

The Confidence of a Writer

by Elizabeth Bookhultz



A throng of us milled around the hotel lobby waiting to catch the next elevator. I was watching everyone, partly trying to coax myself into making conversation. As a writer, I'm always vacillating between removed observation and active participation. I feel like I am never fully immersed in the moment because the artist in me can't stop mentally taking notes on the characters I meet, the dialogue I hear, and the intricacies of the surrounding environment.

When the elevator door opened, we immediately crowded inside. From looking at everyone's lanyards, I could see that we represented all groups—writers, musicians, singers, actors, dancers, painters, illustrators, sculptors, filmmakers, and photographers. I looked up at the mirrored ceiling from my spot against the back of the elevator to better survey everyone's faces. I could tell from their excitement that the people at youngARTS Week weren't here because they dabbled in art; everyone here shared a love and a dedication to their respective fields. It wasn't just a hobby for us; it was something that fueled the very beat of our pulses.

We were among 142 finalists who were invited to spend an all-expenses-paid week in Miami this past January for youngARTS Week 2008. Each year, the

National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts (NFAA), through its youngARTS program, recognizes high school seniors and other 17- and 18-year-olds for their artistic achievements. During youngARTS Week, the finalists participate in master classes, showcase performances, enrichment programs, interviews, and final adjudications to vie for monetary awards.

I found out I was a finalist last November. I had submitted a creative non-fiction portfolio months earlier, and when I got the phone call from the NFAA office, I ran into the living room and mouthed silently to my dad, "I won, I won!" I spent the next several weeks reading about the program on the youngARTS website, watching videos of past showcase performances, and talking with NFAA alumni from my school. Still, it was impossible for me to imagine what the week would be like.

The Performance Panel

On our first evening in Florida, the writers met the four panelists who would be guiding us through critiques and workshops throughout the week. The panelists were professional writers who each represented a specific genre of literature: non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and scriptwriting. Before I had written the essays that secured me a spot in Miami, I hadn't had much experience in writing memoir, so I enjoyed working with Brett Paesel, the non-fiction panelist and author of *Mommies Who Drink*. I am always interested in how professional writers work and live and what they have to say about writing. Ms. Paesel's perspective was refreshing. Before becoming a writer, she was an actress. As we prepared for our showcase performance, she gave us notes on how to read our work and how to keep the audience engaged, which is something writers don't typically learn in writing class.

She had us draft an aide-memoir, a style of writing in which only the facts are given—no embellishments with imagery, metaphors, or similes. It sounds simple, but that



Photo by Juan E. Cabrera ©NFAA]

The 2008 youngARTS writing finalists hold a workshop at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Miami.

exercise made me realize that I rely on literary flourishes a little too often and that, in certain instances, presenting just the factual details of an event can be more powerful.

When I got back to my hotel room on the first night, my body was tense with exhaustion. I thumbed through the anthology of the finalists' works. It would've taken me until morning to get through everything, but I tried to read at least a portion of everyone's pieces. When I finally pulled up the covers and put my head on the pillow, I was envious—how could I be considered equal to all these writers?

It always seems that young writers are just itching to tackle the really big, abstract topics like death and love and hatred. But in perusing the work of the other finalists, I appreciated their ability to focus on the smaller moments in life and to suggest a larger theme through concrete details. I went to sleep with vivid images in my mind of the scenes and people they had depicted in their pieces.

In the middle of the week, we had a master class with David Lee, the first poet laureate of Utah, who recited some of his pieces from memory. He read his words with such tenderness, using his arms and hands to help tell the story of each poem. Later, when he asked all of the panelists to present an excerpt of their work, it was the first time we had the opportunity to see firsthand how our teachers interpreted their own writing.

A Show of Words

When we weren't sharing our work and offering feedback to one another, we were preparing for our showcase, a performance in which finalists from each discipline exhibited their skills. Each night, the rest of us in the audience acted as though we were celebrities at the Golden Globes, praising and applauding our peers. While the showcases were inspiring, some were a blow to our confidence. It was difficult not to be intimidated by the performances of young dancers at the prime of their lives moving with grace and athleticism.

The writers' showcase was the only one held in the morning, and we all joked that everyone would be lulled to sleep by our words, but we found the opposite: the audience was attentive, ready to laugh at the funny lines, and put on their solemn faces for the more serious parts. One of the dancers said, "Man, I want to be a writer." When an actor demanded that we write him a script, we knew we had pulled off a good performance.

I've always been shy about sharing my own work: it's like revealing my insides to an audience, letting them see how my organs operate, and I felt especially vulnerable reading in front of all the other artists. I was second to



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The 2008 youngARTS writing finalists gather for a group shot at Arts Week.

read, which made the whole showcase so much easier: had I not been placed so early on, I would've been chewing on my nails, reading and re-reading the lyric essay I was about to perform. When I was finished with my three-minute excerpt, my body was much more relaxed, and I was able to enjoy the rest of the show just like any member of the audience. Even though we had read our pieces aloud several times in our rehearsals, performing them in front of an audience was like writing them for the first time.

Critic Out, Dreamer In

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to be a writer. Since second grade, I have begged my mother to buy me journals. I used to sit on my bed and invent new stories and record the events in my life.

Somewhere along the line, though, I lost confidence in my aspiration: I didn't believe I had enough talent, and I was always questioning the work that I produced. I ultimately realized that I would have to write for myself and for no one else. While I know that being successful in a contest here and there doesn't necessarily define me as an accomplished writer, the recognition I received from NFAA has restored my faith a little, has reminded me to silence my inner critic and get my thoughts down onto the page uninterrupted.

youngARTS Week was a whirlwind. While I was there, I was so wrapped up in the moment that I didn't realize what effect it would ultimately have on me. Just like writing memoir requires contemplation and distance, it took some time to reflect on the seven days I spent in Florida. Beyond what I learned about writing itself, I discovered that I have the passion and dedication to make it as an artist and the confidence to pursue my dream of becoming a writer. ■



Elizabeth Bookhultz enjoys swing dancing, watching old films, collecting vintage clothing, scrapbooking, and making jewelry. She hopes to attend a small liberal arts college this fall, where she will have the opportunity to receive a well-rounded education.