When directors with Theatre of the Oppressed NYC asked a group of teenage girls to strike a pose that they think represents the Bronx, most of them did the same thing: They chose images with weapons.

This is how artist Melanie Crean remembers a workshop with around ten teenage girls in the Bronx, who were then in the early stages of creating a play that they will perform in front of a live audience this coming week.

"[Violence] is a very real part of their lives that is not necessarily getting discussed and analyzed in schools or elsewhere," Crean told the Voice. "We're starting to...get people talking about problems, so we can start to think about solutions."

This is part of the unique process of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, a nonprofit group on the rise that collaborates with organizations throughout the city to create original productions with communities that face some kind of oppression or discrimination.
They’ve worked with the homeless, with undocumented immigrants, prisoners, transgender youth, HIV/AIDS groups, and more. The performances involve audience interaction and are designed to confront some kind of problem or challenge facing a particular community. The actors often have little to no on-stage experience.

The plays are, at the very least, unpredictable.

This week, we checked in with two of the organizers behind the group's latest project, which is culminating in two performances this week by a group of Bronx girls who are all around 14-years-old. Of the ten girls that the organization has worked with for this effort, more than half are immigrants from Africa or are first-generation, Crean said, noting that a lot of them speak Arabic. This teens are part of BronxWorks, a nonprofit group that works with local families.

Since January, Katy Rubin, the founding artistic director of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, has been partnering with Crean, an artist who also teaches at the New School, to create this show with the youth.

It began with a project Crean called "Once Upon a Time in the Bronx" where she worked with the young teens to create a storytelling card game, in which players have different cards that represent characters, places, objects, etc. The concept is based on a traditional game, but Crean wanted the girls to create cards that were authentic and specific to the Bronx. So she and ten teenage girls went around with cameras and took photos of the neighborhood for cards that serve as the ingredients of their stories.

"If we are going to tell stories about the Bronx, how are we gonna do it? Who would be included? What places, what people what objects?" she said. "And what kind of ending would it have?"

The team is producing decks made up of 165-cards. It is out of this game that they are creating the upcoming performance, called, "Fatou and Fatou" based on the names of two of the teens involved.

Some of the participants have difficult family situations, said Rubin -- who has been facilitating the rehearsals -- and that has informed a lot of the focus of the play they have written. The performance will tackles a number of issues that are relevant to these girls, including domestic violence, self-esteem, sexuality, and family dynamics.

"We started by playing games and really exploring the Bronx in images," Rubin said. "A lot of the things that were coming up were [issues] of violence, gangs, guns, and also..how you look, how you dress, or trying to look good on the street. A big part of this show is men coming up to girls -- and these girls are [around] 13 -- and either asking for their number, or calling them ugly, or commenting on their appearance or making fun of their hair."

The story centers on two friends who struggle with these challenges, and one has an alcoholic and abusive father.
"The story that came together is very intense," Rubin said.

"There are some funny and wonderful moments, too," she added. "They have a blast playing all these crazy people they see on the street, the hairdressers, the guys who come on to girls."

In Theatre of the Oppressed productions, the audience typically gets an opportunity to interact with the actors and suggest possible solutions or alternative ways to respond to the often difficult situations the characters are facing.

The play is being performed in The Andrew Freedman Home, a formerly abandoned space that has been converted into an art space by a nonprofit group called No Longer Empty.

This kind of collaboration gives the teenagers a chance to create something that is really theirs, which, Rubin said, can be a nice change of pace from test-oriented learning in the classroom.

In the best moments, she said, "They feel they've made something that is really truthful and really powerful."

Performances are Thursday, May 3rd at 6:30 p.m. and Saturday, May 5th, at 3 p.m. at the Andrew Freedman Home at 1125 Grand Concourse, Bronx, NY. Free admission.

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