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"Beacham's Last Poetry Reading"

ROBERT BRUSTEIN

On stage a lectern, a glass of water, a microphone. A bowl of daffodils. After a few seconds, John Beacham enters. An aging man, he is dressed in a corduroy jacket with elbow patches, waistcoat, a pair of slacks. Bow tie.

Pantomime: Beacham pours the glass of water into the bowl, and, behind the lectern, surreptitiously empties a flask of whiskey into the water glass.

BEACHAM: Good afternoon, dear ladies and gentlemen, and fellow lovers of Ars Poetica. My name is John Beacham and it is my pleasure to welcome you to our annual poetry series where each year in the merry month of May we sample immortal verse from The Golden Treasury. A priceless anthology first collected and edited by Francis Turner Palgrave in 1861 to commemorate "all the best original Lyrical pieces and Songs in our language."

This historical outdoor amphitheatre on Cambridge Common is an ideal setting for poems that have endured for hundreds of years and will, no doubt, outlast all the physical works of man. Including those of Ozymandias, king of kings, look on my works ye mighty and despair. (Little chuckle.) First, let us take some deep breaths together to fully appreciate this glorious May weather. "For what is so rare as a day in Spring." In. Out. "Spring, the sweet Spring, is the year's pleasant king." In. Out. Good. And now for some sublime poesy.

In tribute to the advent of the vernal season, symbolized by this bowl of flowers (Sniffs them.), I will begin with Wordsworth's immortal poem,
"The Daffodils." (He clears his throat and begins to read, in a vibrant, tremulous voice.) "I wander'd lonely as a cloud/ That floats on high o'er vales and hills./When all at once I saw a crowd,/A host of golden daffo..." (Instead of the last syllable of "daffodils," Beacham substitutes a violent sneeze, followed by coughs and more sneezes. He stops, looks at the bowl of flowers, sneezes again, then hands them off stage.) Sorry, my hay fever seems to be acting up early this season. No matter. Persevering in the spirit of Spring, let us now turn to the oeuvre of Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wondrous panegyric "To a Skylark." (He reads:) "Hail to thee, blithe spirit/Bird thou never wert/That from heaven or near it/Pourest thy full heart/In sweet songs made heard by rosy dews/In melodious quantity of silver sound./Oft when I hear/Those soft sounds in musicborne/On the still ear smother'd/As with sweet perfumes./And then my heart with pleasure fills/And dances with the daffodils." "Bird thou never wert/That from heaven or near it/Pourest thy full heart/In sweet songs made heard by rosy dews/In melodious quantity of silver sound./Oft when I hear/Those soft sounds in musicborne/On the still ear smother'd/As with sweet perfumes./And then my heart with pleasure fills/And dances with the daffodils." (Elvis Presley's "You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog" can now be heard, blaring from a passing car.) Oh, dear. Patience, people, that cacophony will conclude in a moment. "Bird thou never wert/That from heaven or near it/Pourest thy full heart/In sweet songs made heard by rosy dews/In melodious quantity of silver sound./Oft when I hear/Those soft sounds in musicborne/On the still ear smother'd/As with sweet perfumes./And then my heart with pleasure fills/And dances with the daffodils." (Instead of the last syllable, Beacham substitutes a vibrant, throaty voice.) (Cheered.) Nice going! We must learn to inure ourselves to the clamor of the modern world. Ah, but what better antidote to assaults on the human ear drum than Orsino's opening speech in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night: "If music be the food of love, play on, give me excess of it that..." (Now incredibly loud rap music begins blasting in our ears. Beacham affects a wan smile.) That is excess, isn't it? Would you turn down that boom box, please. (The rap gets louder, Beacham tries to compete, falling into hip-hop rhythms himself.) "Once upon a midnight dreary/While I pondered weak and weary/Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore...Mongst horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy." (Losing his place) Uh...uh...uh. (To audience.) Not to worry. A slight handicap. As Shakespeare wisely says: (Reads, "To audience.") "Let me not to the marriage of true minds/admit impediments. Love is not love/Which alters when it alteration finds/Or bends with the remover to remove..."

BEACHAM: (To audience.) You must try to exercise decorum in public places.

BEACHAM: (To audience, in a high, crisp voice.) "And more temperate." I should explain my wife has a touch of Toullette's Syndrome, a distemper of the nervous system that sometimes makes her blurt out things she doesn't mean. Apart from that affliction, she walks in beauty, like the night.

BEACHAM: "Ou sent T,es neiges d'antan?"

BEACHAM: "Dans k pissoir comme toutes les choses comme ça.

BEACHAM: "Ou sont les neiges d'antan?"

BEACHAM: "Dans le pissoir comme toutes les choses comme ça."
BRUSTEIN

BEACHAM: That’s Monsieur Tourette speaking, Bessie dear, not you. (Another swig.) “Thou’l break my heart, thou bonnie bird/That sings upon the bough;/Thou mindst me o’ the happy days/When my true Love was true.”

BEACHAM’S WIFE: Then you’ve got a real long memory, buster.

BEACHAM: Forgive my wife, ladies and gentleman. Her affliction hides a beautiful soul...

BEACHAM’S WIFE: Are you calling me ugly, you bitch bastard?

BEACHAM: I meant no insult, dear one. (He stops and turns up the lapels of his jacket.) Hmm, now there’s a spanking breeze. Whence comes this sudden zephyr? Is it the force of Nature that Shakespeare celebrated in his song, “Blow, blow, thou winter wind”?

BEACHAM’S WIFE: Blow me.

BEACHAM: She said it.

BEACHAM’S WIFE: Moanest loud.

BEACHAM: (Another swig.) “O wild West Wind..../Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow—a pause, realizing he is vulnerable again—nothing from Bessie,” shall blow/...and fill ... with living hues and odours plain....” (During this reading, a couple of audible noises have been issuing from Beacham, obviously farts. Beacham begins fanning his nose.) Whew!!! What is that dreadful stink? Er, stench. I mean odor?

BEACHAM’S WIFE: You’re breaking wind, you old fart.


BEACHAM’S WIFE: Beacham, you old fool, why don’t you wind up this catastrophe and go home!

BEACHAM: Yes, my dear, in a moment. (Goes to take a swig, but the glass is empty.) Thank you, ladies and gentleman for your patient auditory. I could go on, but “The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.” (The loud tolling of clock bells. Increasingly desperate, as the bells continue to ring.) Ring out wild bells.

BEACHAM’S WIFE: Wild balls. Bell’s Scotch. Wild Turkey. Let’s go get pissed.
American Actor Training and Charismatic Group Structure: A Sociological/Artistic Perspective on the Trappings of Guruism

DEBORAH CURRIER

The Layman: If you will omit the evangelical tone, you may talk to me about theatre.

The Theatre Man: Fanaticism is not only inevitable with us, it is almost indispensable (Clurman 32).

Having spent a large portion of my pre-teen years living in a charismatic group in Southern California, I began to notice certain similarities between the language, dynamics and leadership of my grandfather's "church" and the memoirs of theatre practitioners involved with the Group Theater in the 1930's (Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner). Drawing from my experiences and expertise as a professional actor and teacher and my personal history as a young member of a charismatic group, I sought out the academic guidance and mentorship of leading sociologist and author Marion S. Goldman to explore the possible connections between actor training and cult or charismatic group structure.

The recent attention to the potential for psychological and emotional dependency between the acting student and the acting teacher as well as the current studies in the sociology of religious movements led to the main questions of this research: What historical actor training traditions have led to the current approach in the acting classroom, which may mirror charismatic group behaviors? In what way does the practice of charismatic leadership and group structure affect the acting classroom? What can be learned from identifying similarities and differences between the two? What is the resulting responsibility of the acting scholar and practitioner in incorporating (or ignoring) this information in their theory and practice?

The main purpose of this query is to identify the relationship between charismatic groups and leadership as seen in religious practice and common practice in the acting classroom which utilizes the "System" or "Method" as developed by Stanislavski and Strasberg, respectively.

Mutual Seduction: The Power of Need and the Need for Power

The human being desires rules. He desires something to come down from heaven and to be eternal so that he can hold onto it, so that he can feel safe and secure. As soon as somebody says something — if it is good, all the more so — there is a tendency for that observation to harden into a rule, into a magic thing that is kept and to which no one else is privy (Strasberg 42-43).

The history of the acting profession brings with it a tradition of commitment and devotion most often associated with religious and spiritual belief systems. The tradition of charismatic leadership in the theatre, one that often mirrors a guru-like attention to control and surrender, appears to be a result of the training of many acting teachers, especially those specifically schooled in one particular approach to acting (e.g.: The Method, The Meisner Approach). As the fount of resident knowledge on such a highly emotionally charged endeavor such as acting, the temptation to surrender to the seduction of charismatic leadership is great. Even those teachers professing detachment are often unwittingly entering into guru/disciple relationships with their students. When the acting students view the instructor as their center, the natural tendency is for the teacher likewise to become attached to the power of being others' center. Such is often the case, because the teacher holds the keys to everything from validation of emotional connection in a scene to the threat of non-advancement in the program.

Being treated as a knower is one of the most seductive and difficult places to be. One is treated very specially — for what is more special than being considered a vessel of truth? (Kramer and Alstad 50).

The seduction of the continued feeling of being needed by students not only for sharing knowledge but for validation of their very existence can be overpowering if the instructor does not monitor his or her responses and reactions.
What is a Charismatic Group?

Marc Galanter, chairperson of the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on Religion and Psychiatry and author of *Cults: Faith, Healing and Coercion*, defines the charismatic group as having a set of three basic psychological elements: a shared belief system; a high level of social cohesiveness within the group; and, a charismatic (sometimes divine) power attributed to the group's leadership (5). These three "umbrella" elements contribute to the group's common characteristics of belonging, leadership roles, meeting places, rules and regulations, membership, specified and/or exclusionary language and the idea of a "pay-off," or reward, for total sacrifice to these ideals (Levine 101-103). "Among these [charismatic] groups are religious cults, some highly cohesive self-improvement groups, and certain political action movements" (Galanter 3).

Galanter further defines the charismatic group as having a set of basic psychological elements:

- Members (a) have a shared belief system, (b) sustain a high level of social cohesiveness, (c) are strongly influenced by the group's behavioral norms, and (d) impute charismatic (or sometimes divine) power to the group or its leadership (5).

The conformity of the group arises from their shared system of beliefs, whether it is religious in nature or not. The group members' lives on a day-to-day basis, as well as their concern for each other's emotional and physical well-being, comprise and dictate the level of social cohesiveness. This cohesiveness is often manifested in frequent planned activities and rituals which the group participates in together. The group may adopt particular modes of conduct or rules which then translate into a codified set of behavioral norms. These norms not only guide members in appropriate conduct within the group but also dictate proper behavior in unfamiliar situations. The attribution of charismatic powers may fall to the leader or to the group as a whole.

