

STAGE PROTEST

The youth theater company the Yard hits Steppenwolf's stage with a timely play about high school shootings. BY BRIAN GOLDEN

At rehearsals for the Yard's production of *Columbinus*, which opens at Steppenwolf Theatre on May 3, someone cries almost every day. *Columbinus* is meant to be emotionally taxing: The play, written in 2005 by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli, is about the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School. But the kinship felt by the cast runs deeper than usual because in this production, unlike most, the teenagers are portrayed by actual teenagers.

The sense of verisimilitude is typical for the Yard, a theater company formed by Joel Ewing and Mechelle Moe with students from Senn Arts, a magnet program at Edgewater's Senn High School, where both teach. In just three years, the Yard has gained notice for doing professional-level work that puts the passions and performances of young artists at center stage.

In 2012, Moe and Ewing helmed a Senn production of *Our America: Ghetto Life 101/Remorse*, an adaptation of an NPR segment in which teenage boys were given microphones to document life in the Ida B. Wells housing project. *Our America* isn't typical high school fare, but the response to the Senn production was overwhelmingly positive. Ewing credits the personal connections that Senn's diverse cast (students come from all over Chicago to attend the magnet program) felt to the work. "We realized, 'Oh God, if we can get students material that genuinely reflects their life experience, magical things can happen,'" Ewing says.

After *Our America*, Ewing and Moe searched for opportunities for Senn students to showcase their talents outside school. A partnership emerged with the Hypocrites, the Wicker Park ensemble of which Moe is a founding member. Producing as the Yard, Ewing and Moe directed a cast

of mostly Senn students in *The 4th Graders Present an Unnamed Love-Suicide*, written by Hypocrites founder Sean Graney. The collaboration received glowing reviews from local theater critics.

Partnerships with Raven and Jackalope Theatres followed, with scripts from renowned writers on such topics as teen pregnancy and campus racism. Along the way, a foundation began to emerge: Moe and Ewing would serve as lead producers, but the teenage artists would drive programming. "A lot of work adults think is relevant, kids don't give

two shits about," says Moe. "We want to do work these kids really connect to."

Getting them on board with *Columbinus*, a fractured rumination on guns, schools, and adolescence, wasn't tough. In fact, the play seems an inevitable choice for the Yard, whose sense of activism is rooted in the concerns of its student members.

Cleo Shine, 17, has acted in multiple Yard shows and appears in *Columbinus* in a chorus role. A high school student by day, she also organizes gun control protests. In March, she led a walkout at Senn that culminated in a student march to the office of U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky. When it comes to moving the needle on guns, Shine is convinced theater—especially plays like

Columbinus—can help. "If we only talk about gun violence laws," says Shine, "we strip the issue of its humanity."

Eventually, leaders like Shine will graduate and move on. The Yard, unlike some of its storefront theater counterparts, must deal with this kind of turnover. A company less committed to the mission might be tempted to follow its stars into adulthood, but Ewing and Moe are standing pat. At the Yard, the kids are all right.



The cast of *Columbinus*