

# LOS ANGELES TIMES

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## Life at This Stage

### **Four Orange County students make their Kennedy Center debuts in works that link teen actors, teen playwrights, and lots of teen issues.**

By Heather Gehlert, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — As of four weeks ago, Orange County teen performers Amanda Bolten and Steven Rada had never strayed far from their high school stages. Today, they can say they've been on the playbill at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, a nationally known showcase for the theater elite.

Bolten and Rada, both 17 and recent high school graduates, arrived in the nation's capital last month — nervous, a little intimidated and not knowing what to expect, other than that they were about to be part of a professional production conceived, scripted, scored and performed entirely by students.

They were among 39 high school actors invited to Washington by the Critics and Awards Program for High School Theater — the Cappies, for short — that aims to give students interested in drama the same sort of high visibility that top high school athletes frequently regard as their due.

An actress since age 10, Bolten has performed in about a half-dozen student-written one-act plays at Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts. Though she is a fan of the classics and can't say "Neil Simon" without smiling, Bolten said that the words penned by students speak to teens in a way that other works can't.

"Student-written stuff is so different," she said. "It's more edgy. It's more in-depth."

Bolten and Rada, from Mission Viejo High School, went through a peer-critique selection process, lengthy auditions and days of 12-hour rehearsals before stepping on the Kennedy Center stage in the musical comedy "Edit:Undo." A story of life and love in the digital age, told in 16 songs and two acts, it is named for the computer option that allows you to reverse or "undo" your work.

The production is humorous, but is also a social commentary on technology, displaying its destructive role in young people's lives — "You can't edit, undo feelings," one character says — and its productive role in the arts.

"Our generation has been under so much criticism," said Natalie Bamdad, a student at Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Md., and a lyricist for "Edit:Undo." "People assume that [technology] has led to less imagination, less creativity, but I think this proves we're capable of creating something truly original."

Heavy on pop culture, the latest digital gadgets and understandable-only-to-teens lingo, the show has all the makings of a cult classic. But, with a subplot of angst-ridden love and plenty of parent-teen conflict, it also spans generations.

Rada was already looking ahead after the final performance Tuesday: "It's so cool to think maybe this will be on Broadway someday," he said. He and Bolten plan to major in theater — Rada at Azusa Pacific University and Bolten at Long Beach State.

The Orange County Cappies chapter is one of 15 in regions across the United States and Canada.

In the fall, each participating school — there were 23 in Orange County this year — selects a production as its Cappies show. Student journalists receive professional training as drama critics. They attend performances at the other schools, and their reviews are published in major daily newspapers, in the high school papers and on the Cappies website ([www.cappies.com](http://www.cappies.com)).

At the end of the school year, the teen critics choose the best performances and productions of the season — a local high-school version of the Tony Awards. By winning that competition, Bolten and Rada were invited to Washington to perform on the Kennedy Center stage.

Prior to this week's performances of "Edit:Undo," the Cappies also staged "Starz!" and "Playz!" — two compilations of short sketches, monologues and plays that included work by two Orange County student playwrights, Taya Kenny of the Huntington Beach Academy for Performing Arts and Guy Yedwab of Sage Hill School in Newport Coast.

This is the first time the Cappies International Theater Company has performed student-written productions, but it won't be the last, said William Strauss, who co-founded the program in 1999 to promote positive reinforcement for students in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings.

"It makes the program more work; it makes it more of a challenge," said Strauss, who is also director and co-founder of the Capitol Steps, the Washington political satire group. "But it's more in the spirit of the Cappies' mission — celebrating talented young performers and playwrights."