she was ordered off the stage for gabbing. Singletary plays the sister and also belts out the play's closing song. "I'll get over it. Always do."

STORIES FROM THE STREET

Practices after practice, Sean Fielder was a tap-dancing, hip-hopping blur. The 17-year-old could not stand still, never mind sit still. His feet and fingers and head moved through Vesce's directions, and they kept going through the breaks.

In his spare time, Fielder was moving through the summer at the Boston Dance Collective and rapping with his own group, DVS. But learning aside, he says his priority was the play.

"I just think some people don't have the chances other people do, and some people who do just don't take advantage of them," said Fielder, who lives in Mattapan with his stepfather and mother, a computer assembler working toward a master's degree. "The people here know they have a chance."

Like many of the actors, Fielder has been in other Dimock productions. Each one was a fable from the street; each had a moral. "Brother to Brother," which runs through Saturday at the Strand, is no exception.

"It's about the things that are going on in the streets," said Jovonne Wirts, whose mother is a clothing design assistant. "That way, the people in the audience can look at the play and see the things to do, and not to do."

The lessons are not intended for the audience only.

During rehearsals, it was obvious from the ad-libs that the actors know the characters and the choices they make. The young men cast as gangsters talk

barg with the authority that comes from seeing the type up close.

Yulanda Miller, a Dimock development officer who plays Mama, pleads with one son and prays for the other so persuasively that the actors sometimes flinch, as though they had heard her words before, off stage.

"The play is about reality," said ToRena Webb, who also has her own dance troupe, Miss Chief. "People are getting shot over stupidness. There are drugs. What we see is what we do — not all of us, but too many of us."

What the cast members saw over the last six weeks was Vesce and Hunter sticking to them, offering praise when earned and punishment when deserved. It was a constant that not all of them have in their lives outside the theater.

There was total confusion just once, when choreographer Yandje Dibinga, told the dancers to perform a move more like John Travolta and the entire stage erupted in one loud "John who?"

By last week, they had perfected that step and more. As Vesce said, "It's always like that: Boom, they're focused."

That quality had first surfaced when Dibinga, a professional dancer who is in the show, asked several young men to create a "loose, joint-clicking dance."

Suddenly in charge of themselves, there was no fooling around in the hall. The steps were theirs to choose, and they wanted to choose correctly.

"Come on, ya'll," Fielder warned them, doing a good impression of Vesce and Hunter and Dibinga rolled into one. "It's up to us. Let's do it right."