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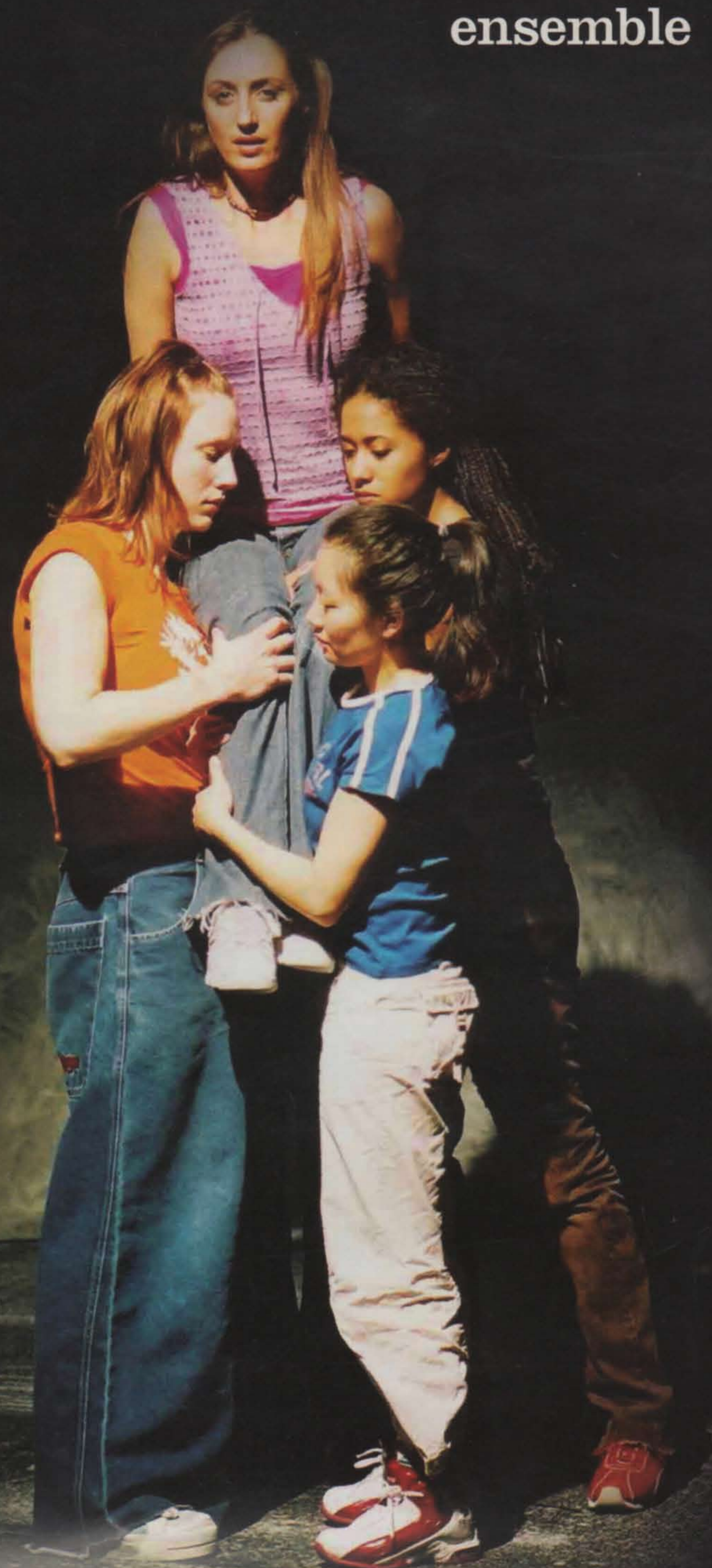
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## 2005 FESTIVAL GUIDE

**&** *A look at the latest  
in outdoor speakers*

*Redefining  
opera*  
with Toronto's  
**URGE**  
ensemble



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# Following the URGE

The Toronto-based collective's latest work takes an anti-didactic, and subtly musical, approach in addressing issues that are uppermost in the minds and psyches of teenage girls.

By Elissa Poole  
Photos: John Lauener

A scene from Theatre Direct Canada's URGE production of *And by the Way, Miss...* Pictured left to right are Andrea Donaldson, Lauren Brotman (being lifted), Amber Godfrey and Diana Tso.

