

**Interview with Jeff Church about The Coterie's Young Playwrights' Roundtable
by Kent R. Brown, posted by Dramatic Publishing, 2004**

Originally posted at:

<https://www.dramaticpublishing.com/AuthorsCornerDet.php?titlelink=9112&sortorder=3>



Established in 1979, [The Coterie Theatre](#) is a professional theatre for multigenerational families and young audiences between 5 to 18 years of age. It seeks to open lines of communication between races, sexes and generations. The Coterie's service area covers the entire Kansas City metropolitan area, which crosses two states and a 100-mile radius beyond.

The Coterie stages 320 performances of seven productions from October through July, and plays to over 60, 000 individuals each year. In addition to staging productions, The Coterie is fully committed to several ongoing community/school outreach programs such as Reaching the Write Minds aimed at students in grades 7 -- 12. The following interview with Jeff Church, The Coterie's Producing Artistic Director since 1990, was conducted by email during January-February 2004.

What motivated you to begin the project?

The program began 13 years ago. Since writing is one of the strongest components of any school curriculum, we wanted to introduce playwriting as a creative option to the more traditional prose-oriented outlets. A comprehensive playwriting unit is something more than most teachers can give. And it's not generally their specialty. The program seems to have fulfilled a need for alternative self expression. We've been lucky to secure local foundation financial support. And the NEA has been highly supportive.

How are the students selected? How many are involved yearly? How do they display their potential?

It's a three-step process, really. Between 15 to 20 middle schools and high schools are invited to participate. Teachers then recommend 20 students. Two or three professional

playwrights in the Kansas City area conduct several five-hour seminars with about 20 students in each seminar. They learn to create settings and characters and the basics about creating scenarios. One favorite exercise to get them writing quickly is to show them pictures of interesting people in an intriguing setting. All we say is, "Jump in at the point of conflict," and they begin placing them in situations and writing dialogue for the characters. This warms the kids up and doesn't bog them down with exposition and setup. In fact, they often hide their exposition much better by doing it this way.

What guidelines do you ask the teachers to keep in mind?

We ask teachers to identify students they feel would do well with playwriting and dialogue. We contact all the schools in our service area, public, private, parochial, whatever. As a result, it's a very multi-ethnic group that reflects the city we live in. We tell teachers to go with their hunches and not pick students by whether they get all "A's" in their classes. If you think about it, playwriting often is not concerned with traditional rules of grammar and punctuation. Kids who have an ear to the pavement and have listened and observed their peers do quite well for us.

The students have now completed the five-hour seminar. What next?

From the 400 students, the seminar leaders recommend between 45 to 60 student writers for what we call the Roundtable phase. I interview them in an effort to gauge their real interest. I'm looking for the kind of student who would be writing plays on their own time whether they are selected or not. We want individuals we think are willing to work with others, as peer critics and fellow artists. Eventually, including those students we invite back from the previous Roundtable, about 30 or so start the Roundtable process. Generally they meet on a bi-monthly basis on Sundays at the theater. They develop their ideas, share their drafts, read each other's plays and monologues. This year we have 33 Roundtable members. Some are more active than others due to their schedules, etc. I'd say we see 20 to 25 at any one session.

Do you place any restrictions on them or on the material they decide to write about?

Restrictions would only hold them back. The only thing I'm strict about in a Roundtable session is not talking during someone else's reading. I really ask for full focus. I also think they learn how to criticize without judgment. Peer playwrights never let a fellow playwright get away with a gun being the solution to anything in a piece of writing, nor do they let a novice playwright think we'll cry at a suicide play. They are nice, but frank with one another in saying that they predicted an obvious solution a mile away. The highly melodramatic plays are politely called "After School Specials." They are a savvy group. If we do it right, everyone feels by the end of the Roundtable like they helped everyone else's play.

What themes and characters seem to grab their imaginations?

Over 13 years, the range of themes, topics and subjects I've seen makes my head spin. You can't put a pen in a young playwright's hand and expect him or her to be polite. They may not obey any of the genre rules. Once a young teen female wrote a highly comic play about two girls slipping out of the house to go see some boyfriends. Turns

out the guys are bad, and they're at a crack house...and it was very dangerous. It was very exciting. We dubbed that play "Lucy and Ethel Go to the Crack House."

Other plays explore what it's like to be the best friend of someone gay in high school. One examined the startled feelings friends have when their fellow student is caught with a "hit list." One comic piece of science fiction set out to explain the big bang theory of the universe. One student jumped back to the late 60s with a monologue expressing sentiments about participation in war. Each year the students continue to astonish us with their diversity and distinctive view of life. It's very exciting.

How do you go about selecting which pieces will be featured in the Festival?

I select those pieces that seem most ready for public presentation. The emphasis throughout has been on development, and everybody's plays or monologues are at different levels of completion. But every playwright should feel some sense of ownership to the work being selected. They've all responded to each other's drafts and ideas.

What about those students whose work is not chosen?