Examining the four major areas of charismatic group components - shared beliefs, behavioral norms, group cohesiveness and altered states of consciousness - and applying them specifically to training the actor, some "red flags" are identified. Monitored early enough, recognizing these tendencies can help the instructor avoid destructive aspects of charismatic leadership. The shared beliefs of an acting class are the binding force behind the energy necessary to obtain a degree in the field. The dedication essential to achieve graduation from college requires a set of shared beliefs among acting students, and the level of social control needed to operate as a cast depends on the healthy functioning of this belief system. It is the particular reinforcement of these beliefs that can be a danger in the acting classroom, especially if the specialized behaviors and language of the group becomes a dominating factor in demonstrating an individual's total commitment to the group. The acting teacher must be aware of facilitating a view of possessing an exalted level of knowledge, which can detract from the positive outcomes of group beliefs and lead students to transfer beliefs onto the teacher herself.

Behavioral norms, or those qualities which serve to bind the group together through appropriate conduct, are also an area easily manipulated by the acting teacher. The acting class is susceptible to a wide variety of behavioral norm rewards, ranging from the traditional grading structure to non-material rewards such as social reinforcements via applause, smiles and congratulations. The duty of the acting teacher is to make sure the rewards are related more toward maintaining the acting program's goals rather than specific leader expectations (such as inadvertently ignoring student critique which does not agree with the teacher's view and consistently reinforcing that which does).

Psychiatrist Robert Lifton has identified eight psychological themes necessary and central to totalistic environments, such as those found in both cults and more strict charismatic groups (Singer 69-74). Lifton's eight criteria for charismatic group behavioral norm control techniques can then be applied specifically to the acting teacher. For example, when monitoring communication within the group, the leader must avoid milieu control devices that shut down or alter free response in the classroom. This applies to group feedback sessions, where a healthy, alternative point of view in critique must be nurtured, and the dissenting students made to understand that due to the entirely subjective nature of acting, opposite opinions will frequently be expressed — and welcomed. If the acting student feels that his or her emotional life is on the line, and freedom of expressing doubts, differing opinions and viewpoints is denied or negated, the natural result will be setting of destructive behavioral norms within the group. Consequently, in order to maintain group cohesiveness it will become more and more necessary for the acting students to act as reinforcers of the leader's views, rather than experimenters on their own.

The acting teacher must also avoid the overuse of loading of language, or specialized and reinvented words and terms which exclude those not "in the know." The difficulty with specialized language is that it is a necessity in the acting field when teaching various techniques and exercises. The turning point from positive reinforcement of learning to negative loading of language occurs when the group demonstrates a high level of "us versus them" cohesiveness which develops into an exclusionary group dynamic with the encouraging acting teacher as top of the hierarchy. For example, actor training programs are usually divided into upper and lower level courses, with eliminations occurring
each semester or quarter up through the highest level classes. The lower division students are often purposefully excluded by the upper division students in a rehearsal setting, because the specialized language is not at their disposal. Once again, this is a natural occurrence, but the acting teacher or director’s task is to facilitate growth in the coursework. By making sure the specialized language is not used in a way to control, exclude or measure an acting student’s worth, the teacher can deter students from seriously adopting charismatic group behaviors. As for the question of specialized language in the classroom, there seems to be no way to avoid its presence or use, but a close monitoring of potential abuses can help avoid the most destructive tendencies.

The demand for purity, which manifests itself in acting programs as a limitation on the students to seek additional instruction outside the department, can be a debilitating control mechanism if rigidly enforced. The prevailing sentiment of “spoil one’s talent” by seeking training outside the group is fairly common and limiting in nature. Rather than acknowledge the value of a more rounded base of training in the actor, many teachers become feral and controlling of their students’ training.

The concept of being either a Method actor or a Meisner technique practitioner or rejecting the system altogether is a common division among acting teachers and students. Oftentimes, the training system has adopted one viewpoint, and the student who does not thrive under that particular technique is eventually eliminated from the program. Just as the different learning modalities of individuals have come into play in the educational world, the acting profession needs to acknowledge the individuality of learning styles and accommodate those differences for the good of the students. The goal of demanding purity in an acting program to reinforce group norms and behaviors as well as nurturing dependence on the group is misguided and potentially destructive. It is vital to adopt a healthy adaptation of various techniques and approaches, all welcomed so that the actor in training can begin to build their own approach to the craft, rather than imitating what they feel the group and teacher want. Many current textbooks incorporate a number of approaches, attempting a survey approach to various techniques, but the basis for most of the exercises and sample approaches comes from the method tradition. The instructor’s willingness to explore and broaden the horizons in the classroom (for example, incorporating some of the emerging movement based character creation techniques or non-Western traditions) will greatly affect the students’ willingness to question, experiment and evaluate critically their progress on their own.

The three most important control elements for the acting teacher, coach or director to be aware of misusing are confession, mystical manipulation and dispensing of existence. These three aspects of authoritarian and charismatic power are not only the most potentially harmful to the students but are also the most easily misunderstood and manipulated forces in the classroom.

The use of confession techniques in classroom and rehearsal exercises is an integral part of the purist Method approach, and one often abused by acting teachers under the guise of breaking down personal emotional barriers in the students and getting them in touch with “themselves.” Exercises which center around intimate sharing of personal experiences with the group, especially if combined with altered consciousness elements such as dimming of lights and using rhythm to enter a relaxed, trance state, are bordering on psychotherapy techniques and can be harmful to students not ready for highly sensitive emotional commitment. The confession exercises, which often contain quasi-hypnotic language and phraseology such as, “think back to a time when you were...,” “let it all out...” or “this moment you’re remembering will live in part of your body and inform your breath and movement,” and even examples as simple as giving an emotion memory a narrative that is spoken out loud, can be fuel for the misguided acting teacher to use in later encounters with the student. Often times, acting teachers will suggest to the student a memory or event having some personal knowledge of the student often shared in confession exercises, to try and bring forth a truthful response in the actor on stage. This can be extremely harmful to the psyche of the student, as the emotional ties and depth of feeling in associating an event to a “real” moment in character may elicit too-powerful responses. This also becomes a highly effective control device for the teacher as the triggers and fears of the students are laid bare during confession exercises.

Harold Clurman remarks on confession as related to the Method and young, inexperienced actors:

With the immature and more credulous actor [Method acting] may even develop into an emotional self-indulgence, or in other cases into a sort of therapy. The actor being the extraordinary man suffering all sorts of repressions and anxieties seizes upon the revelation of himself as a purifying agent (Krasner 17).

The concept of acting being emotionally self-indulgent is not a new notion, but the danger lies in the manipulation of that indulgence by the teacher to gain personal insights into their “repressed” and “anxiety stricken” students. This, then, easily crosses over into therapy for the student, openly acknowledged by the teacher and used as classroom fodder. If the temptation to use emotional exercises and warm-ups as a “purifying agent” remains a given for the young and impressionable
actor, it becomes the teacher’s duty to watch for the signs of confessional therapy taking place in the class. The group critique and discussion sessions are not a venue for counseling, and unless the leader has a license to practice therapy he or she is not qualified (no matter how much caring and personal involvement is present between students and instructor) to counsel students in any area other than acting technique. This includes deep emotional “release” exercises and class discussions designed to exercise demons supposedly plaguing the actor. 4

Another popular confession example which takes varied forms is the “naked” exercise, in which students are demanded to strip either physically down to underwear or emotionally down to tears through some self-revelation exercise. These classes usually adopt aliases from the students such as “Crying 101” or “Naked Basics,” and are generally considered by the student group to be the turning point and test of loyalty to the department. These courses most often are part of the upper division curriculum and serve to engender a very specialized group dynamic. If the acting class is not demonstrating charismatic group behaviors before confession and exclusion exercises begin, they most likely will manifest the dynamic if not properly guided by the teacher.

In what way can the same growth in young actors be facilitated without a necessary emotional “stripping” of the students? If the instructor’s goal of the exercises is to create a bonded group dynamic, he or she needs to reexamine what precisely is intended by the need to demand total compliance of the student actors. If the goal is to become more emotionally free and open so as to transfer that freedom to the stage performance, there are a number of warm-ups and games which can tap into those elements without necessarily making the results public or mandatory. The unwavering expectation to weep or disclose (even metaphorically) can become such a controlling factor that the exercise becomes more about bending the students’ will to the teacher’s demands than an emotional connection (unless tension and shame are the desired outcomes). One way to avoid the control which accompanies confession, if those exercises are a vital part of the program, is to disallow public sharing— as enticing as it is for the group to verbalize and receive validation— so that any and all emotional boundaries are sole property of the student actor. The common agreement, “This will not go any further than this room,” is not necessarily a guarantee of positive confession outcomes. The sense of exclusionary, “us versus them” and pressure to respond are more indicative of charismatic group cohesiveness than silent and personal ownership of artistic growth.

Mystical manipulation, or the constructed sense that new discoveries made by the group are occurring spontaneously as a result of the leader’s guid-
ance achieved; however, if the focus placed on aspects of the students' academic lives that "weed them out" is shifted from a feeling of having failed the expectations of the teacher to more concrete issues of attendance, written work and growth in knowledge. Unfortunately, there comes a time in every actor's life when they will be judged on talent, as that is part of the professional world as well as academia. The difference may be as simple as setting up a paradigm for the program which attentively avoids charismatic group structures and leadership, which then makes the "rejection" less of a spiritual failure and more of a factor reflecting the professional practice of the art.

Often times, a notion has been cultivated in a theater arts department that a specific acting teacher's memory is long and unforgiving, creating an unspoken pressure to conform absolutely or be, essentially, "blackballed" from the profession altogether. Too often, acting teachers use their skills and knowledge of the professional world to drive home continually the point that theatre is a small world, and every action performed and word spoken by the student will curse and follow them not only in the department, but also out into the professional world. This is true in a large sense, in that a professional reputation and reference does indeed precede the actor into auditions and interviews (due to the relatively small and close knit network of professional directors and casting agents). However, if the acting student is not free to question, take risks and figure out their own technique in the collegiate setting, what is the point of the education? The threat of joining nothingness for the rest of your life is far too great a pressure to place on a young 18-24 year old budding actor. Although it is important that the acting teacher give insight into the professional world and the world of technique in the collegiate setting, what is the point of the education? The competition inherent in the art of acting greatly increases the risks for destructive cohesiveness, if the integration of identity and decision-making skills is tied into group and leader critique. If the criteria for cohesiveness is an enhanced well-being manifested by total fealty to the group's goals and an overwhelming attention to other's views of an individual, the cohesiveness can be manipulated by the instructor. As Galanter states, "acceptance and conformity bring relief from distress" (36). Therefore, leader exploitation and manipulation of reinforcement, negative and positive, gives undue power over the student's everyday emotional lives. Critique and criticism should not include references to "the way we always do things" or "the class thinks you should...."

