

Rabbits have artists hopping

Trailer Park Boy among students in unique school

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Only months ago, Nova Scotia actor Cory Bowles was riding high in the low life, playing Cory, one of the dim-bulbs who once started an inadvertently gay illegal nightclub in his mom's mobile home on the cult TV favourite Trailer Park Boys.

Today, after three weeks in a unique Calgary theatre summer school, he says he's seen the future of his career, and it's got nothing to do with television.

"This," Bowles says of his time in One Yellow Rabbit's (OYR) Summer Lab Intensive, "was the turning point of my artistic ideal."

Bowles left Trailer Park Boys recently to return to his first love, dance and choreography. But the decision was not resting comfortably with him. But after three weeks as a so-called "labbit," his perspective has changed.

"I worried that leaving a big show was suicide, that it was an ego thing, that going back to my first love -- choreography and dance -- was just an ego thing.

"My questions were answered, I felt solidified. The Lab confirmed that I am good to go. It confirmed that I can contribute to my art scene.

"The lightbulb didn't just go off. It blew up."

Such statements might sound a little over the top if they weren't so common from Summer Lab Intensive participants. Each of the 13 students speaks of today's final day of the program as the end of a journey of discovery, before they disperse across the country to resume the lives they have put on hold for three weeks.

They come from diverse backgrounds -- one's a 56-year old drama teacher, another a recent theatre school grad -- but each speaks of having their creative minds blown by the program. They say the Lab will help redefine, focus and expand their creative energies, planting the seeds for more skillfully-crafted and



CREDIT: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

A group of students from One Yellow Rabbit's Summer Lab Intensive theatre program at the Big Secret Theatre in the Epcor Centre.

honest art.

The real challenge is describing exactly what that means to an outsider.

"You're going to want to tell your friends and partner everything that happened here at a gasp," says the program's driving force, OYR ensemble member Denise Clarke. "But try and remember they weren't here, and thus they may not get it, or want to hear it.

"Do not break up with your partner over the Lab," she warns, only half jokingly. For the past three weeks, the labbits have been writing, directing and rehearsing their own, individual 10-minute pieces, performed Friday and today, which marks the end of the Lab. This, however, is not typical theatre.

All the participants say it is difficult to describe the process of taking what you have learned, to write, direct and act a 10-minute piece. The creative process is hard enough to articulate; blowing it up, redefining it, expressing it through a piece that is only for art's sake -- that's really hard. There are no grades, no marks, and no report card for their parents to sign.

In fact, "no judging" is one of the core philosophies of the Lab.

"That," says Garrett Watson, a labbit, and recent graduate of the University of Saskatchewan drama program, "blew me away.

"If I have an open mind, why do I assume others don't? Why do I think the audience wants to judge me," asks Watson rhetorically.

In fact, the only judging in the Lab happened months before; the application process is like a final exam in philosophy. There is no form to complete. There is no deadline. According to their website, OYR stops accepting applications "when the Lab is full." You simply provide the office with your contact information, and like the A-Team, OYR will find you.

The application is exactly what you think it is, except, this being OYR, it isn't at all.

"We've received simple head shots and CVs, and deconstructed CD players remade into elaborate treasure hunts, where each button you push prompts more information about the applicant" says Clarke.

"We're looking for total theatre artists, who can grasp the total esthetic of their art."

The program accepts dancers, actors, singers, you name it: even the occasional lawyer. The instructors cover all these elements, from visual arts, to writing, and down to rigorous yoga.

Like the instructors, this year's labbit warren is a diverse group indeed, representing every region of the country, from different artistic disciplines, levels of experience, age groups -- even a celebrity. Now within sight of the end, each has taken something different from the experience.

JoJo Rideout, 56, teaches drama at Bishop's University in Quebec.

"Obviously, I'm older," says Rideout, "but that's made no difference. Any fear I

might have had is long since gone."

"The yoga is really hard for me, but has been so valuable. I'm going to try hard to continue with it."

At the other end of the country, and in experience, is Christopher Duthie, who has one year to go in the University of Calgary's undergraduate drama program. Duthie says the Lab has surpassed even the rave reviews he heard in town. "The spontaneity, the exploration is amazing," says Duthie.

"It's also shown me what my habits are, good and bad. I tend to spend too much time writing and not enough time rehearsing."

"The Lab has freed up my thinking."

For Bowles, Rideout, Duthie, Watson, and nine others, their performances -- which they describe as their gifts to their fellow labbits -- are unique. Bowles describes his as a character study; Rideout as an exploration of her heritage, and another as a political statement.

Whatever the subject matter of their piece, Each labbit tells the reporter a variation of the same theme: the most important audience is themselves.

"Success," says Watson, "is defined by creating good work."

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