Most understand that not everyone's work can be featured in the Festival. Often they'll find production outlets in the community. Some of their schools have said they'd stage the work even if it is not selected for Festival exposure. There have been a few instances where someone's done a great deal of rewrites and the play is just not right for us ...perhaps it's too long and I can't find a good one or two scene cutting... maybe it's material that is just too R-rated. Either way, I try to personally work with the playwright to understand why we decided as we did.

So, it's Festival time. What actually goes on?

We'll present selections from 12 to 14 short plays or monologues in rotation over a three-day period for audiences numbering between 800 to 1000. The Festival is the most provocative weekend of the year for us. In preparation, we've hired professional directors and equity actors in the city who perform under the staged-reading code. Everyone is exceptionally dedicated to the playwright and the play they are working on. They feel it's a privilege to get to be on stage letting the new playwrights have their voices. On occasion, we've had playwrights who happen to be amazing performers who can portray a character close to their own age better than any professional actor I could find. In those instances, I've asked them to perform in another playwright's piece. We used to do question and answer sessions after the performances, but no longer. We decided to give more time to putting more plays on the stage. Who wants to give up 20 minutes when we could squeeze in another short play?

Do you keep in touch with the student playwrights after the Festival?

One of the most important aspects of the Coterie's Young Playwrights' Roundtable, in my estimation, is our commitment to the young writer for the long haul. Once you're chosen for the program, you remain a member of the Roundtable until you graduate from high school, as long as your interest is strong, of course, and you attend the sessions and work on new material. So each year there will be continuing writers from previous Roundtables. When we bring on a writer who is in junior high, we feel we really get to know him or her pretty well. You see tremendous growth over that period of time.

All Roundtable playwrights get to see all the plays here at no charge, too.

Several have gone on to major in theatre in college or have gone into the field in some capacity. Christina Anderson, for example, developed a one-woman performance piece called "Construction of a Black Diva" that she performed in our festival. She later went on to do it for TCG conferences in San Francisco and Minneapolis, as well as for the audiences at the Mark Taper Forum. She recently graduated from Brown.

What's the lasting benefit to your student playwright?

I think the most important thing is they find kids like themselves. Kids that have creative thoughts and ideas. We received a letter for Connie Lim, from Grandview Alternative School, who just had her play done last year. In it she says "Before I was accepted to the Coterie, writing was something I played at; I never took it seriously. When I was asked to interview for you, I thought it a lost cause because I didn't think I was a real writer. I thought that real writers were the authors promoting their best sellers in L.A.I never felt that I belonged anywhere because I was the kid that liked to write and read. For a long time I actually hid it from my peers for fear of being taunted. Except with other members of the Roundtable it was like: finally, teenagers my own age I can relate to. They shared the same passion with me and they were proud of it. It was only after my entire school came to see my monologue at the festival that I have come out of my shell."

That must be very satisfying.

It is, yes. But what is really satisfying is that their growth and confidence came out of their own effort. The clearest thing they learn is that you learn playwriting by doing it, sharing it, and then rewriting it again and again until it is as clear and as strong as you can make it. All other benefits derive from the commitment to creating the best work possible.

Thanks for your time. And good luck.

You're welcome. Thank you.

Kent R. Brown is a director, editor and playwright whose works have been produced throughout Canada, Belgium, The Netherlands, Australia and the United States. American venues include People's Light & Theatre Company, Walnut Street Theatre, Greenbrier Valley Theatre, Orlando Repertory, BoarsHead Theater, West Coast Ensemble, Boston Theatre Works, Moving Arts, The Side Project and Pulse Ensemble. Titles include *Two Beers and a Hook Shot*, *Larry's Favorite Chocolate Cake*, *Designer Genes*, *Playtime*, *The Seduction of Chaos*, *Reduced for Quick Sale*, *The View From Sunset Towers*, *Lover Boy*, *Welcome to Four Way: The Town That Time Forgot*, *A Trick of the Light*, *Gooney Bird Greene and Her True Life Adventures*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles: A Comic Thriller Starring Shirley Holmes and Jennie Watson* and *Gooney Bird Greene and Her Fabulous Animal Parade*. His works have earned prizes from Mill Mountain Theatre, McLaren Comedy Festival, Boston Theatre Marathon, George R. Kernodle, Pulse Ensemble and Denver Center Theatre Festival competitions as well as a Drama-Logue Award for Excellence in Writing for *Valentines* and *Killer Chili*, and a Beverly Hills Theatre Guild/Julie

Harris Playwright Award for *In the Middle of Nowhere*. He has served as guest artist/critic at the Writers' Center at Chautauqua, Illinois State University, the Dayton Playhouse New Works Festival, the Indiana Theatre Works Creativity Conference, the New Plays Premiere Series at Clemson University and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. He has also been a member of the selection panels for the Millay Colony, The Bonderman Playwriting Symposium and New Dramatists. He lives with his wife, Gayle, in Simpsonville, S.C.

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