

# PLAYWRIGHTS' YOUTH WORKSHOP YIELDS BRIGHT STARS OF STAGE, SCREEN

STORY BY Chris T. Wilson

**For the past 15 years, the Ojai Playwrights Conference has gathered some of stage and screen's finest creative talents together into the clear, rural, summery air of the valley. Together for one week in August, they write and read and act. Ideas overflow and drafts are sculpted and polished into stage-worthy material. And from this separate place, as a few fortunate audience members watch, some of America's finest theatrical productions are born.**



Photo from archive

Ojai Playwrights Conference Youth Workshop students with Kim Maxwell, far left.

Oftentimes, before a new play makes it to the big stages of New York, Chicago, L.A. or London, its playwright spent an intensive week in the Upper Ojai Valley immersed in the finer points of the creative process from which many new and brilliant works emerge.

The Youth Workshop is basically the summer camp component of the OPC Summer New Works Festival, which runs from Aug. 7 to 12 this year (applications will be accepted March 1 — so go to [ojaiplays.org](http://ojaiplays.org) and apply now, as space is limited). A dozen junior high and high school-aged writers get the uncommon opportunity to learn and create alongside professional working playwrights, actors and dramaturges.

Youth Workshop director Kim Maxwell has spent the past eight seasons with OPC leading the week-long process. By using a series of techniques and exercises that she's developed and refined for the past 20

years, young writers dive headlong into a focused creative process. They learn alongside and eat lunch with the attending playwrights and then write, rewrite, edit, workshop, block, rehearse and then perform a short piece of their own creation, all in one week.

"These young people get a company pass," Maxwell says. "They get to go to all of the readings and symposia and it's an honor for them. They get to see these plays go on to extraordinary venues all over the world."

Having this opportunity to see the true creature qualities of older working writers and actors has proven helpful for young people searching for the confidence to openly take risks and express themselves.

And, as the week progresses, Maxwell's job is to keep the program flexible so when one of the writers, actors or dramaturges has time to join the youths for 30 minutes to several hours, Maxwell

can plug them in, as she says.

"They pour themselves into their work and put pen to paper and unbelievable things develop," Maxwell says. "They write scene material, monologues, poetry, music, song and everything is absolutely beautiful. They learn from a lot of other people that they have a lot to say. Then, at the end of the week, they get up to perform. And then Robert Egan shows up to watch and hear. It's their words, and to be heard is the ultimate in permission. That's where art starts happening, when someone says, 'yes' to you."

Egan, the OPC artistic director - producer since 2002, spent 20 years directing new play development at the Mark Taper Forum. He says the Youth Workshop is one of the most unique and substantive programs available to young artists today.

"They learn scene-writing skills and perform and cull dramatic material from

their life experiences," Egan says. "That's truly a one-of-a-kind opportunity."

Egan says that what excites him about the Youth Workshop is to see the power of a live voice in a room, with other people watching, come to life in the young people.

"Their doubts and fears thinking, 'I'm a teen who lives here, who would want to hear my experience,' are quickly jettisoned in this program," Egan says. "They soon realize, 'Hey, my life is just as worthy as anybody else's.' That really leads to strong self-esteem."

While the program is open to youth from all over, a select few from Ojai have returned year after year. And from their experiences in the workshop, they've continued up, down, and along their own creative paths. What follows are a few of their stories.

Micah Van Hove is an aspiring filmmaker who has made his way from Ojai to Los Angeles in recent years. At 15, he had completed one of Maxwell's theatrical classes when he learned of the OPCYW.

Van Hove recalls the feelings of validation when his performance got laughs from the audience at OPC.

"The piece was pretty comical, but I played it really straight faced," Van Hove says. "I remember lots of laughter, and that's always good, since people a lot of time will be like, 'Oh a bunch of kids, who cares?' So it's cool to test out your material and have it work on a bigger stage."

He recalls that actor Hamish Linklater, who was performing at the OPC that week years ago, had jokingly said he was going to steal his act. "That was cool. I was 15, maybe 16."

Writer, director and activist Luis Alfaro made an impression on Van Hove during the workshop.

"He was a pretty funny guy and I remember he wasn't treating us like kids," Van Hove says. "He was pretty open to us and was making jokes and wasn't playing down to us like so many adults do. He was a funny, happy-go-lucky guy that gave us



Kim Maxwell introduces her students during a recent OPCYW.

a lot of energy and a big presence."