In addition to Lifton's identified control techniques, there are special characteristics of traditional charismatic leaders which set them apart from traditional hierarchies. The charismatic leader often has helpers (sometimes labeled "lieutenants") who are "active co-workers with the prophet on his mission and who generally also possess some charismatic qualifications" (Bryman 25). This relationship is often mirrored in the acting classroom by the presence of upper-division actors in training who serve as coaches and classroom assistants to the teacher. This can be a very healthy relationship, as peer mentoring can be a valuable asset in any classroom setting. The balance, however, is shifted when the student helpers are expected to reinforce the leader's views, serving as "spies" and enforcers of doctrine in the class. The power these upper-division students can have is tremendous, for they are often regarded with a cultivated sense of awe by the lower division students. The pedagogical benefits of the student assistant relationship can be healthy, rewarding and inspired for teacher, students and helpers alike - if the assistants are encouraged to find their own teaching voice and techniques without an expected cohesiveness with all of the leader's views and mandates. Many times these assistants are held up as examples in the acting classroom and their stories of "salvation" from negative habits and tendencies are told and retold as reinforcement by the teacher. Just as in a tent revival, the "saved" stand up with the charismatic leader to declare the leader's power, thereby lending a patina of sacred science and mysticism to the gathering. This is an extreme example, but the manipulation of others in the hierarchy to reinforce the charisma of the leader and demonstrate the value of following is a danger to beware of. The acting teacher must make sure that the student assistants are there to provide a "checks and balances" approach rather than doctrinal reinforcement.

Altered states of consciousness, as the final criteria for charismatic group structures used in this study, is a common and useful technique in acting.
The leader must make sure, however, that the goals of the meditative and threshold exercises used in rehearsal and classes are not self-serving in nature. Healthy altered consciousness exercises are relaxing, deepen the students' sense of personal goals and strengthen the connection between group members—not the leader. Hence, the threshold exercises used in classes should never be "required sharing," and a consistent non-personal approach must be maintained by the leader. Something as simple as verbally reminding students that they are not failing the exercise or even themselves if it does not work for them is a helpful method for those leading group meditative and liminal/threshold warm-ups. Oftentimes, charismatic group leaders will have the members perform everyday tasks together as a group while in a trance or meditative state to reinforce group structure and dependence. One way an acting teacher can avoid this pitfall is to limit the meditative and liminal exercises to include only personal and private experiences. Avoid bringing the group to a high threshold state and then asking them to then join together and in some way use their collective energy to connect or build off of each other.

In his book Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements, Lorne L. Dawson points out that, most often, behavior modifications occur following a change in beliefs, leading to changes in attitudes, followed finally by changes in behavior. The student who is actively trying to fit into the group is more likely to modify behavior first in order to learn how to pass as a member (125-126). The acting teacher must be wary of this type of surrender in the students, often manifested in group critiques, journal writings and class discussions. When risks are asked or demanded of a student who is not prepared emotionally, they will most likely alter their behavior without the necessary attitude or belief changes. This simply reinforces the group and leader's control over the student, as they are rewarded not for truly attempting something that feels right for them, but for "playing the game" according to the rules of the class.

Training the Teacher: Areas for Further Research

There are two areas for further research to suggest as part of an acting teacher/teacher's continued education and self-evaluation. In addition to knowledge of the techniques and methods traditionally used in American actor training, the acting teacher must seek training and knowledge in various systems and approaches. Educating oneself on techniques, which may even be aesthetically to personal approach, is a valuable tool for the teacher to maintain a balance of information passed on to students. There are numerous seminars, conferences and workshops designed to introduce acting educators to varying methods and emerging techniques. The recent growth of interest in non-Western acting styles and training has produced a volume of written works dedicated to exploring these methods. The "non-methodist" practitioners are all excellent starting points for examining approaches which veer away from the traditional American realism techniques.

The acting teacher must also seek education in psychological and sociological findings on leadership and group dynamics. These are vital elements in the acting classroom, but rarely touched upon or developed by theatre departments. Because the nature of acting demands such high levels of social, emotional and physical commitment from the students, teachers must expand their knowledge of performance to include effective leadership and teaching skills, identifying group behavior patterns, emotional triggers, feedback sessions with a large group dynamic and the techniques of psychodrama therapy. The focus can then be placed on appropriate use of this knowledge, rather than inadvertent misuse and abuse of control devices. Courses in sociology, psychology and even the societal aspects of religion are helpful in creating a base of knowledge for the acting instructor.

The final approach, after careful and thoughtful self-education, is to open dialogue between fellow teachers regarding the charismatic aspects of teaching acting. Discipleship is a known phenomenon among acting teachers, but something that is rarely spoken of and even more infrequently written about. If a body of knowledge, theory and various approaches in avoiding negative charismatic tendencies were disseminated with the same fervor as warm-ups, exercises and rehearsal games are among acting teachers, the shared responsibility of tackling the issue would alleviate much of the silence surrounding the subject. Hopefully, if the seduction of authoritarian power is something openly addressed among theatre faculty, educators can become more cautious, conscientious and aware of both their need as teachers and the needs of their students.

Conclusion

All prepared systems fail. They fail when they are applied, except as examples of a process which was significant, at some time, for someone or some group. Process is dynamic; it's the evolution that takes place during work. Systems are recorded as ground plans, not to be followed any more than rules of courtship can be followed. We can get clues from others, but our own culture and sensibility will lead us into a totally new kind of expression, unless we simply imitate both the process and the findings of another. The aesthetic remarks system (Chatkin 71).

Joseph Chaikin is directly responding to the Method and the American tradition of reverence for a system which was significant "at some time, for some group." If an acting teacher can maintain focus on the dynamic...
and ever-changing evolution of the craft, he is one step closer to avoiding negative charismatic group structure and the seduction of authoritarian leadership. It is essential to remind students that the System, the Method, or any detailed approach, are merely ground plans to be redesigned according to the needs of each individual. More importantly, to maintain a healthy atmosphere of "this may not work for you" while refraining from negating the students' experiences requires the leader to become ultimately comfortable with non-authoritarian power structures in courses. Charismatic group dynamics will emerge from an authoritarian power structure, given the tendency to hold reverent a doctrinal system simply imitates the process of a "master."

The most important factor in the future education of young actors is instructor awareness. Knowledge of the various systems, techniques and approaches is essential in providing alternatives to students who seek a balanced education in performance. The various "Methods" as taught by the masters studied here remain at the core of American actor training. Unfortunately, the original ideas have been "weakened by misunderstanding on the parts of actors, acting teachers, theorists and the Master teachers themselves" (Blair 207). Actors who become educators must see themselves as historical researchers, current seekers of new techniques and potential theorists of their own, rather than adhering to one method they may have encountered in their training. Acting teachers must be educated to observe and take action against negative charismatic tendencies in both themselves and their students. The seduction of surrender may be too powerful for the young minds entering into a program to resist, but a conscientious leader can certainly avoid the potential destructiveness of a cult-like worshipping of any person or idea. That focus and knowledge must become built into acting educator training, otherwise the potential for harmful charismatic group and leader tendencies will take place in the acting classroom.

Endnotes

1 "The Group" started in Reche Canyon, California and has since relocated to the high desert of Lucerne Valley. With their aging leader, the membership has dwindled to the few remaining faithful who live at and help run the current compound. The author has not had personal access to The Group for over 20 years. Research questions and theories were developed in part through years of counseling and deprogramming efforts as well as coursework in sociology, psychology and religion at the University of Oregon.

2 Goldman is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon. She is the author of several books, including: *Passionate Journeys: Why Successful Women Joined a Cult*. University of Michigan Press, 1999.


4 Unfortunately, most often the training of an acting teacher will entail how to reach an emotional release in their students, but not how to recover from it. This of course raises the issue (one for another article) of how to educate teachers to achieve emotive and liminal states without crossing boundaries from which they cannot lead their students to properly recover from. Without requiring an additional degree in drama therapy and/or psychology, how can this be achieved?

5 For example, many of the trust exercises used in acting classes are prefaced by a breathing or guided imagery focusing warm-up. Make sure the students are adequately out of the threshold state before grouping them together for emotionally risky trust games. Make sure to also return the room to its "normal state" of environment and then start the activity. Otherwise, students will begin to co-dependently associate the ability to be cohesive as a group with the liminal state.

6 For examples and further readings in non-Method approaches which are currently beginning to be incorporated into American actor training programs, please refer to the following: *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and the Theatre* by Anne Bogart; *Anne Bogart: Viewpoints* edited by Michel Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith; *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal; *The Presence of the Actor* by Joseph Chaikin; *The Missing Body* by Jacques LeCoeu; *The Way of Acting* by Tadashi Suzuki; *The Groundsanch Sourcebook* edited by Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner; *An Acrobat of the Heart* by Stephen Wangh; and *Acting (Reconsidered: Theory and Practice*) edited by Phillip Zarilli.

References


Stories Make the World

JOHN PLUMPIS

So, what's the story? What is the story?

This presentation is a story ... of my story. People say those of us in the theatre are story tellers. At The Lion King we are always told, "Just tell the story."

I recalled hearing an amazing show on National Public Radio by a San Francisco based troupe called, A Traveling Jewish Theatre. They are a storytelling company, and they produced this great show discussing the nature and purpose of storytelling using some truly funny and touching stories from the Jewish tradition.

The show was called, "Stories Make the World." They named it based on a quotation from a little girl in a New York City elementary school. She was a participant in a workshop they held. When asked about the value of telling stories, kids had all sorts of answers, but one little girl’s hand shot up; the woman who ran the workshop said the girl could barely keep her seat, and she seemed to be illumined by a great light from within.

She said, "Well, stories are the world. Without stories there would be no world. Stories make the world." And so I stole their title for this presentation, "Stories Make The World." I would also remind you of the age old theatrical maxim that great actors steal. Hey, at least I didn’t call it King Lear!

I began to think about what this little girl said, and it occurred to me that, yes, everything is a story. Quite literally the world itself is a story. The origin of the universe is a story, which ever way you slice it. The big bang is a story. Creationism is a story. And by the way, if you think I am going to engage in that debate, you’ve got another thing coming. My point is, irrespective

John Plumpis is an actor and teacher based in New York. He is currently playing Timon in the national company of The Lion King. This article is a revision of his Keynote Address for the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region VII/Northwest Drama Conference, 2006.
of what you believe is the truth, they are both stories of how we got to be here. Think about it. How do we know the world is a story? Biology is a story, about how life works. Physics is a story about how light and atoms and the rest of the physical world behave. Dance is a story told in the shapes a body makes. Your bank account is a story told with numbers. And in a lot of cases that story is a tragedy. The word "history" itself has that dang word story right in it! Your day is a story. My day is a story. "Oh man, I got up, and I was hung over. My head hurt, and my stomach was feeling blah. And then I got in the shower and got some fluids in me. And then I got out into the cool air, and my brain finally kicked in, and now I am listening to that guy who plays Timon in The Lion King. Now, perhaps, I am putting too fine a point on this, but after all, this is my presentation, and I can do whatever I want.