Nobody would think to call *And by the Way, Miss...*—the latest theatre piece by the URGE ensemble—an opera. Nor could it be described as musical theatre. Many audience members might even go home after a performance unaware that they'd experienced a musical evening. And yet music is absolutely integral to *And by the Way, Miss...* (which ran at the Harbourfront Centre Studio Theatre in Toronto from Nov. 24 through Dec. 5 last winter), as it has been to URGE's other productions. It's just a little less obvious.

Take, for example, a group "hello" voiced simultaneously by five characters in the play's opening scene. "It wasn't a random moment at all," says URGE member Fides Krucker, one of the co-directors for *And by the Way, Miss...* "We needed four or five different pitches; we wanted a certain amount of dissonance; and we needed the word to be held for a certain length of time," she explains. "That 'hello' was worked musically again and again, but the audience wouldn't necessarily know what it was that made it so magical."

When URGE rehearses a dramatic scene, each ensemble member thinks pitch, tone-colour, volume, tempo, texture, counterpoint, tension and release—all musical terms. If there's a problem to be solved, they look for a musical solution. They establish a mood with ordinary sounds that are as rigorously chosen and rehearsed as those in a string quartet. And in *And by the Way, Miss...* they weave the stories of five characters together as if performing chamber music, alternating solos and tutti, and varying ensemble combinations. The approach is ubiquitous in any URGE production, and it's why the group—an inter-disciplinary collective of four Toronto women in the performing arts with a distinctly feminine and experimental perspective—makes such a point of defining its work as *musically driven*.

*And by the Way, Miss...* is typical in this respect, but in other ways it is a huge departure for URGE. For one, it is the first production in which members of the collective—including Krucker, who is an opera singer and specialist in contemporary vocal techniques; composer Linda Catlin Smith; dancer-choreographer Marie-Josée Chartier; and performance artist Katherine Duncanson—do not themselves perform. They have written and directed the piece, but they do not act in it. *And by the Way, Miss...* is also a commission, aimed directly at girls between the ages of 12 and 14. As a result, it is somewhat less abstract in its final form than earlier URGE projects have been. "We wanted more clarity in the storytelling for this piece," explains Krucker. "Kids need that. The piece still reads to adults, but it's the girls we really wanted to speak to."

The commission came from Theatre Direct Canada, which has a mandate to develop work for young audiences. Lynda Hill, Theatre Direct's artistic director, was attracted to URGE because, although she wanted to address issues relevant to teenage girls, she did not want a didactic piece. As Hill puts it, she wanted something girls could respond to in a "feeling space, not an intellectual space." The abstract, non-verbal aspect of URGE—its essentially musical underpinning—provides just that. Whimsical, humorous, relevant and frank, *And by the Way, Miss...* deals forcefully but gently with issues uppermost in the minds and psyches of teenage girls, but it is URGE's unique integration of movement, poetic imagery, improvisation, humour, rhythm, song and soundscapes that allows it to do this so effectively.

Research on the project started just before Christmas in 2002, when URGE members went into the Toronto schools to interview and conduct workshops with girls in Grades 7 and 8 to find out



what stories they needed, or wanted, to hear. URGE imagined that body image might be the central concern, but somewhat to their surprise they discovered that wherever they went and regardless of the individual background of the girl being interviewed, each identified friendship as the single most important issue in her life. Thus, friendship is the theme that threads through everything that is touched upon in *And by the Way, Miss...*, from fashion to eating disorders, from sex to suicide.

Because they were targeting such a young age group, the senior URGE women (who joke that the working title for their next show could be "mental-pause") decided to leave the acting to younger women. More than 200 young women artists were auditioned for the cast, and the criteria were specific and somewhat unusual. URGE wanted each actor to be highly skilled in her dominant art form and comfortable with improvisation; they wanted some cultural and ethnic diversity; and they wanted an ensemble in the truest sense of word, one in which a vibrant, trusting and cooperative group dynamic would encourage creativity. They also needed actors who were prepared to make a long-term commitment (approximately 18 months) to the project.

