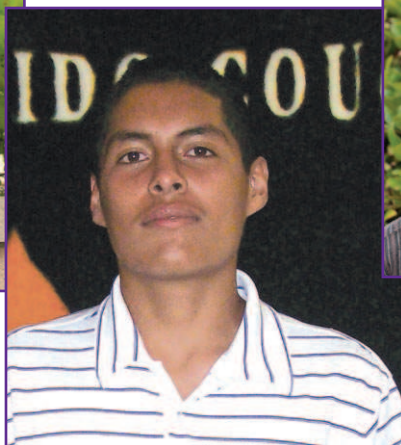


Playwrights Project

Local student writers shine on the page and stage



Nachiketa Baru



Enrique Hernandez



Chris Toth



Mikie Layavong

Ronni Rowland

What can transform a student who doesn't like to write into a winning playwright? The answer is Playwrights Project of San Diego.

The mission of Playwrights Project is to "advance literacy, creativity, and communication by empowering individuals to voice their stories through playwriting programs and theatre productions." Founded in 1985, Playwrights Project supports arts education through classroom programs and its annual playwrights contest for students 18 and under.

"Students tell us they love writing about anything they want and creating characters they identify with and care about," says Cecelia Kouma, executive director of Playwrights Project. "Basing the plays on fictional characters keeps it safe for the student writers to express themselves. Students realize that they are the creators of the world within the play, and that is very appealing to them, especially since there's so much in their

lives that they can't control."

The winners of the 2009 California Young Playwrights Contest, ages 14 and under will receive staged readings of their plays, and all of the young winners this year are residents of San Diego. Winners ages 15-18 will have their productions staged at the Lyceum Theatre in Horton Plaza, San Diego. This year's winners hail from Berkeley, Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. Read on to meet these talented local writers, and save the date for one of the scheduled performances.

Spotlight on San Diego's Winning Playwrights

Play synopses adapted by Cecelia Kouma, Executive Director, Playwrights Project and Chelsea Whitmore, Producer/Program Manager, Playwrights Project

"In the Stars"

By Nachiketa Baru, San Diego

Baru's play (written at age 13) tells the story of two "unemployed slackers" Travis

and Dustin. While gazing up at the stars, the two decide to defy the corruption of big business and open a fortune telling business. They soon fall prey to the same greed they once criticized and become embroiled in their own Ponzi scheme.

Baru says, "This was the first play I wrote dealing with current affairs; the last few dealt with talking animals, pirates and Greek mythology, so this was a change. I love to learn about what's going on in the world—I read the "New York Times" and "San Diego Union-Tribune" daily—and one of the main issues during the last few years has been greed and corruption on Wall Street. This led to my idea of putting two 'ordinary Joes' in the position of running a Ponzi scheme by preying on people's innocence and good faith.

"I plan on writing a play for next year's competition. I hope to go on to have a writing career. Playwrights Project has given me the confidence in my writing, the hunger to win and the hope that such a thing is possible."

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"The Tale of Jack"

By Enrique Hernandez, Escondido

Enrique wrote his play at age 13, during a Playwrights Project residency at Mission Middle School in Escondido. Enrique tells the story of Jack Evergreen, a young man with a rare disease, *heartus explodus*, who only has one week to live. Mr. Creeper (the Grim Reaper) accidentally visits Jack a week early. Jack convinces Mr. Creeper to give him more time on earth, but soon realizes that no bargain with Death goes without consequences.

Hernandez says, "Reading and writing are one of the best forms of entertainment, and I won't stop doing it because it is an incredible experience and it reveals thoughts and ideas that no one has considered before. I enjoy reading stories that have a serious theme along with a humorous story line. My

25th Annual "California Young Playwrights Contest"

Lyceum Theatre, Horton Plaza, San Diego

Tickets: www.playwrightsproject.org
619-239-8222

Saturday, Feb. 20, 7:30 p.m.

Opening Night

Productions: Re-Drowning Ophelia, What All School Children Learn, and Funny Little Thing

Friday, Feb. 26, 7:30 p.m.

Productions: Funny Little Thing, What All School Children Learn

Readings: The Tale of Jack, The Funny Bone

Saturday, Feb. 27, 2 p.m.

Productions: Funny Little Thing, What All School Children Learn

Readings: The Tale of Jack, The Funny Bone

7:30 p.m.

Production: Re-Drowning Ophelia
Reading: In the Stars

Sunday, Feb. 28, 2 p.m.

Production: Re-Drowning Ophelia
Reading: In the Stars

favorite authors are Christopher Moore and Jonathan Stroud, who both have characters with some connection to another world."

"The Funny Bone"

By Mikie Layavong (written at age 11) and Chris Toth (written at age 12), San Diego

In this play, an amiable black bear, named Choco Bear, wants to enter the Joke-a-thon, the most important competition in the Woods. The only problem is he just isn't funny. His best friend Tofu, a panda, encourages him to seek medical attention, and Choco Bear discovers that he's missing a funny bone. With the doctor's help, Choco Bear hopes his jokes will improve and he can earn the respect he desires as the winner of the Joke-a-thon.

Mikie Layavong

"Writing this play helped me understand how to make characters. Our whole class was helpful in giving us advice about writing jokes. Ms. Salzer, the founder of Playwrights Project, helped by telling us what was good and what needed to be improved.

"I like adventurous and funny books like *Pillage* or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. My favorite author is Obert Skye."

Chris Toth

"At first, the play was just homework. After we finished writing the play, we learned that there was a contest for plays by Playwrights Project. We didn't think that we would actually win. I am very honored that the play that I wrote was picked as a winner for the Playwrights Project contest.

"Working in a team was a challenge because sometimes Mikie and I disagreed on something, but usually in about 10 minutes one of us convinced the other that he was right. The best thing about working in a group was that we came up with more ideas and challenges to move the play along. I guess two heads really are better than one." ♦

Ronni Rowland is a mother of two and freelance writer.



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