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# The Bushwick Starr

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Where ambitious artists  
& ambitious audiences find each other.

## Interview with Jeremy Pickard of Superhero Clubhouse



*BIG GREEN THEATER is an annual eco-playwriting program and green theater festival celebrating environmental education, sustainability in the arts, and community enrichment. Original plays written by Bushwick 5th*

*grade students are performed by a professional ensemble using only green theater methods.*

*For a 4 month period every year, The Bushwick Starr theater works with a group of 5th grade students, teaching a combination of playwriting and environmental education. Our program partner, Jeremy Pickard of Brooklyn based eco-theater collective Superhero Clubhouse, leads this group of young writers in creating original eco-plays, which are then presented at The Bushwick Starr's Big Green Theater Festival every April. The plays are performed by an ensemble of theater professionals using only green theater methods.*

**1. Give us a general overview of the Big Green Theater Festival (BGT): what it is, how it began, and how the process works.**

**JP:** BGT started in 2010, initiated by The Bushwick Starr to offer local schools a hybrid program of environmental education and playwriting. Superhero Clubhouse, an eco-theater collective, was brought on board to direct the classroom sessions and production, and the rest is history. BGT is a four-month program for fifth-grade students. In January and February, eco-experts come into the BGT classroom to give interactive presentations about specific environmental topics. Then the students are guided in writing their own plays inspired by the presentations. At the end of February, students pick the plays they want to develop and see produced. In March, students finish their plays, while learning about rewriting, songwriting, and design. In April, Superhero Clubhouse produces the student plays with professional actors and ecological design. The 4-month program culminates with performances for the schools and the public, and the students take a bow.

**2. This year BGT's extended its reach to two area schools (P.S. 123 and 075, respectively). What are some of the benefits and challenges of working with two different groups of students?**

It turns out that neighboring schools have vastly different cultures. While the fifth-graders at PS123 and PS075 share similar senses of humor (irreverent one-liners), inspirational stories (Frozen) and favorite snacks (Spicy Takis),

the differences between the way the two groups listened and communicated were profound. We learned that the approach we have used at P.S.123 wouldn't work at P.S.075, and quickly had to rethink the way we talked to the students, the taught writing, led exercises... We even had to change the space in which we held classroom sessions. Adjusting to an unfamiliar culture of students was a major challenge, but the discrepancy between schools was artistically a blessing: both schools received the same presentations on climate change, yet each school's plays are distinctly different mythologies. The playwrights at PS123, having inherited three years of BGT, were clever and crafty with language, while the playwrights of PS75, brand new to the art form, were more raw and emotional in their approach.

### **3. Which collaborators (eco-experts, teaching artists, etc) are you working with with this year, and how have these partnerships affected the plays?**

We began the science side of this year's program with a visit to the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, one of the world's leading climate science campuses, where students got to tour the labs of paleobotanist Dorothy Peteet and core a tree with dendrochronologist Nicole Davi. Back in the classroom, the students worked with water engineer Katherine Alfredo, agricultural expert Weston Anderson, energy expert Zara L'Heureux, and NASA climate modeler Kate Marvel. After students chose the plays they wanted to develop and see produced, they had a rewriting workshop with climate playwright Chantal Bilodeau, a songwriting workshop with composer Nate Weida, and a design workshop with BGT set/costume designers Michael Minahan and Preesa Adeline Bullington.

### **4. Why do you believe the work you're doing with BGT is important?**

This is a hard question to answer succinctly, because I feel like I could write an essay on why I think BGT is important. Perhaps most significant: BGT is about empowering kids at a point in their lives when storytelling and imaginative play— the modes with which we all grow up learning and communicating— begins to drop down on the priority list, if not get phased

out altogether, in school and at home. BGT is intended to nurture students' individuality and creative expression, to allow them to find confidence in their own voices and pride in the hard work of art-making. BGT features adults from the science and art worlds inspiring kids to use their imaginations as a tool to connect their own lives to the problems of the planet; and in the process, the kids inspire us adults to do the same.

### **5. What's your favorite part of this year's lineup? Any spoilers?**

This year is very special. Not only are the plays some of the best we've ever produced, but the topic of climate change has allowed us to experiment with limitations in a beautiful way. Design spoiler: expect our set to recede, resources to deplete, and time to run out. Script spoiler: expect possessed mermaids, unfrozen cavemen, and world destruction.

### **6. Best classroom moment?**

The day our energy expert Zara taught students about the complexities of switching to renewable energy, the students at both schools organically began debating about whether or not we need to use so much energy. Some kids were adamant that they would be happy without lights and heat; some felt strongly that certain appliances like hair irons were essential to life.

### **The Bushwick Starr Presents:**

### **The 5th Annual BIG GREEN THEATER Festival**

**Created in collaboration with Superhero Clubhouse**

**Plays written by Bushwick 5th grade students at PS123 + PS075**

**Performances April 24 - 26**

**Fri. at 7pm: \$18 Special Benefit Performance**

**Sat. and Sun. at 11am + 3pm: Free!**

**Reserve Tickets [here](#), and track the students' progress on our [BGT Blog](#)!**

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