However, here is the deal: we cannot help but tell a story. And I don't mean that in an "oogy boogy woo woo" sense. I mean we actually do it. We see a person walking by sour faced, and we immediately tell his story. "Ooh, somebody's had a bad day!" And we cannot help but want a story. "Well, I am the way I am, because I am a Pisces, and they are really sensitive."

I will even bet you have seen someone recently and asked yourself, "Ooh, what is his story?" or, "Man, what is her story?"

So back to my point here. Did you know that there are anthropologists who prefer to call human beings not by their usual scientific name, Homo Sapien; that is, the being that reasons or thinks, but rather, they prefer to call human beings Homo Naron, that is the being that tells a story. Isn't that cool, huh?

Now, perhaps you are thinking or - let me rephrase that - you are probably thinking, okay, short curly haired Greek man, this is all very interesting but what in the sam hill does it have to do with the Theatre?

I would respond to your question with one of my own. And that is, how did we get here?

This is how I got here, and of course ... it's a story. I first started doing plays in high school to get girls (well a girl) which is fun but not exactly the life's work for which I'd like to be remembered. When I got to university, I studied political science and kept doing plays on the side ... you know ... for the chick angle. In the fall semester of my junior year we were visited by two actors who were associate artists with the Royal Shakespeare Company. They somehow saw some potential in me and took me under wing. They also encouraged me to go on to professional training - which was the hardest and best damn thing I would do in my life up to that point - and I will get to an important aspect of that, shortly. As I said, they took me into their care, encouraged me, and most importantly, before they left, they gave me a script to an evening of theatre called, Pleasure and Repentance. It is a made piece, an anthology of scenes, poems, essays and songs touching on the stages of love, Young love, courtship, marriage, children, love in later life, disillusionment and finally death. Near the end of the evening there was a piece by the great playwright, George Bernard Shaw, in which he describes the cremation of his mother. What may seem at first a morbid subject is described matter-of-factly and with humor. As he watches the folks at work sifting through what remains after the fire, the spirit of his mother makes an appearance at his elbow and whispers in her son's ear a gentle joke: "Which of the two heaps of ashes do you suppose is mine?"

In that moment the piece ceases to be a merely the report of a son witnessing his mother's end and becomes a celebration of their relationship, a recognition that the flesh was not the most important part of her and an acknowledgement of whence his great wit and humor came. A celebration of mother and son.

I produced this show as well as being in it. We performed in the lobby of a larger theatre, in front of a fireplace as if we were in a nice warm cozy living room. Sitting just down left, there was a woman listening to the piece, and as it developed she laughed harder and harder, and tears began to come down her face until the sound that emanated from her was a mix of racking sobs and laughter.

That night, and in that moment, I thought, "Aha! This is not available in the other things I am considering doing with the rest of my life." And that called me to the Theatre. A story made her do that, and that's what brought me here.

And I would venture to say that all theatre students, faculty, and professionals alike have a story like that. Something that changed your life, that changed your course and sent you toward the door marked, "Theatre." You saw a story or some aspect of a story that got you here. A story changed your life. And I would also venture to say, that it probably didn't happen at a Broadway show or a Hollywood film - though it might have. It probably happened at a high school or community theatre, a university theatre or making a short film with your friends one summer. Can you see that what I am talking about is not only available at the most visible or "prestigious" levels of our profession? It is available at any level.

It doesn't matter where; the work and the mission of those who choose to look hard and be true artists is the same whether you are on Broadway, at the Civic Theatre of Lewiston, Idaho or anyplace in between.

So the proof that the Theatre makes a difference is in you. You are living proof of that.
As I mentioned just a bit ago, I decided to go on to further training and when I entered the University of Delaware Professional Theatre Training Program, what I encountered doing Pleasure and Repentance was what drove our work. Part of our daily work included conversations about what got us there; why we did what we did. And we were exhorted to create the kind of theatre that got us into the Theatre in the first place. We worked under two questions: Does the Theatre make difference? What is the possibility of Theatre?

At the just plain skill level these questions are a practical reminder that, indeed, we hone our skills not for the sake of the skills themselves but for the end they serve. You are in the Theatre to tell a story. You voice and body if you are an actor; your simplicity, clarity and elegance if you are a designer; your efficiency and exactitude if you are a technician; these are skills that allow you to communicate the play at its most basic. Can it be seen, can it be heard; is it pleasing to the eye and ear for two and a half hours? This is even more important for classic plays whose manner of execution must be impeccable irrespective of the approach. Why? Because these plays, these great stories utter something to our hearts which ultimately cannot be put into words.

If that is the case, and I believe it is, then just as an example, the talking in that play had better be crystal clear. So when we drill with a hand held mirror, “pa pa PA ba BA, pa pa PA ba BA,” it is not to make a good sound for merely for the sake of a good sound, it is to gain the skills to communicate as fully as we can a story which holds the possibility of transformation for audience and artist alike.

But there is something else. And don’t get me wrong, I think that skills in the Theatre are of the highest importance, but they are not everything. We’ve all seen plays or films where everything is done “right,” and yet we are left completely unmoved. And there is no doubt that it is sometimes the case in undergraduate and graduate training programs, where skills are being learned. But that is part of the territory, and a stage that must be passed through in any apprenticeship.

That being said, I think the Theatre is best when it’s a little messy. Messy allows for humanity. Because we are not perfect. We are a little messy. A bit of gentle advice ... you will find in life and in art that the pursuit of perfection will leave you disappointed, if not brokenhearted, indeed.

But to return to the “something else” I just mentioned. What I would rather see - for lack of better word - is spirit. Let me be clear that spirit is not enthusiasm or energy – though they are often present. Here is a story ... (surprise, surprise) concerning precisely what I am talking about.

When the great British director Michael Blakemore was a young actor he was in the company at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford Upon Avon, England. This was, by the way, the producing organization that eventually became the Royal Shakespeare Company. In the 1958 season Mr. Blakemore was contracted to play the First Lord in, among other things, a production of Shakespeare’s All’s Well That Ends Well. The production was directed by Tyrone Guthrie, founder of the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada, and the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. The play starred the legendary English actress, Dame Edith Evans, as the Countess of Rossillion. She played the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet with Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft. In 1935, Ancient history, I know. In his recent memoir Arguments with England, Blakemore writes that making that play was different from the making of the other shows that season. He tells the story like this:

Ingmar Bergman (the great Swedish film director) has written that ideally he wanted to make films the way the great cathedrals of Europe had been built, by artists and craftsmen of all sorts, for whom coming to work was itself a kind of worship: stonemasons and carpenters happy to express themselves in a comic gargoule or carved rafter so high up that only God could see it. Something of this spirit began to attach itself to the rehearsals of All’s Well, which increasingly came to seem a metaphor for something else. What that something was none of us quite knew. But there was something building in the company, a good faith, which absorbed personal ambitions and disappointments and put them to better use. The Theatre, which can so often be trivial or bogus has something going for it which the great solo arts do not. Literature and painting testify to what individuals can achieve, and to what other individuals responding to them can feel, but the theatre is about what can be done within a group, and what an even larger group can collectively experience. At its best the theatre expresses hope, no matter what the play itself may have to say. Maybe that’s what our rehearsals were a metaphor for; hope. On our first night we had two things to present to our audience; a new production of Shakespeare’s play, obviously, but also a demonstration of the spirit that had gone into its making. Were we saying that the ends are not worth the means? If so, in a mostly expedient world this was a radical assertion?

The spirit in which the work was done was as important as what the play had to say. There are very few places other than the theatre where a group of people get together and conspire for two hours each night, and for 8 hours a day for some weeks prior to telling a story that will make another larger group of people laugh or cry or be moved to see another way of living. That is a special kind of storytelling. Blakemore called it hope. This word, hope, is closely associated with — and let me tread lightly here, for I am about to utter a hot button word — it is closely associated with religion. Cae sosimus mus!

Setting aside Christopher Durang’s plays, let us say that at their best the Theatre and religion both offer hope. Perhaps that is why, for a long
time now, the Theatre and religion have had an uneasy relationship: may be they are competing for souls.

In a lecture entitled "Alchemy in the Theatre," the great Canadian novelist and Theatre connoisseur, Robertson Davies, put it like this: "Alchemy really means something which has attained to such excellence, that it offers a glory, an expansion of life and understanding, to those who have been brought into contact with it." Sounds like what folks go to church for doesn't it?

And by the way, you know it is an old joke among actors that in younger days they wanted to be ministers, priests or rabbis. Heh, I was first "on stage" as an altar boy, myself.

Robert Brustein, who was the long time Dean of the Yale School of Drama and the founder of the American Repertory Theatre, touches on this subject in his book, _Letters to a Young Actor_. It is no wonder, he says, that in Chekhov's _The Seagull_, Nina refers to the Theatre as her calling, much the same as a priest, or monk or nun. Chekhov gives her this to say: "In our kind of work, whether we're actors or writers, the important thing is learning how to endure. And when I think of my calling I'm no longer afraid of life." Learning how to endure as an artist. This is not a very popular notion in an age of instant celebrity but ... that's another story.

So the Theatre and religion are in the same business: glory, endurance, expansion of life, understanding ... hope. And to what end? Which brings me back to the question, What is the possibility of the Theatre?

What might be possible is this: it might be possible that the Theatre can make the world a better, safer place, more peaceful place. It might make the world a better place. Nothing else can. The person who come to church for doesn't it?

When I was in grad school the movement teacher was and is, a man named Jewel Walker. He's nearly 80 now and still teaching. He is extraordinary. He integrated many of the things people called stage movement and created something new in actor training. He is quite a sage and is recognized by theatre educators and professionals the world over as a master teacher. Jewel contributed a chapter to a book called _Master Teachers of the Theatre_, and in it he captures how the man who taught the rocks to speak approached his life. Jewel writes, "A committed human being can make a difference. Nothing else can. The person who comes to work every day with the declaration that it will work will find the way, will see the opportunity, will make the difference." 8

Konstantin Stanislavsky was a guy who made a difference. By the way, I once heard him referred to as Stan Slavinsky, and I have laughed ever since. He changed the art of acting and how we think about the Theatre. He was a life long student and teacher of the theatre, and very near the end of his life he wrote the following to a group of students.

One should not be on the stage, one should not put on a play for the sake of acting or producing only. Yes, you must be excited about your profession. You must love it devotedly and passionately, but not for itself, not for its laurels, not for the pleasure and delight it brings to you, as artist. You must love your chosen profession because it gives you the opportunity to communicate ideas that are important and necessary to your audience ... to make them better, finer, wiser, and more useful members of society ... You must keep that idea alive and be inspired by it at each performance. This is the only way ..." 9

Modern physics tells us that our experience of the world is inseparable from our interaction with it. It is a phenomenon called "complementarity." It says that the physical world does not exist independent of our experience of it. And conversely we do not exist independent of a physical world to experience. Mind blowing isn't it?