Van Hove is currently rooming with other creative Ojai residents, including Sam Jones, who has co-written a feature that they're beginning to shop around for financing. His other roommate, Jeffrey Reeser, was also a regular in the Youth Workshop.

"I've been making music videos to pay the bills," Van Hove says. "But I've kind of stopped all that so I can really focus on getting this next project made."

A telling example of Van Hove's creative edge is in the way he came up with the

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OPC Youth Workshop participants gather for a photo after their plays are produced.

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name of his production company.

"Umuima doesn't mean s\*\*\*," Van Hove says. "I needed an AOL instant messenger account so I slammed my face into the keyboard and that was what came out.

That is now my production company name. Big and unpronounceable."

Emily Thelander, like Van Hove, graduated from Happy Valley School, recently renamed Besant Hill School. Conveniently, it's on this hilly, sprawling

500-acre campus in Upper Ojai, that the OPC Summer New Works Festival takes place.

Now living in Burbank and interning in the control room for Conan O'Brien, Thelander started in the YW seven years ago and then spent the past two summers at OPC working as an intern. She, too, had been in Maxwell's acting class when she learned of the workshop.

"The conference taught me a lot about what I really wanted to do and what I wanted to explore," Thelander says. "At first I thought I wanted to be a playwright and in the theater. Then, when I started to meet other people, I realized I was more interested in film and post-production work. There were so many elements to the OPC that it was easy to figure out what I wanted."

Taking the acting classes from Maxwell, was very important to her, Thelander says.

"She has an incredible way of getting kids to come out of their shell," she says. "We learned a lot about ourselves in that program."

Lily Brown, Maxwell's daughter, now in her first year at Bennington College,

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wanted to be a part of her mom's classes from her earliest recollections. She would beg and plead.

"I remember being a little kid and begging my mom to be part of her class," Brown says. "I was so obsessed with it, that when I was 6 years old, I made a sign that said, 'Lily Brown Teaching Class ages 3-5.' Because I was following in my mother's footsteps, I guess."

She was in sixth grade when she got her first shot to be in her mom's class, and didn't look back. She spent her last seven summers at OPC.

"Regardless of life experience, they accept you," Brown says. "It's not as much your age that determines the value of your opinion for some reason. They understand a voice is a voice. So if you have something to say, it doesn't matter if you're young or old."

At the time of this interview, just before the beginning of spring semester back in Vermont, Brown was at home with her mom helping Maxwell prepare for new classes that she'll be offering in the near future. Brown says she has been registering domain names, organizing class photographs and helping with newsletters.

And then there's Laignee Barron. At age 20, for starters, she's completed four full-length plays. One of those plays,



"If I Were Your Superhero," about an autistic boy's relationship with his babysitter, has won several awards and been produced at least two times. After winning a young playwright's award in New York, the one-act play has been produced by high schools in Minnesota and Florida.

"I just got my first royalty check," she said via Skype from London.

At a young age, Barron's mother pulled her out of school because she was having difficulty reading. After that, she was home-schooled exclusively.

"My mom was really rigorous," she recalls.

Maxwell recalls that Barron was writing so much in the YW that she had her own folder separate from the work of the other kids. Barron recalls at the age of 4 she and her sister, Tiobe, acted out "The Frog and the Prince." Seeing her interests develop over the years, Barron's mom enrolled her in the YW.

"Kim was an incredible, phenomenal teacher," Barron says. "She really inspired us. There were a group of students that always came back every year. It was a great way for us to experience phenomenal plays. I saw one play on Broadway that was developed at OPC."

Barron says Maxwell has a way of breaking down comfort zones that leads to great self-expression.

"It's a raw and powerful

experience," she says.

A junior at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Barron missed last year's OPC because she was interning at the New York Daily News. Now spending a semester abroad, studying British literature at King's College in London, she has her sights on a career in international journalism — ideally, stationed in the Middle East ("That's where the story is," she says) and writing for the San Francisco Chronicle.

"I really admire that paper, because the editorial board makes bold choices that lots of other papers don't make."

So, if you've ever passed through Ojai in August and wondered how anything could happen in the potentially sweltering summer days, just know that in a secluded space on a prep school campus, young minds and old are diligently collaborating to entertain and transform you.

Learn more about the Ojai Playwrights Conference by visiting [www.ojaiplays.org](http://www.ojaiplays.org).

The hot summer sun beats down on the meadows of Upper Ojai as the OPC Youth Workshop writers take a break outdoors.