In short, they hoped to form and mentor an ensemble somewhat like URGE itself, whose signature style has evolved through a leisurely improvisational process that draws upon material current in the members' own lives. As in URGE proper, the process for developing *And by the Way Miss...* relied upon the special skills of each actor (one is a clown; one has strong musical skills, another is trained in movement), but URGE does not restrict the dancer to movement or the musician to sound. Everyone moves; everyone vocalizes. A willingness to take risks, artistic as well as emotional, is a necessary part of URGE's *raison d'être*.

In *And by the Way Miss...* the "girls" play themselves to a certain extent, although each scenario, and each character, emerged gradually out of collective improvisations on various themes. The actual performers—Lauren Brotman, Andrea Donaldson, Amber Godfrey, Christina Sicoli, and Diana Tso—are not teenagers. They range in age from 23 to 35, but inhabit their teenage personas with such conviction that real teenagers in the audiences confidently assumed they were only a few years older than themselves. Most were shocked to discover the actors' real ages.

Making the piece inherently "musical"—not just *using* music but ensuring that music informed the piece on every level—was, as it is

in all URGE productions, a conceptual priority. But it was a special challenge in this case, since music was less central to the expertise of the cast as a whole. These women were primarily actors, not dancers, or composers, or singers.

"Actors are more accustomed to a traditional acting environment," says Krucker. "What's organic to us is very different from what's understood as established theatre process. The abstract world that is so natural for musicians, choreographers and performance artists is unfamiliar to most actors. And yet the only way we feel we can do justice to some of the emotional terrain we want to cover is to move into abstraction, or in other words, to think musically."

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In order to go against some of those theatrical "givens," URGE took away the actors' most relied-upon tool: speech. "We didn't even consider using text at first," says Krucker. "We'd take an idea into improvisation using only non-verbal sound and just see where it went."

"But on every level we thought *sound* and *soundscape*," stresses Smith, who adds that even once they had moved to text, they were constantly shaving it of excess to make suffi-

cient space for the non-verbal elements.

Usually the soundscapes were made vocally or with everyday objects (the latter was explored intensively in the 1996 URGE production *She Promised She'd Bake a Pie*, which exploited an "orchestra" of cooking utensils for its soundworld). The sounds then functioned on multiple levels. For instance, in one scene in *And by the Way, Miss...* the girls bang out a rhythm on screens with their running shoes. That sound sets the mood and accompanies text *and* movement. Similarly, a school bell or an alarm clock, rather than a curtain, marks scene changes. But it goes beyond that initial function, too: When several bells ring at once, we register pitches—harmony, in fact—and move from there to the implications of the word "harmony," which means, of course, agreement or concord.

The women do sing the occasional song. But even giggles and screams (vocalized to project and blend for a distinctive texture and emotional *affect*) are treated as musical items by URGE, whose members have done extensive work in extended vocal techniques with such teachers as Michelle George, Richard Armstrong, and Marjam Hassam.

Each and every sound constitutes the "musical score" of the piece. One might be tempted to hear some of it as accessory, but that would be wrong. All are fastidiously weighed, deliberated and rehearsed. It is not background music. And if the sound were not there, the play would collapse.

Typical is an early scene in the play where the girls explore the sounds of relevant words as they line up in front of a mirror in the school washroom. "Zzzzit," they vocalize as they examine their complexions. "Swishhhh" they intone as the mascara goes on. And "ooh, ooh, ooh," as they apply their lipstick. It's guileless and playful and lyrical: It's musical.

URGE also uses sound to build moments of greater emotional complexity. Take, for instance, a scene in slow motion in which the presence of a popular boy suddenly registers on the girls' radar: "Hiiii Benjamin! Andy really liiiikes you," recite the girls. At first they speak in unison, but on the word "liiiikes", each voice spreads its wings and settles in a different register, making, in fact, a "chord." That's harmony. But when Benjamin focuses on the new girl Christina, instead of on Andy (who considers him "her property"), the voices break apart. Harmony splinters. URGE defines this moment as "the molecular breakdown of friendship."