Well, the same is true of stories. We and our world do not exist without them. And they do not exist without us to tell them.
PLUMPIS

Remember that little girl illumined by a great light from within? She had a glimpse into that mystery. "Stories are the world," she said. "Without stories there would be no world. Stories make the world."

And that's my story, and I am sticking to it!

Endnotes

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

Theatre for Social Justice: Sexuality, Bigotry and Transformation on the Stage

JILLIAN CAMPANA

Theatre has long served as a vehicle for promoting dialogue, community and self-expression. Popular theatre for example, theatre by the people and for the people, asks theatre patrons and practitioners to explore social and political concerns (Kraii et al., 1979). Groups such as The Living Theatre, created by Judith Malina and Julian Beck in New York in the 1950's, and the Vermont-based Bread and Puppet Theatre, started by Peter Schumann in 1961, have advocated communication through performance as the primary tool for investigating possibilities for social change (Finn, Jacobson, & Campana, 2004). Another widely celebrated method for utilizing theatre in the service of social change is the techniques in the Theatre of the Oppressed developed by Brazilian director and theorist Augusto Boal, who uses theatre as a tool for instigating transformation by generating information from performers and audience members about ways to fight oppression (Bates, 1996). Boal's books, Theatre of the Oppressed (1985), Games for Actor's and Non-Actors (1992), The Rainbow of Desire (1995), Legislative Theatre (1998), and Hamlet and the Baker's Son (2000), outline specific methods for creating and implementing theatre that serves social justice. The goal of Boals' Forum Theatre, for example, is not to search for solutions to problems but rather to discover possible options (Finn, Jacobson, & Campana, 2004).

Another form of theatre that can promote dialogue and explore social concerns is Documentary Theatre. Documentary Theater is non-fiction; it is created using real words from real life; therefore, the words spoken on the stage are taken from actual people rather than imaginary characters (Favorini, 1994). The documentary play, The Laramie Project,

Jillian Campana, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of the Department of Drama/Dance, University of Montana in Missoula.
which discusses the aftermath of the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, opened at the Denver Center Theatre in February 2000 and has since become one of the most commonly produced plays in the country. Written by Moises Kaufman and members of his New York company, Tectonic Theatre Project, the play does not depict the murder or re-enact any of the events, but rather it chronicles the lives of the people in Laramie by sharing their thoughts about Shepard's murder, homosexuality, and human rights. The authors performed an extensive research and interview process in which they visited the town of Laramie six times in the year and half following the murder. During that time they conducted over two hundred interviews with the inhabitants of the town and other people closely related to the case. The group then constructed The Laramie Project from the interviews, their own journals, transcripts from court and public hearings, and print and media articles.

In the summer of 2002 the University of Montana's Lambda Alliance, the gay and lesbian student organization, asked the Drama/Dance Department to consider producing The Laramie Project as part of our performance season, and I leapt at the opportunity to direct the piece. I was familiar with the play and the facts surrounding the murder. But the play is not really about the murder of Matthew Shepard. It is an ethnography about the effect the murder had upon a community, and the script came about because the Tectonic Theatre Project was interested in creating a piece of theatre that fostered a dialogue on the social, political and human issues of our world (Kaufman, 2001 p.11). After hearing about Matthew Shepard's murder Kaufman posed these questions to his company: "What can we as theatre artists do as a response to this incident?" and, "Is theatre a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events?" (Kaufman, 2001 p.12). By showcasing the response of Laramie, Wyoming, the project intended to shed light upon the way our contemporary society thinks.

The more I considered the play and its purpose, the more interested I became in the efficacious quality of The Laramie Project. Could the play really foster a dialogue about human rights as Kaufman suggested? Could it encourage people to think about the attitudes toward homosexuality that our culture promotes and supports? And, finally, would the play ask, perhaps even demand, a change in feelings and attitude regarding homosexuality and human rights from those who participated in the production?

Loaded with these questions and grounded in the firm belief that The Laramie Project does not conceal our nation's struggle with heterosexism, I embarked upon both the direction of the play and a simultaneous research project designed to study the actors' feelings about homosexuality as they rehearsed and performed in the play. My overarching question was: Will the actors in our production of The Laramie Project experience an attitudinal transformation toward homosexuality as a result of participating in the play? I set out to trace the actors' thoughts throughout the production and to compare their attitudes about homosexuality prior to rehearsing and performing in the production with attitudes they expressed after the play closed.

The Participants' Process

I explained the research project to the ten actors after they were cast. Participation was entirely voluntary. At the first rehearsal I explained the project and passed out blank journals to all actors. Those who wished to participate were instructed to answer a total of ten open-ended questions that dealt with their personal attitudes about homosexuality which were posed at four different points in the production process (2-3 questions at each interval). Those who did not wish to participate in the project were asked to use the journals to write about their own rehearsal or character process during the allotted time. The actors kept their own journals and then, if they wished, they turned them in to me one week after the run was over. The journals were confidential and names were not used in an effort to encourage the students to voice openly their opinions. Since participating in the research aspect of the project was voluntary, only six of the ten actors turned in their journals after the play closed.

The actors cast in our production formed an unusually tight knit group, perhaps because they were somewhat marginalized by their peers. At the auditions for the spring season several drama majors refused to audition for The Laramie Project citing personal reasons. At the second rehearsal one of the original cast members chose to withdraw from the production and informed me that she had "...a problem with homosexuality on a very base level." Although the actors in the production were unaware that she dropped out of the show because of the play's subject matter, her abrupt resignation was upsetting to them all. Fortunately, the actor was immediately replaced and from that moment on, the cast worked together as a united ensemble.

Ranging in age from 19-35, the actors were all majors in the university's drama program, three of them being MFA candidates. Of the seven undergraduate actors, three were seniors, two were sophomores, and two were freshmen performing in their first major play. Five of the actors were native Montanans, while the other five represented a cross section of the United States, hailing from New York, Ohio, Texas, Utah, and Missouri. Nine students identified themselves as heterosexuals and the tenth actor identified herself as a lesbian.
The University of Montana Production

In The Laramie Project, the actors speak directly to the audience; there is no theatrical illusion of a fourth wall that typically draws a line between the stage and the house. As our production began to take shape, I found myself experimenting with staging qualities and technical designs that further blurred the boundaries between the voices of Laramie, the actors, and the spectators. In order to desegregate audience and performer, this play was presented in our smallest performance space, the Masquer Theatre, which seats 150 and 800 patrons depending on its configuration. This black-box theatre allows for creative placement of audience seats, and, because I wanted to incorporate our audience into the action, the production was staged in the round.¹

The Research Study: Methods

I approached this research project from the qualitative rather than quantitative tradition of case study, because I was interested in examining the actors' feelings about homosexuality by studying their personal descriptions of their experiences. It also fit with my desire to develop an in-depth analysis of a single case (Creswell, 1998). My study was bound by a single production, the University of Montana's production of The Laramie Project and a single time period, from early December 2002 when auditions were held, and the play was cast, to mid-May 2003 when the production closed its two-week run.

I knew that in order for the study to rend reliable results, the participants needed to trust in the research process and to have absolute freedom to convey their thoughts. To achieve veracity, the actors simply could not feel coerced into participating. It was imperative that I be clear with the actors that a decision to not take part in the study would not present any consequences. I reiterated that the study was voluntary and reminded them that they could choose to stop answering the questions at any point in the process.

In order to assess any change in attitude on behalf of the actors, I needed to measure their attitudes at the beginning and again at different intervals in the process. As mentioned previously, I posed open-ended questions via handouts at four different points during the production. The questions were designed to promote thoughtful reflections about the nature of the participants' feelings. In each of the handouts the actors were asked to describe their opinions of heterosexuality and homosexuality and to define the message the play. Although the phrasing behind the questions changed at each reflection, the nature of the questions remained the same. For example, at the first read-through I asked: "Do you think this play has a message? If so, what is it?" This question was then re-phrased as: "What do you think The Laramie Project is about?" and again asked after the close of the play. In the second week of rehearsal I asked: "What is your favorite line in the play? Which line most offends you? Why?" Two weeks later, I asked: "Which characters in the play do you like the most? Which characters offend you?" I also asked the actors to discuss their personal backgrounds at two points in the production process, first asking, "Do you relate to any characters in the play?" Four weeks later I asked, "Are you, or do you know anyone who is similar to a character in the play?" I also asked the participants to explain their opinions of homosexuality and heterosexuality at the beginning of the rehearsal process, and then at the close I asked them to re-read their first entry and to explain if they believed that rehearsing and performing in the play have in any way affected their attitude toward homosexuality.

Certainly there are many factors that influenced this study. To begin with, our drama program has a strong educational component. There is a major in drama education and a commitment to serve as a resource for the Western Montana community and the schools of the region by providing performance experiences geared toward controversial issues. We also have a strong connection to the Department of Social Work and consistently encourage our students to take Social Work courses and to engage in community programs. In addition two of the five professors in the acting program, Dr. Randy Bolton and myself, come from performance theory backgrounds. In our teaching of acting there is continual reference to performance as a method for identifying and exploring personal and social issues. These values permeate the program, and the actors in The Laramie Project must have brought such aesthetics to the production, possibly making it more likely for them to be open to recognizing the intricacies of both the research subject and any changes in their ideas and attitudes on their behalf. With this in mind, I offer the reader the findings.

The Research Study: Themes

Tolerance versus Acceptance

The notions of tolerance and acceptance arose in all six of the journals often, although I did not use these terms in my questions. Originally the actors found the two philosophies to represent the same ideas, failing to recognize the differences between the two. "The play has a message of tolerance," wrote one actor at the first rehearsal. A second actor conferred and wrote, "The play carries a message of tolerance and acceptance for all kinds of people." And yet another actor stated, "Tolerance and acceptance..."
are the same thing,” two weeks into the rehearsal process. The stance that the actors held in the beginning of the production process is similar to the ideas presented in the first part of the play. For example, in the opening moments of the play, the Laramie residents express disbelief that such an act of prejudice and violence could occur in their open-minded town. Sergeant Hing’s “live and let live,” mantra (Kaufman, 2001 p.50), is echoed by others like 70 year old Marge Murray, the mother of police woman Reggie Fluty, who says, “As far as the gay issue, I don’t give a damn as long as they don’t bother me and even if they did, I’d just say no thank you. And that’s the attitude of most of the Laramie population. They might poke one, if they were in a bar situation, you know they had been drinking, they might actually smack one in the mouth, but then they’d just walk away. Most of ‘em said they would just say, ‘I don’t swing that way,’ and whistle on about their business. Laramie is live and let live.” (Kaufman, 2001 p.50).

