

## Youth Onstage! by All Stars Project



Reynaldo Piniella (right) in the Castillo Theatre's production of *Fine Print* in 2008.  
Photo credit: Ronald L. Glassman



Reynaldo Piniella (front, left) in the Castillo Theatre's production of *Coming of Age in Korea*, in 2009. Photo credit: Diane Stiles

The All Stars Project's Youth Onstage! Program Introduces Young People to Performance, Development and the World of Theater.

When actor and playwright Reynaldo Piniella was growing up in East New York - one of the most impoverished communities in Brooklyn - he was a shy and 'pretty closed off kid who knew little of life outside his neighborhood. This changed when Piniella began attending John Bowne High School in Queens, where he was first introduced to theater and Youth Onstage! (YO!), a program of the All Stars Project (ASP), that Piniella openly credits with transforming his life.

"I was going through a hard time in my life," explains Piniella. "My parents had separated, I had to make new friends, I was dealing with work, school and a long commute, so I fell into a pretty bad funk." Fortunately, an English teacher who saw 'something' in Piniella told him that if he wanted to pass, he had to participate in class every day. Since she was also a drama teacher, his participation often involved performing in classroom play readings. "At some point," he recalls, "she told me I was a 'natural' and suggested I audition for drama class, which I agreed to only after she told me I wouldn't have to take English."

That same year, Piniella met the ASP, whose mission is to transform the lives of youth in poor communities, using the power of play and performance. According to Piniella, he was immediately responsive to the ASP's mission and especially liked that its programs are free and accessible to all young people. He traveled to the ASP's performing arts and development center, on West 42nd Street in Manhattan, to audition for YO!, which introduces young people, ages 14 to 21, to performance, improv and the world of theater, under the direction of volunteer theater professionals.

The unique opportunity to be able to audition in front of experienced theater professionals made a big impact on Piniella. "Having them see something of worth in me was emboldening. I fell in love with YO! and the Castillo Theatre [ASP's Off-off-Broadway theater] because, for the first time in my life, I had a sense of direction, a place where I could have a voice, a place where I could transform and live outside small circumstances of my life."

Over the course of eight weeks, Piniella's YO! cohorts met twice a week for classes in acting, voice, projection, breath, improvisation and movement, classes that students found especially challenging. "We were a bunch of Black and Latinx kids, so we did not want to act like a cow or roll around on the ground. But we soon learned that YO! was a space where we could 'act the fool' without the judgment of school, which was empowering. I know that it helped me and others to become more confident, to approach learning with new openness and curiosity, and to push ourselves to be our best."

Upon graduating from YO!, Piniella performed in a number of Castillo Theatre productions and launched his professional career in both screen and stage. In addition to several Off-Broadway credits, including *The Toilet* at the New Federal Theatre, *The Death of the Last Black Man* at the Signature Theatre and *The Space Between the Letters* at The Public, he has received the Fox Foundation Resident Actor Fellowship from Theatre Communications Group and the Thomas Barbour Playwrights Award.

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down theater in New York City, Piniella accepted an offer from ASP to come back to YO! as a teacher in the virtual space, which allows him to work with kids from around the country. He is delighted by their "flexibility, preparation, readiness to play and willingness to push me to grow as a teacher," and is not surprised. "The ASP and YO! are all about development, about failing in the pursuit of growth, about going outside your comfort zone and stretching in ways you don't think are possible."

Piniella reflected on the experience of teaching and building a program similar to the one from which he graduated. "Now, I see myself as an activist and educator as much as an artist. The values that I learned at the All Stars Project have everything to do with uplifting young people that look like me, engaging poverty, and working to create a better world. During this time of righteous protest and 'Black Lives Matter,' we all need to find ways to open doors for young people across this country. I am proud to do this as a theatre artist and a community builder."

You can learn more about the All Stars Project, Inc. and Youth Onstage! by visiting <https://allstars.org>.