The scene continues as the actors spread out



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across the stage, dispersing visually as well as aurally. Each girl, in isolation now, traces a circle on the floor with her foot, and the sound of that action—a dry, hollow, rasping swish—sets up one of the most intense moments in the play:

Andrea: Did you hear about that girl who went to that party? (first whisper in)

Amber: Some guys got her really drunk so she could barely move... (second whisper in)

Lauren: They took her to the bathroom and this guy just started fingering her... (all whispers in)

Diana: Her friends didn’t help her? (whispers and feet out—all caught in the same awkward stance, whistles start, develop and then grow silent)

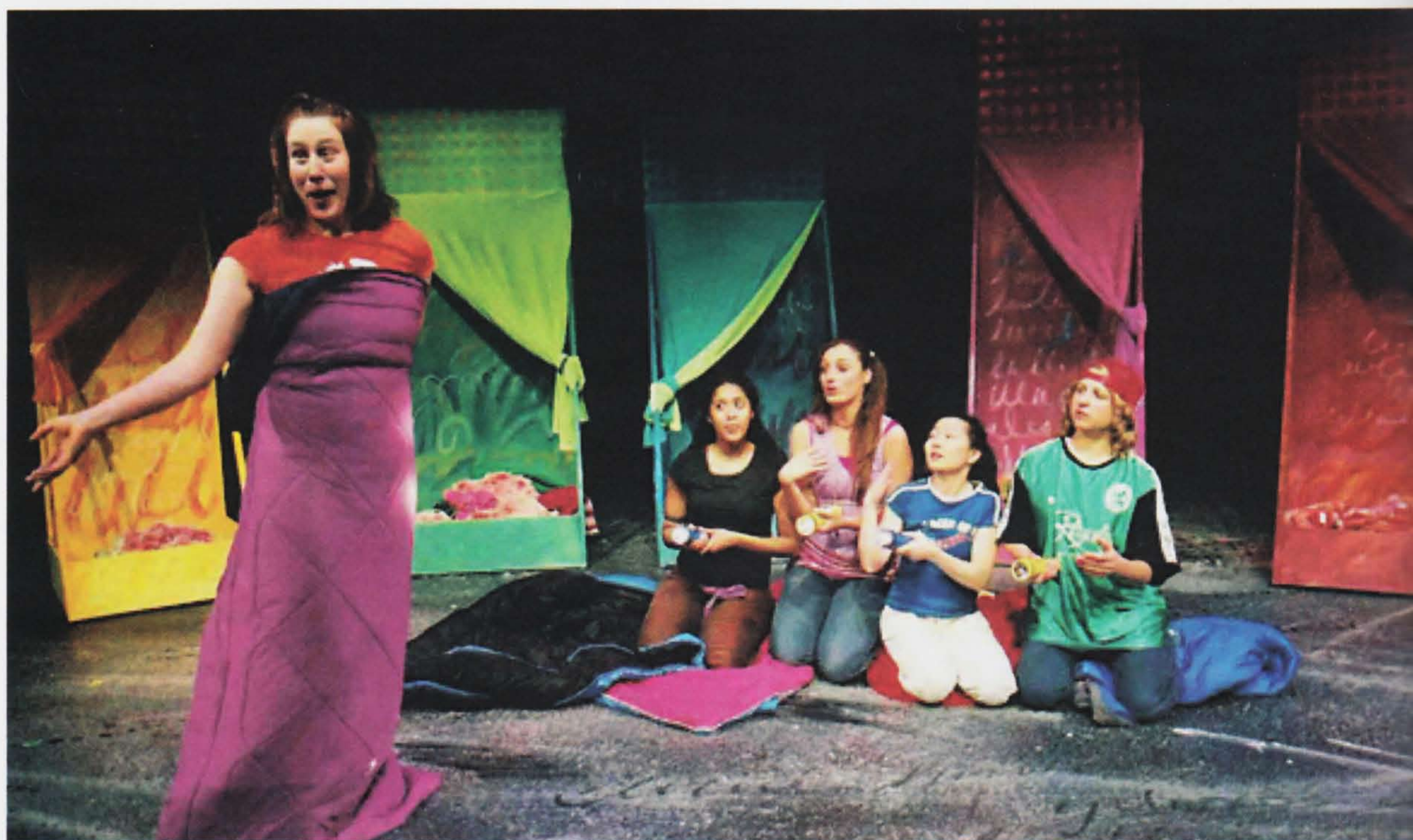
Christina: (in silence) She’ll have to change schools....

