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## **High School Students Team with Skylight Opera Theatre to Create Original Musical Production**

Milwaukee, WI (Oct. 16, 2009) – More than 200 students from three MPS schools have contributed to an original production that explores the ups and downs, angst and thrills of change -- all from a teen-age perspective. *TeenWrites: Change* will be performed for the public October 23, 24 and 25 before traveling to England, where students at a partner school will add material, turning it into an international project.

*TeenWrites: Change* is a product of TeenWrites, a program managed by the Skylight Opera Theatre in cooperation with Milwaukee High School of the Arts (MHSA). For the first time, TeenWrites is collaborating with an overseas theater company and school.

The program, in its fifth year, begins with creative writing workshops at three MPS schools, where students are inspired to generate original writing in any form they choose. The writing they submit can range from fiction to rap to poetry to music.

The theme for this spring's workshops was "change," and 243 students participated. MHSA students then worked with a Skylight artist over the summer to set selected pieces of writing to music. This fall, students then worked with teachers and artists to stage and choreograph the writing and design and build the set. Becca Nielsen, the Skylight's Education Manager, is directing. Nielsen has been shepherding the project from the beginning, and is documenting the process in a blog, [www.teenwriteschange.wordpress.com](http://www.teenwriteschange.wordpress.com).

The show is about to tour MPS schools. Three public performances are also scheduled: 7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 23, and Saturday, Oct. 24, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 25, at the Milwaukee High School of the Arts Studio Theatre, 2300 W. Highland Ave., Milwaukee. Tickets, available at the door, are \$6 for adults and \$4 for students.

The stories told in *TeenWrites: Change* "range from amusing and funny stories about what it's like growing up and becoming an adult, to difficult changes in their own lives such as dealing with troubled parental relationships or questioning their sexuality," said Nielsen.

The experience of creating a new work of art from ideas and words written by students is a profound one for the TeenWrites team, said Nielsen. "It helps them understand the power and importance of their own voice and the voices of their peers." Nielsen added that interest in the project is so strong that some TeenWrites alumni who have since graduated are still involved.

After this month's performances, TeenWrites embarks on the second phase of its journey. It will travel to Thurston Community College (the equivalent of an American high school) in Suffolk, England. There, students from the two schools will work with Gecko Theatre, a touring theater company based in Ipswich and London. Students will then perform the piece a second time, incorporating new ideas and interpretations from the work done with Gecko.

In spring, the Milwaukee team polishes the final product along with the high schools' jazz combos and dance department and exchange students from England. It all culminates in April 2010 with a performance on the Mainstage at the High School of the Arts.

"When young people are helped to find their voice, encouraged to give it expression, assisted in developing the mediums to do so and then provided a forum for it, we are truly looking at changing the world," said Ralph Janes, Theatre Department Chair at the Milwaukee High School of the Arts. "These young artists have a unique opportunity to become part of a new vanguard for the arts and for their generation."

MHSA students are raising money to send the TeenWrites team overseas. For information about making a contribution, please contact Janes at (414) 934-7071 or [rjanes@wi.rr.com](mailto:rjanes@wi.rr.com). For interview requests, photos and further information, please contact Diane Bacha, the Skylight Opera Theatre's Interim Communications Director, at (414) 299-4961 or [dianeb@skylightopera.com](mailto:dianeb@skylightopera.com).

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The Skylight is supported in part by grants from the NEA, Wisconsin Arts Board, the City of Milwaukee Arts Board, and CAMPAC. The Skylight is a member of OPERA America; Visit Milwaukee; Historic Third Ward Association; Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin; Theatre Wisconsin; and a cultural partner of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's Arts in Community Education (ACE) Program. This theater is an equal opportunity employer. Except in plays where race itself is an issue, casting is decided based on ability, not race.

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