

# Hostel behavior

Shepherdstown theater festival offers teens exhilarating hands-on experience

By **BETH BATDORF**  
Special to the Spirit

**SHEPHERDSTOWN** – The Contemporary American Theater Festival offers an amazing opportunity for young people to have a hands-on experience alongside some of the greatest talents working in contemporary drama today.

Teens 14 to 18 can sign up now for Hostel Youth! – a three-day immersion program returning for its fifth year with “53 exhilarating hours” of readings, workshops, performances and opportunities to learn from an array of talent featured in the CATF company.

Hostel Youth! is the brainchild of Peggy McKowen, the festival’s associate producing director. She says she shares credit with Julian Lazarus, the director of education at New Spire Arts, a performing arts nonprofit in Frederick, Md.

McKowen is passionate about the program, based on a full-immersion youth hostel model. She wants parents, teachers and other people who are interested in supporting young people to know that Hostel Youth! is not a typical theater camp – and not just for young people who want to be actors or designers or playwrights or somehow involved with the theater.

“The goal is to help our youth connect

**RIGHT: Jefferson High sophomore Sam Shunney attended Hostel Youth! in 2015, the same year he portrayed Robbie Wilson in the festival’s “The Full Catastrophe.” Sam called Hostel Youth! “the perfect platform that allowed me to engage in creative theater activities while bonding with a genuinely wonderful group of people.”**

with the art of theater so that it can be part of their lives forever,” she said. “The goal is to help our youth develop social skills so they can talk to their peers about important things. The goal is to make better human beings.”

Theresa M. Davis, the director of Hostel Youth!, has served in that position for four years. CATF patrons may remember her from her work directing last summer’s CATF stage reading of “Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers” by

Frank X. Walker.

Explains Davis: “I believe we are helping to build a culture of empathy, creating a safe – yet, not always comfortable – space that allows the ‘Hostelers’ to speak about the plays and their lives in profound and meaningful ways. In the three days we’re together the students become a community of empowered and committed theatre participants. It’s such a joy to hear and see them respond intel-

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SETH FREEMAN/FOX CATF

**ABOVE: Theresa M. Davis returns as the director of Hostel Youth! for the fourth year. During the academic year, she works as an associate professor in the drama department at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.**



**Peggy McKowen, the festival's associate producing director, came up with the idea of Hostel Youth! but says it's not a typical theater camp. “The goal is to help our youth connect with the art of theater so that it can be part of their lives forever,” she said. “The goal is to help our youth develop social skills so they can talk to their peers about important things. The goal is to make better human beings.”**

**WANT TO KNOW MORE?** Watch the Hostel Youth! video at [catf.org](http://catf.org) to get an overview of the program, then download a registration form at [catf.org/Hostel>Youth](http://catf.org/Hostel>Youth). The deadline to sign up comes July 3





Ed Herendeen

see them respond intellectually and viscerally to the power of live performance. I hope each Hostel Youth! experience sparks a love and respect for theatre that will last a lifetime.”

The CATF plays are professionally produced so the students have the opportunity to interact with professionals from the Actors’ Equity Association, United Scenic Artists and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. Hostel Youth! participants will see five plays with an optional sixth show available plus a new play reading, talkbacks, an acting and directing workshop with CATF founder Ed Herendeen, movement workshops, and a host of other activities.

Herendeen calls it “a real pleasure” to see how young people respond to the plays. “They really get it,” he said. “They are willing and open.”

And participants in the program are given a life time pass to all the CATF plays in the future, which is a wonderful perk.

McKowen is open to talking to parents who might have some concerns about the language or the themes of the plays. Parents are even invited to see a show with their son or daughter. Some of the students who return for a second summer are designated as leaders and provide peer support for the new attendees.

Take a few minutes and watch the Hostel Youth! video which is on CATF’s website ([catf.org](http://catf.org)) to get an overview of the program. You will be amazed at the comments from the participants. Here’s a sampling:

“The plays have been so thought provoking, mind-stimulating. With new works come new ideas. Even if it is a play, it actually happens. It’s really gripping like a movie but you feel closer to it. The playwright who worked with us asked us to wake up every morning and ask who we are and what we want. What is your purpose in life?”

“My dad signed me up for it and I was really nervous. Just meeting new people is anxiety producing for me and being told I’m confident was the best compliment ever.”

“I thought it was mind-blowing as the plays would go from ridiculously serious to hilarious in

**WANT TO GO?** Teens 14 to 18 can sign up now for the Contemporary American Theater Festival’s Hostel Youth!

Hands-on summer theater immersion program offers readings, workshops, performances and countless opportunities to learn from the professionals at CATF. Two sessions are planned: One from July 18 to 20 and another July 25 to 27. Each costs \$325 and includes a two-night stay in a Shepherd University dorm, nine meals and snacks, five plays, one reading and 11 workshops/sessions

a second.”

“I’ve been so grateful for this experience. It’s been so eye-opening. I love the concepts that are being demonstrated and the philosophies that are being explored. You are never finished learning and there is always something else that someone can teach you.”

Alex Romine, a freshman at St. James School in Hagerstown, Md., took part in Hostel Youth! last summer and says it was the perfect place to learn new things about the theater, both the acting, and what happens behind the scenes.

“For example, I learned how people set up the stage, some good warm ups for acting, and how the costumes are made. My personal favorite thing was learning how to perform a fight scene,” he said.

You may remember Sam Shunney, who played 11-year-old Robbie Wilson in “The Full Catastrophe” in 2015. Sam attended Hostel Youth! in 2015 and called it “the perfect platform that allowed me to engage in creative theater activities while bonding with a genuinely wonderful group of people.” He’s a sophomore at Jefferson High.

I look forward to interacting with the Hostel Youth! kids every season. I hope my character, self-confidence, empathy and fun-loving spirit will develop in parallel to their wide-eyed energy and enthusiasm. I think I might lie about my age this year and sneak in a registration form for Hostel Youth!, but don’t tell Ed!

— Beth K. Batdorf  
serves on the board of the  
Contemporary American  
Theater Festival