The whispering texture, like gossip itself, comprises real words, and it’s sibilant with tension and potential malice. It also holds the speakers in its collective net. When whispers give way to low whistles at the words, “Her friends didn’t help her,” the mood shifts poignantly: “To me it’s a very haunting, lonely sound, like whistling in the dark,” muses Smith. “It’s as if they’re trying to convince themselves that there’s nothing really wrong when the opposite is true.”

Some of the cast had never sung before. “We worked over the musical vocabulary of the show every day,” Smith tells us, “humming from a distance, humming close together, changing levels and pitches. We worked on the women’s individual voices and how they could grow, letting them discover what was there and

ly different sound. The four-way screen-playing accompanied Diana for her pseudo fan dance, which ended with her picking up her running shoes and banging on her screen (bang 2 3, bang bang 2 3 4, bang 2 3, bang bang 2 3 4) until the other girls dropped out and she finished on her own. Diana’s screen was rigged with a few coins taped to it, which gave it its own buzz, making it slightly different again from the others (to correspond to her character’s psychological prominence in the scene). The banging expresses the girls’ anger at themselves (or at someone else) for bullying Diane — “something to do with the pulse of rage,” suggests Smith—and the intensity it creates is unmistakable.

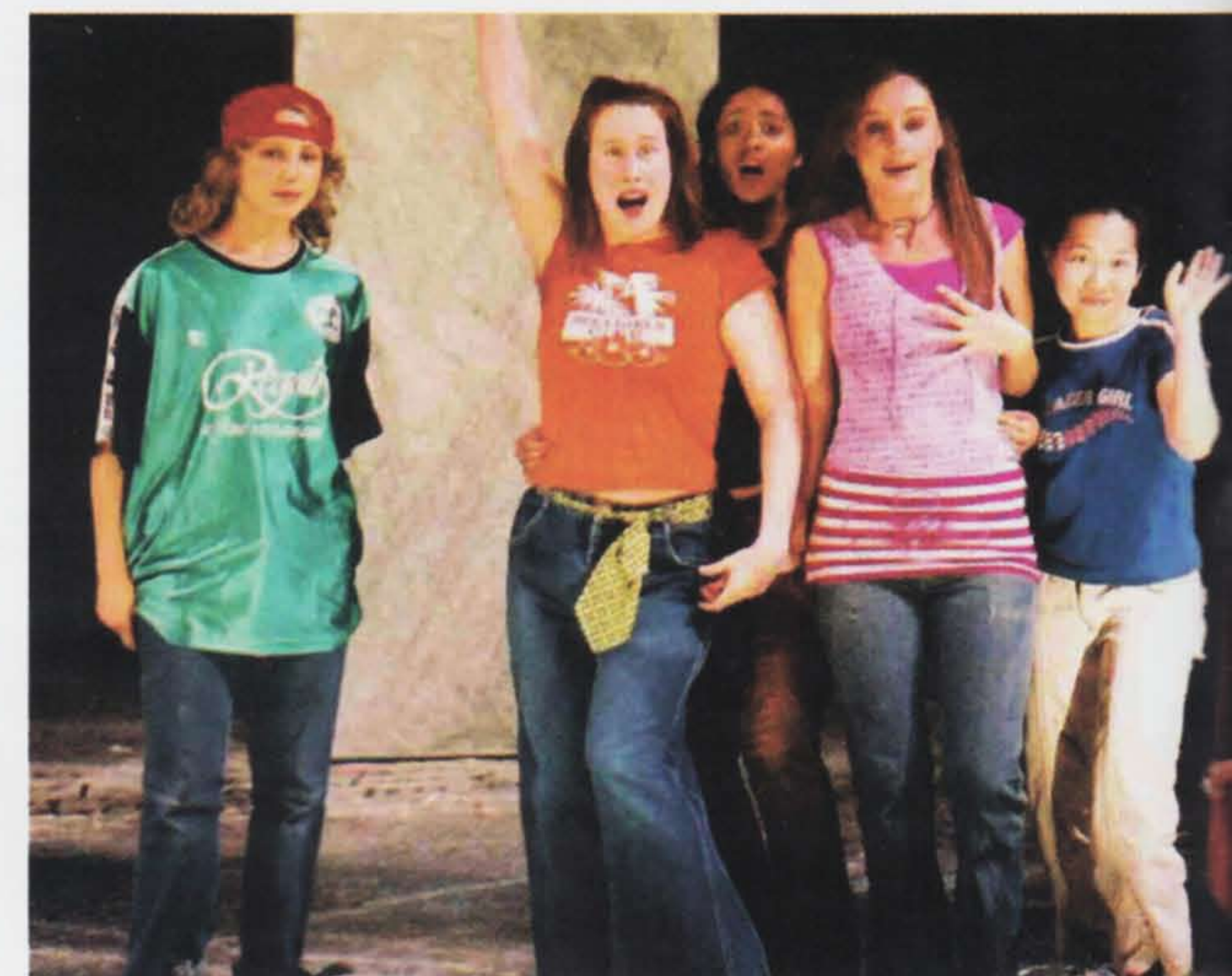
Other ideas emerged during the daily voice training sessions. “We were working with