And despite listening to and even saying lines such as these during the first rehearsals, the actors, like Hing and Murray, were unable to make the connection between a tolerant attitude toward homosexuality and a tolerant attitude toward hate. The live and let live philosophy that appears throughout the play is a sort of thread weaving the voices of Laramie together. The University of Montana actors also attached themselves to this philosophy in the beginning. At the top of the rehearsal process, the actors requested this phrase with open-mindedness and open-heartedness and in fact, in their opening journal response, two of the actors defined, “Live and let live,” as the message of the play.

The primary voices in the play equate this philosophy with compassion and acceptance until midway through the text when Jonas Slonaker says, “And it’s even in some of the Western literature, you know live and let live. That is such crap. I tell my friends that—even my gay friends bring it up sometimes. I’m like, ‘This is crap you know? I mean basically what it boils down to. If I don’t tell you I’m a fag, you won’t beat the crap out of me. I mean, what’s so great about that? That’s a great philosophy.” (Kaufman, 2001 p.60).

As I analyzed the journals I found that the evolution the actors experienced parallels the presentation and progression of ideas in the play. When we began crucial rehearsal work with the moments in the text that unmask and challenge the live and let live philosophy, the actors also began to examine critically the philosophy and to draw a distinction between tolerance and acceptance.

The same actor who, in the beginning, said that the play carried a “message of tolerance and acceptance,” wrote during the third week of rehearsal, “I define acceptance as a completely different idea (from tolerance). Acceptance is going beyond tolerating it but actually living with it and embracing it.” That same week the actor who earlier claimed the play “...has a message of tolerance,” wrote, “Tolerance: maintaining a peaceful environment around those different from you. Acceptance: embracing those different differently, different points of view.” I find particular beauty in this use of the word “embrace,” which is physical in its nature. To embrace someone is to hug them, to encircle or clasp them in one’s arms. In massive contrast to the idea of embracing something is the idea of enduring something, of abiding or stomaching something that one disagrees with but is forced to live with anyway. To tolerate something is to endure it. The idea of surrounding someone or something with physical support is the opposite of the, “Live and let live,” philosophy that popularizes and condones turning one’s back on difference.

During the fourth week of rehearsal I invited graduate students in Dr. Janet Finn’s Social Work class, Discrimination and Difference, to a special rehearsal and discussion. The opportunity for actors and audience to talk to each other may seem rare but is not actually an uncommon practice in educational theatre settings. In fact our department holds “talkbacks” between actors, designers, directors and spectators at some point for every play we produce. The rehearsal began with the Social Work students and actors entering the theatre space. Dr. Finn and I combined the students into small groups of four or five in order to discuss one of the following questions: 1.) What is homophobia and what part does homophobia play in this play? 2.) Why do you think the Tectonic Theatre Company wrote this play? 3.) Where does prejudice begin? After the small group discussions the actors took to the stage and performed a series of approximately twelve monologues, juxtaposed to present the wide array of opinions presented in the play. Following the “mini” performance the entire group gathered to talk. Dr. Finn and I did not lead the group in a discussion; rather, we immediately opened it up for comments. The group talked about the possible factors that can lead individuals to join bigoted or fanatical mind-sets, and one young man in Dr. Finn’s class wondered aloud if he would have aligned himself with Matthew Shepard’s murderers had he shared their life experiences. One actor argued vehemently against what she considered to be an appeal, and the conversation gathered the interest of the entire group and came to a boiling point. Although this fervor did not yield any answers, it did seem to evoke in the actors a mindfulness of the myriad of factors that contribute to narrow-minded thinking and behaviors. The rehearsal marked the moment in the production process when tolerance and acceptance became diametrically opposed philosophies for the actors. One of the
six actors who participated in the full research study came to understand that while tolerance claims to support homosexuality, it only does so on the surface. Acceptance, on the other hand, supports homosexuality both on the internal and external level.

In a Harper's Magazine article that provides a context for the crime, JoAnn Wypijewski writes, "Before it became the highest state to which straight society could aspire, tolerance was what one had for a bad job or a bad smell" (1999 p. 62). Through my own observation of the actors personal sentiments and my own research as director of this play, I have come to understand that to tolerate homosexuality is also to tolerate prejudice against homosexuality. Tolerance, therefore, cannot combat prejudice because it gives prejudice permission to exist. Somewhere in recent years the word tolerance has come to be associated with acceptance and respect, yet Dr. C.T. Onions in the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology locates its derivation in the words "bearable, endurable" (1966), and the persisting interpretation of tolerance is still rooted in endurance with contemporary definitions suggesting permissible deviation. After working with this play I, like my student actors, wonder why I ever thought tolerance was enough.

Ownership and (Dis) Identification

The amount of distance the actors put between themselves and Matthew Shepard's murder also changed throughout the production. The actors went from believing that the play is about one small incident and the way a specific group of people reacted to the a specific crime, to understanding that the play is about all of "us" and not just the residents of Laramie, Wyoming. For example, one actor who wrote in the second week that the play, "says this is America look at what you are [sic]," moves toward ownership in the fourth week of rehearsal by explaining that the play shows, "the country how things are for everyone by showing this event in this small town." By using "you" the actor is excluding himself from the problem. He implies that the problems presented in the play involve the entire country except for him. By underlining the word "everyone" a few weeks later, he seems to be including himself in his culture and owning up to a shared responsibility toward rights for all humans. During the fourth week of rehearsal another actor took this notion further by writing, "I now think the play is about all of US." The language used, specifically the use of the word, "us" gets to the heart of the matter just as another actor does when he approaches the problem in a more concrete way and writes, "We all contribute to hate. If we aren't doing something to stop bigotry then we are contributing to it." Indeed, it is difficult to achieve the ability to accept that hate crimes such as the murder of Matthew Shepard
are caused not because one or two persons are homophobic, but because our society is homophobic. I believe that the actors in The Laramie Project were guided toward these revelations by the Laramie residents whom they brought to life via the stage.

The information that the actors in The Laramie Project were exposed to via their characters provided insight that aided in their attitudinal transformations. Laramie resident Zubaida Ula, a young Muslim woman who was a classmate of Aaron McKinney's, demonstrates the notion of cultural responsibility when she says,

And we have to mourn this and we have to be sad that we live in a town, a state, a country where shit like this happens. I mean, these people are trying to distance themselves from this crime. And we need to own this crime. I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this. (Kaufman, 2001 pp.60-61. authors capitals).

When an actor plays a role, he or she is assuming another identity for a brief period of time. During this time a liminal space is provided to occur momentarily, allowing for a transformation from actor to character. While playing the character the actor is able to explore experientially another person's thoughts, beliefs and existence. The actor then returns to their self by shedding the assumed role. In this way acting becomes a way to walk in another person's shoes to try on new attitudes and feelings. In the case of this production of The Laramie Project, the six actors were able to incorporate the information garnered from portraying the residents of Laramie into their own lives.

All of the actors addressed this phenomenon of identification, or dis-identification, with the Laramie residents in their journals. One young man wrote,

I relate to Jed Schultz at the end of the play. I kind of went through the same transformation he did. At first I thought homosexuality was wrong or I was afraid of it. But as I grew up and had my own thoughts I realized that I didn't have to be afraid of difference.

Another actor wrote, "Playing people that I didn't like—actually saying words that condone prejudice and hate and violence was very difficult... [It] asked me to think about what prejudice I tolerate." These actors were able to locate their own individual opinions through first understanding what they did not philosophically agree with. Because every good actor must have sympathy and appreciation for the characters they perform, The Laramie Project actors were forced to associate with people who either actively condone bigotry or merely tolerate homosexuality. When they shed their roles each night, the actors were forced to estrange, or disassociate, themselves from the characters they played that bred hatred. This disassociation seemed to cement their attitudes regarding tolerance and acceptance and deepen their understanding toward human rights.

A similar phenomenon occurred when the actors were able to identify a connection between one of their own family members and a Laramie resident with a close-minded opinion. In this way, the play enabled the actors to recognize prejudice within their own families. This new ability, on behalf of the actors, to locate language and behavior that forgives prejudice is, as one actor put it in the last journal response, "one of the greatest accomplishments of the play." In the first response, for example, one actor wrote, "My parents do not hate homosexuals, but they feel it is wrong. Mainly my father." Another identified his parents as being, "from a society where aberrations from the norm are frowned upon." The language in these two descriptions avoids any use of the words prejudice, bigotry, narrow-mindedness, or even intolerance. But just as they came to understand their own attitudes through associating and disassociating with the characters in the play, they were also able to locate bigotry evident within their families because of their ability to recognize it in some of the characters from the play. One actor illustrates this new awareness in the last journal entry:

I use to ignore it that my dad used words like fag or dyke and now I hear those words loud and clear. Now it bothers me. I used to write it off.

The play places responsibility for fear and hate upon all people and asks us to acknowledge and own the crime rather than distancing ourselves from it. The idea of owning a crime is frightening. Most of us do not want to believe that we have been complicit in anti-gay actions, but by claiming that we have had nothing to do with the way society behaves toward gay men and lesbian women is to claim that we are not a part of our culture. If I am a product of my culture, then certainly the converse must also be true: my culture is a product of me.

Lessons in Accountability

For the six study participants, the experience of rehearsing and performing in The Laramie Project was attitudinally and philosophically altering. Every one of the six actors considered herself or himself to be liberal and an open-minded thinker before participating in the production, yet in the end they all recognized that they had much to learn from the play. In the last journal reflections they wrote about what they had experienced.

"This play made me think about all of the people who are getting the shaft daily and people turn a blind eye. People don't deserve that," wrote one actor. Another student wrote about a dramatic discovery, "I have seen theatre as a vehicle to explore and educate about human rights and was
thrilled to be a part of that. Hope to make it a part of my life now." A third actor wrote,

It is a story about hope for humanity. Everyone knows that people do terrible things. This play showed me that people can change and it helped me change.

Finally, one actor who identified herself as a lesbian wrote about a change that had occurred in her relationship with her parents. They led a support group for family and friends of gays and lesbians through their church where they taught, "acceptance of the person, but not the sin." Apparently, when she told them about the picketing of the production by the Westboro Baptist Church, their group prayed every night for the success of our production. Although she found the Reverend Fred Phelps to be, "the most offensive character," he was also the most helpful to her and to her family. By really looking at Phelps’ actions in Laramie, Wyoming and Missoula, Montana her parents were forced to look at their own behavior and "they had to separate themselves from fake acceptance to true acceptance and really question what that means."

I have directed many plays and yet The Laramie Project consumed me in a more radical way than I have experienced before or since. Directing this research study while simultaneously directing the play certainly had something to do with my complete absorption, and yet there was something else. Rehearsals often left me feeling depleted rather than eager to get back the next day to explore the play further. I did not portray the people of Laramie like the actor’s did, but I did live with them for a semester, and I did hear the thoughts of residents like Murdock Cooper over and over:

It doesn’t bother anybody because most of ’em that are gay or lesbian, they know damn well who to talk to. If you step out of line you’re asking for it. Some people are saying he made a pass at them. You don’t pick up regular people. I’m not excusing his actions, but it made me feel better because it was partially Matthew Shepard’s fault and partially the guys who did it...you know maybe it’s fifty-fifty (Kaufman, 2001 p.59).

Hearing sentiments such as this expressed again and again reminded me that every single action and belief can and does limit or extend the rights our society offers gays and lesbians, and it emphasized my responsibility to contribute actively to securing equal rights and treatment for all humans. Working on The Laramie Project reminded me and my students that creating a peaceful and accepting world not only means treating each other with respect, but it also means assuming some responsibility for our heterosexist culture. We all must consider the role we play in our bigoted world, because if we only blame others for the inequality in human rights, then we exempt ourselves from the way our culture treats difference. The play really is about much more than a community’s response to the murder of a homosexual college student. As Moises Kaufman articulates in his introduction, The Laramie Project is "...about our nation, about our ideas, about ourselves" (2001 p.13).

Endnotes
1 Lighting design was created by Cody Schindeldecker, and costumes were by Lorney Clark. Sound was created by Regan de Vries, and the props and set, including a hallway installation, were designed by Sara Nelson. All designers were UM students.
2 The WBC cancelled their trip to Missoula approximately one week before their scheduled protest.
3 The term liminality derives from the Latin word limen, meaning "threshold." Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, "distinguishes three phases in a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation" (Turner, 24). The liminality occurs during the transition stage where participants pass into a transitional period that is not of the past and yet not the future.

References
In the hallways, classrooms and lunchrooms of America’s schools, there is an often unseen struggle and oppression. This oppression happens as “a normal part of growing up,” and thus for decades has been regarded with complacency and an almost reluctance to effect change. Popular colloquialisms for this phenomenon include the pecking order, paying your dues, and survival of the fittest, but the terms defining them in actuality carry harsher tones. Bullying. Harassment. And since the Columbine High School massacre almost eight years ago in which it was found bullying had been a significant factor, America’s schools have begun to finally take action, implementing zero-tolerance anti-bullying and harassment policies in an attempt to prevent further tragedies from occurring. But the violence engendered at Columbine and other schools is regarded as extreme in comparison to the internal violence which occurs as a result of bullying for all parties. For the victim, bully, and bystanders who watch such acts, there is a silent struggle to which the anti-bullying policies fail to give a voice. In many places these zero-tolerance policies have resulted in the suspension or expulsion of children from school who were not bullying but were suspected merely on circumstantial evidence or innocent actions (Coloroso). Anti-bullying curriculum and intervention/prevention programs have since been developed for schools to educate students and teachers about the issue of bullying and to implement more sane and holistic responses to the problem.

Kate Muchmore is a Master of Arts candidate in the Department of Theatre Arts, Western Washington University in Bellingham.
How Drama Can Aid in Intervention/Prevention Programs

Bullying curricula as a whole emphasize factual knowledge about bullies, victims, bystanders, recognition of bullying behavior and practical intervention techniques. Utilizing standard teaching practice, students are led into classroom discussions and are encouraged to institute and follow rules, with disobedience resulting in disciplinary action. While this method has proved to be effective, schools with increasing frequency are realizing the importance of alternative means to presenting and reinforcing anti-bullying messages. Drama, because of its long believed ability to present topics and stories in non-threatening, impersonal ways, has been shown to produce positive results in other educational contexts, both socially and for learning purposes. For instance, in a study done with fourth through sixth graders in 1982, researchers began to explore the possibilities of using drama to reduce prejudice in schools. Students in an experimental group were exposed to plays about different ethnicities and cultures, acted out scenes, and role-played the characters from the dramas. The study concluded that students in the experimental group showed a greater amount of knowledge about the cultures in the plays in cognitive tests conducted after than did students in the control group, and subsequently showed lower levels of prejudice towards those groups (Gimmestad and Chiara).

Role-playing drama has achieved status in classroom curricula and been successful in the engagement of students in learning, as well. In Hawaii, an educator used role-playing exercises to teach his students about the events surrounding nuclear testing the U.S. government conducted in the 1940s and ’50s in Bikini Atoll (Marshall Islands). Students role-played both U.S. Cabinet members making the decision to use Bikini Atoll and islanders meeting with diplomats sent to convince them to leave their atoll and move to another part of the island chain. Without knowing the true story of the Bikini islanders, the teacher found that the drama “...drew them [the students] forward. The story became more interesting to dramatize, under the belief that they could influence its course” (Kelii II 21). The teacher also realized his goal of having his students completely immersed in a lesson (Kelii II). In a similar story, a teacher used role-playing drama to teach persuasive writing to students by setting up a fictional town whose old buildings were to be demolished for the building of high-rise condos. Students wrote strongly worded letters to the city council of this town after first developing their own characters as citizens of the town. Once this was completed, however, students clamored to take the exercise one step further and conducted a town meeting to argue the proposed action (Innes, Moss, and Smigiel).

The examples cited above show the powerful influence drama can have on the learning process and social skills of students. In regards to role-playing specifically, observations have been made that the activity involves students both cognitively and affectively. “Within the role, children replay, revisit, and repeat their existing knowledge and understandings, and from this context they question, negotiate, collaborate, cooperate, and reflect with their peers” (Innes, Moss, and Smigiel 211). Role-playing also embodies the premise that drama is situational, and as such gives students experience in social roles and situations that can teach communication skills such as listening, negotiating, and defending. The result brings personal empowerment in these social contexts (Innes, Moss, and Smigiel). Role-playing is thus coming to be seen as an effective vehicle for teaching children positive behaviors in challenging situations. Bullying being considered one such real-life situation students find themselves faced with, educators are beginning to seek ways to integrate role-playing and drama into their bullying prevention programs.

Numerous methodologies and supplements have developed over the years. In a South Carolina prevention program implemented in 1994, classroom intervention strategies included not only role playing but other artistic activities in conjunction with the video, “Bullying,” as a way to “help children to understand the seriousness of bullying, support victims of bullying, and help to prevent bullying at their school” (Limber et al 68). Stop the Bullying: A Handbook for Teachers suggests opening up classroom discussions about bullying by conducting a role-play illustrating a bullying situation and later undertaking role-playing exercises to assist bystanders in appropriate responses when situations arise (Rigby). Yet another popular bullying curriculum, Bully Busters: A Teacher’s Manual, includes specific role-playing exercises within its recommendations for activities. “A Piece of the Pie” emblazon children in practicing how to enter unfamiliar group situations. “Setting the Stage for Success” instructs that students in small groups develop their own play about a student being bullied with a group of bystanders watching nearby, creating a solution to the situation, and then taking turns playing all the roles. “Jump into my Shoes” has children explore and discuss the feelings bullies and victims have during bullying encounters prior to the class dividing in two with one student playing the victim and one student playing the bully in a role-play. One of the feelings discussed is chosen by each actor and each side of the rest of the class supports either the bully or the victim. Once the role-play is complete the two actors with their supporters switch roles and explore the alternate feeling by doing the role play again (Newman, Horne, and Bartolomucci). Finally, in the award-winning prevention program Steps to Respect developed by the Committee for Children, students are taught
three R's to bullying prevention: Recognize, Refuse, and Report; with recommendations for parents and teachers to use role-playing in conjunction with learning and practicing each step (http://www.ccchildren.org/str/aboutSTR; Coloroso).

Role-playing is only one type of drama technique utilized in bullying intervention and prevention programs, however. In one middle school in Virginia in 2001, counseling and drama department staff members teamed up to develop an anti-bullying program. Counselors at the school had been approached for help by the drama teacher who was experiencing a number of bullying incidents in her classes. The counselors gathered as much information on bullying as they could, discovering a need in the school larger than drama classes alone. When asked if the drama students could perform skits about bullying to demonstrate what they were learning about the issue, the drama teacher went one step further and wrote a play, "Bullybusters," to focus student attention on how to recognize bullies and implement the strategies they were learning in bullying situations. The aim of the drama was to show bullying situations in a non-threatening context that middle schoolers could identify with. The play did not resolve all the conflicts presented, however. Left unresolved intentionally, the hope was that students would explore other possible solutions to the events presented. The play was used as a kick-off to the school-wide anti-bullying campaign (Beale).

During the assembly following the presentation of "Bullybusters," school officials presented the school with the zero-tolerance policy on bullying and asked students to pledge not to bully and to take actions to stop bullying in their school. Classroom discussions ensued, allowing students to express their opinions and beliefs about bullying in a non-personal way. They discussed possible solutions to the situations in the show and interacted with peers who were feeling similarly to themselves about bullying going on in the school but just had been too afraid to voice their thoughts. Eventually, students were able to talk more openly about their own bullying experiences and feelings. This format encouraged students to find their own answers and think seriously about the issues which had been placed before them. Along with teacher awareness, new school and classroom rules which were enforced, parent involvement in intervention, and counseling programs for victims, the school where "Bullybusters" was initially performed indicated a 20% reduction in reported bullying incidences in its first year with the anti-bullying program (Beale).

"Bullybusters" grew to be a huge success in its community and the surrounding areas. An evening news segment led to the play being performed in many elementary schools within the region. The drama students received hundreds of letters from students who had seen the production saying things like, "I am being bullied so I think 'Bullybusters' will help me. Now I know all the types of bullying and when to help others," "All your hard work really paid off because there is a kid on my bus that always picks on a younger kid and now he has stopped," and "You made me want to stop being a bully. Thank you!" (Beale). The use of peer-acted drama to demonstrate the definitions, situations, and possible reactions to bullying was thus found to be a highly effective tool.

The play "Bullybusters" fits into a genre of drama known as psychoeducational drama, which "attempts to utilize the dramatic arts to increase our understanding of ourselves and the human condition" (Urtz and Kahn 326). Those who incorporate this type of drama into social programs often observe that audiences are affected emotionally by the live nature of the performance and the psychological or social issue explored. Because the intent of the drama is to induce audience members to identify with their own life situations, discussions which follow the dramas are likewise emotionally charged. Psychoeducational drama is not meant to be threatening, however. To the contrary, psychoeducational drama is most successful when it allows "participants to observe the drama at their own level of understanding and insight and at their own ability to tolerate challenging emotional and intellectual material" (Urtz and Kahn 327). To this end, outside drama groups are increasingly developing presentations to supplement and support social issue programs within educational contexts. One of the first such integrations for bullying was carried out as part of an anti-bullying program in Sheffield, England in 1991. The Neti Neti Theatre Company presented "Only Playing, Miss" at 11 schools, then ran half-day workshops to examine and instruct how teachers could use drama techniques to reinforce the messages about bullying being taught to the students (Smith et al).