Sleeping Bag scene from *And by the Way, Miss . . .* Left to right are Andrea Donaldson (standing), Amber Godfrey, Lauren Brotman, Diana Tso and Christina Sicoli.

looking for places of power in each voice. We trained them a lot in matching tone, taught them how to be in unison, and we worked on listening skills so they could get the right dynamic and learn how to choose pitches for the ‘chords.’”

And always it was a process that bore fruit gradually. Consider how the screen-banging scene we spoke of earlier evolved: Experimenting after a rehearsal, URGE discovered that using a rubber sneaker to hit the screens that divided the stage into each girl’s individual space made a good sound. But the banging on its own wasn’t enough, so they taught the cast a slow rhythmic pattern. Amber started it, then Lauren joined in (in canon); then Andrea also joined the canon followed by Christina—who didn’t play the canon, but contributed a slow pulse. Each screen had a slight-



Boy-sighting scene from *And by the Way, Miss . . .* Left to right are Christina Sicoli, Andrea Donaldson, Amber Godfrey, Lauren Brotman and Diana Tso.



Amber one morning on her song, which is kind of bluesy," says Smith, "and we wanted to find a way to let her enjoy it more. We suggested to the other members of the cast that they pretend to be back-up singers so she could really go for it." It worked so well that they incorporated the general idea, though in a somewhat economized form, into the final version.

URGE also uses sound to ease transitions. Scenes flow into one another with dream-like continuity, allowing *And by the Way, Miss...* to touch down on such dark topics as abuse, violence or depression without labouring them, contacting nerves, soft spots and, of course, funny bones, all along the way.

"Some subjects were awkward, but they lightened them by making them funny," said 15-year old Naomi, whose relationship to the play started when she was 13 and URGE interviewed the girls in her class. "That made it easier."

To be sure, *And by the Way, Miss...* is less surreal, and has less metaphorical layering, than other URGE pieces, but it is not less funny. (The ensemble's 2002 piece *Trousseau-True Nature*, for instance, punned—both verbally and visually—with ebullient freedom on brides and grooms, bits and bridle paths, one idea flowing into the next with stream-of-consciousness ease). *And by the Way, Miss...* tones down abstraction in the interest of clarity, but

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certainly abstraction is still present, and it allows URGE to cover considerably more sensitive material, and to more fully delineate its five characters in a mere 50 minutes than if they were locked into a standard narrative structure. As well, it makes the play seem "up to date" to the kids. One girl simply dismissed other plays she'd seen at school: "Those were just your basic plays, totally realistic," she said. "This play had different scenes going on at the same time. That's what made it really cool."

There are, by necessity, plenty of loose ends, but that's deliberate. "We haven't tried to answer all their questions," says Krucker. "We'd rather they went with their feelings than tried to analyze the scene for absolutes."

The girls in the audience responded to that. "I could really relate it to myself, to things I'm going through now," Naomi said. "It's great to know other people are thinking the same things."

And it's telling that friendship has the last word, just as URGE's research suggested it should. Kristina, 14, said, "After I saw it I wanted to call up my friends and tell them I loved them." This, to me, says more clearly than anything else that *And by the Way, Miss...* has remained true to the spirit of the girls it was written for. That's intangible, perhaps, but so is music.

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