The Taproot Theatre Company
The drama outreach programs of professional theatres often tend to focus on "theatre education," opening the minds of children to the art form and showing students how fun and provocative theatre can be. Sometimes, however, theatre companies embrace the psychoeducational drama model and incorporate important social issues into their productions. One such company, Taproot Theatre's Road Company in Seattle, WA, has for almost 30 years been touring to schools in its area presenting drama which "explores the beauty and questions of life while bringing hope to our search for meaning" (Taproot Theatre Company). According to Angela Lai, playwright of many Taproot Theatre Road Company...
Survivor” students is presented. Says Lai about her goals in writing scripts, areas of child bullying are being built upon. Steps to Respect is one of the framework with which to write “Survivor.” “It felt necessary and important to partner with existing organizations that have real expertise in the areas of child bullying...Steps to Respect teaches great skills for kids to understand the dynamics of bullying and to learn how to handle bullying when it happens to them or others...” (Lai, Angela). “Elementary School Survivor” synthesizes all of these points in fun ways for the students in a dynamic story.

For instance, Mr. Watson, while talking with Timmy, asks him if he knows what bullying is. Timmy, however, does not have a clear idea of the exact definition.
TIMMY: So being an effective bystander means helping in whatever way you can?
ROXIE: Yeah. It’s safe, you can stand with the person who is being bullied and try to help them, like I just did when Tyson was trying to get the ball away from you. If it isn’t safe, then get help from a teacher that you trust, like Mr. Watson.
TIMMY: We better get over there and see what we can do.

Tyson and Roxie then intervene on Tyson’s behalf, but unfortunately Tyson is not very appreciative. The show concludes with a scene between Timmy and his mother to emphasize the importance of parent involvement and cognizance of bullying issues at school and another Survivor challenge in gym class during which Tyson and Timmy are teamed up and consequently become friends. As a part of this happy ending, Mr. Watson conducts a class discussion to reinforce the concepts of bullying, refusing bullying, being an effective bystander, and the difference between tattling and reporting. “More and more as I work on these scripts, I believe that their purpose is to get kids engaged and to hopefully provoke discussion in the classroom...to provide teachers with examples to reference as they educate on the topic” (Lai, Angela). As classroom discussions about bullying are a specific component of the program, this goal supplements school curricula effectively.

Actors in the touring company are also trained in the Steps to Respect program and in leading discussions and talkbacks with the students as a way to reinforce the message of the show. Michael Salas, a four year member of Taproot’s Road Company and originator of the role of Timmy in “Elementary School Survivor,” says that Taproot set up a special training day for all members of the Road Company to visit Committee for Children offices and receive personalized training in their anti-bullying curriculum. Talkbacks which were conducted upon the immediate completion of shows with students often included the questions: What is bullying? What is a bystander? What is an effective bystander? What are three R’s you can remember if you see someone being bullied? What is the difference between tattling and reporting? What can you do if you’re being bullied? and What can you do if you see someone else being bullied? (Salas, Michael). Children were thus able to shout answers back to indicate that they had received the message of the shows. According to Salas, most of the time schools were actually using the Committee for Children’s curriculum, and this aided in students’ comprehension of the concepts. Actors also conducted in-class workshops with students if schools requested them. During workshops, actors had the chance to reinforce the messages of the shows a second time by conducting role-playing exercises with the children and submitting to a question and answer time. Most often, students wanted to know if the actors had ever been bullies or had been bullied. This often provided ways for the students to feel like there were those who could identify with them. Feeling a kinship to Timmy, Salas said that often he would privately be approached by a child who wanted to tell him about ways he or she was being bullied. At those times, Salas would ask the child if they had sought help like the characters in the show had done and if the bullying was still happening. Depending on the child’s answer, Salas would then direct the child to either seek help in ways that had been discussed or offer to talk to a teacher with the child. “We were always told [by the theatre] to bring everything back to the show and situations in the show,” Salas emphasized (Salas, Michael).

Josiah Wallace, current Director of Outreach for Taproot Theatre Company, says that of all their anti-bullying shows, “Elementary School Survivor” has run the longest.

People continue to want shows on bullying. “Elementary School Survivor” has almost been retired by the company several times, but we keep bringing it back because it’s easy to do and the demand is so high. It’s been performed over 550 times in four years (Wallace, Josiah).

It is also important to note that the reason “Elementary School Survivor” has been so much more popular than Taproot’s other bullying shows is because the plotline of the show integrates the TV reality show so compellingly, blending both fun, action sequences with teaching and informational segments. Taproot primarily serves Western Washington with brief trips to the middle and Eastern part of the state, so the impact of this drama alone, working in conjunction with Steps to Respect, has been enormous. In surveys completed by schools in the weeks after performances of “Survivor,” 97% of them indicated that the message of the play was clear, and 95% affirmed the message to be of very high relevance to their audience. “Topic fit very nicely with our character education and focus on how to address bullying. Good staff and student responses to the performances!” “That is the best presentation I have seen for elementary children. It was very well and energetically performed. The first graders understood it” (Taproot Surveys 2002). “[a] strong message against bullying, and steps for us to deal with it. This continues our coordinated effort to provide community and school-wide awareness of bullying and how to recognize and respond to bullying. This assembly is a “must see” and compliments well what we are doing at school to be Bully Free.” “Teachers reported that they had great discussions afterward.” “The message was powerful. Two 5th grade girls reported bullying the next day and today a second grade student shared that she wasn’t ‘tattling,’
just 'reporting.' Kids learned the concepts well!" "Very entertaining and a great way to get the message across!" (Taproot Surveys 2005). Wallace reports that over 60,000 youth in 118 schools in grades K-12 were reached with Taproot’s dramas during the 2004-2005 school year alone, 88% of those performances being anti-bullying shows (Wallace, Josiah).

The impact of drama in bullying prevention programs has thus been established and recognized by schools in Western Washington on a very large scale. The prevalence of outside drama groups who embrace psychoeducational drama for the purpose of bullying issues is scant on a nationwide basis, however. In addition to Taproot Theatre, only a few professional touring groups target bullying in their repertoire. With the success and popularity of anti-bullying shows then, coupled with the established need and effectiveness of drama which not only educates, but also affects and changes the lives of children, there is sufficient argument for more theatre outreach endeavors to integrate a psychoeducational component into programs which currently are merely entertainment. At the very least, an increase in the use of drama techniques in schools to address this issue or even just as an activity to build self-esteem should be explored. Participation in drama often has the effect of enhancing the self-esteem of those involved by increasing the ability to communicate thoughts and feelings, developing concentration and discussion skills, fostering spontaneity and imagination, and enabling those qualities that contribute to a healthy self-concept (Renard and Sockol). According to Renard and Sockol, the ways children gain a healthy self-concept are through a strong sense of belonging in their peer group, a sense of power, or to ask for help if they need it, and that they know they are special and unique, possessing qualities and strengths that no one else has quite like themselves (Renard and Sockol). In comparison, victims and bystanders in bullying situations have been shown to lack healthy self-concepts, thus feeding and perpetuating the bullying cycle. It follows then, that the use of drama is a powerful tool to not only empower students through educating them about the acts, effects, and proper responses to bullying, but also to bring empowerment through direct participation in drama as a whole. Whether this participation comes by way of acting themselves on a stage, working backstage, being an audience member, or even being an actor in a role-playing exercise, the positive effects on the self-concepts of these students can serve to indirectly contribute to a healthier and more positive perspective in regards to confronting bullying in their lives.

The effectiveness of drama in bullying intervention and prevention is thus two-fold. Through directly exposing the issue in role-play or performance and encouraging students to discuss and experience more positive solutions to these situations, intervention and prevention programs are universally more successful and students more empowered. In addition, the act of participation in drama also builds self-esteem and helps students to practice life situations in a safe construct before being faced with them in reality. Both are useful tools in bullying prevention. Anti-bullying programs will never be effective unless adults both at school and at home are in agreement about the inappropriateness of such behavior and join in its condemnation, however. Drama about anti-bullying is most effective when paired with an already existing and active prevention campaign. Wallace, referring to schools and theatres alike to join hands in greater measures to combat this issue which, sadly, will never disappear so long as children are motivated to learn about and experience power through belittling and harming their peers. More efforts and education as to the benefits of drama in anti-bullying programs are needed, and more theatres to provide those services as well.

Endnotes

* William Mastromonte’s Bang Bang You’re Dead is another popular peer-acted drama frequently utilized in high schools around the United States. The play’s main focus is violence prevention, however, with bullying only indirectly referenced. As such, this play has not been used as a primary example in this paper.

References


- Personal Interview. 28 Nov. 2005.


Salas, Michael. Personal Interview. 16 Nov. 2005.


- Surveys 2005.


Sidney, Australia. It arrives at 1:45 PM the next day. I knew there was a
time change.

EURYDICE: What about Tampa.

PHONE VOICE: All our Tampa flights have been temporarily rerouted
today to Sidney, Australia.

EURYDICE: What do I have to do to get to Florida today? Please help me?
My daughter is having a baby!

PHONE VOICE: Go to the reservation desk. (And she hangs up.)

(Eurydice wanders back to the AA attendant.)

ATTENDANT: Any luck?

EURYDICE: No, all the flights to Tampa have been temporarily rerouted
to Sidney, Australia.

ATTENDANT: Listen, I’ve been looking at the schedules, and your best bet
is this new low fare airline at Terminal X called Limbo Airlines. They have
regular flights to all the southern cities.

EURYDICE: I didn’t know there was a Terminal X.

ATTENDANT: At the very extreme end of the airport.

EURYDICE: (At the end of her rope.) You’ve been very kind.

ATTENDANT: No problem.

(Eurydice wheels her carry-on round and round in circles until the Attendant
changes the name tag to Limbo Airlines; Home of the Limboliner; “When We
Get You There, You Stay There.”)

ATTENDANT: Hello, we’ve been waiting for you. Welcome to Limbo Airlines:
Home of the Limboliner.

EURYDICE: Do you have a goddamn seat on a goddamn flight to goddamn
Tampa.

ATTENDANT: Yes, we do happen to have a seat, on the all-new luxury 787
Limboliner.

EURYDICE: Thank God.

ATTENDANT: But that flight has been delayed for six months due to tur­
bulence and flatulence.

EURYDICE: Oh, this is hell.

ATTENDANT: No, this is Limbo. For Hell, you must go to Styx Airlines at
Terminal Z, and board the Piedmont Piper Puddle Jumper. The equipment
is very old, the oxygen masks don’t work, and the airline is experiencing
interminable delays. But you are guaranteed to eventually reach Hell, or
wherever your final destination may be. Until your flight is called, you are
perfectly free to wait in our comfortable Limbo departure lounge.

Slow fade on Eurydice in total despair, crying “Help!!!”

All rights to “Airport Hell” are held by the author and for performance information may be
contacted at American Repertory Theatre, 64 Brattle Street, Cambridge, MA 02138.