

# Youth, Theatre and Civic Dialogue: Implications and Opportunities

**SESSION DESCRIPTION:** What unique contributions can professional theater for youth and youth theater make toward fostering civic dialogue? This session will feature presentations by two Animating Democracy Lab theater projects. Children’s Theatre Company’s Land Bridge project examined the Minnesota farm crisis and culminated in *Stories from Montevideo*, an original production performed for both rural and urban audiences. Flint Youth Theatre’s project on school violence culminated in the original production, *...My Soul to Take*. People’s Light and Theatre will discuss its work engaging artists and youth in ongoing collaborations, and its ideas on how youth and community can be central to a complex arts institution. In an open, moderated discussion, the session will pursue such questions as: What roles can and should youth play in this work and how are their voices invited, heard, and honored? How can theater-making be liberated and artistic expectations exploded through intergenerational projects? How does the intent to do dialogue impact the creative process? What are the specific challenges of partnerships in youth-oriented arts-based civic dialogue projects?

**PRESENTERS:** *David Bradley, People’s Light and Theatre; Sharon DeMark and Rebecca Brown, Minneapolis Children’s Theatre Company; Bill Ward, Flint Youth Theatre*

**RESPONDENTS:** *Talvin Wilks, New WORLD Theatre; Dr. Shaun Nethercott, Matrix Theatre Company*

**MODERATOR:** *Joan Lazarus, University of Texas at Austin*

## **CHILDREN’S THEATER COMPANY PRESENTATION**

**Rebecca Brown:** Our project, called the Land Bridge project, began with work in Montevideo, a rural community in western Minnesota. Children’s Theater Company (CTC) builds bridges between communities; in this case, bringing awareness of the rural community to the city and also performing the piece in the community where it was created. While working on the Land Bridge Project, the company spent a week in residency in Montevideo. Working with farmers, teachers, business owners, clergy, and youth in the community, interviewing them and listening to their stories we created a piece that embodied the dialogue within the community.

First, we wanted to get beyond the specifics of the farming crisis and get into the hopes, values, dreams, and inspiration of the community members; we wanted to look beyond to the bigger life picture. How were these issues affecting the life of the youth? As a result of people losing farms, losing businesses, and the poor economic state of town, there was an exodus of young people. In trying to communicate a solution, we came across stories of ancestry—stories of immigration from countries like Norway, Sweden, and Germany; these were stories of struggle and of overcoming difficulty. We decided to juxtapose this 150-year history with more contemporary stories from recent immigration to bring out the role of humor and survival. The text for the piece was woven together through the spine of the history of farming. The community became faced with the issue: “How do we make this a desirable place for young people to live?”

**Sharon DeMark:** We organized several dialogues with structured facilitated questions for young diverse audience members from rural, suburban, and inner city backgrounds. We asked them about their relationship to farming. In advance we had created study guide material for the teachers to use prior to the show. We organized the children into pairs and had them discuss their reaction to the play. Diane Aldis (our partner from Perpich Center for Arts Education) led the dialogues with an exercise asking about the kids’ relationship to their hometown. Would they stay? Move away? Come back? We had a sense of kids moving away and them moving back in; and we still have connection to that community. We’re trying to figure out the next steps for continuing this discussion.

**Talvin Wilks:** What is the lasting relationship to the community? How do your personal relationships grow? In the goal and planning, how do you continue building trust?

**Rebecca:** There are concerns regarding exploitation. How does one tell their deeply personal stories and avoid caricature or inflicting one’s own point of view? I worried about bringing urban, liberal leanings to the piece. It’s amazing in the CTC project how the possibilities of dialogue had been planted in the process while having an outsider involved.

**Shaun Nethercott:** There are also issues of agency. Young people have the right to be the subjects in their own stories and to shape a performance about them. It's the concept of being the architect vs. the recipient of the experience.

**Joan Lazarus:** There's also the idea of theatrical ethnography. What are the implications of changing the dialogue?

**Joan:** How does the identity of the organization stay intact? Is some part of it connected to the organizations mission?

### **FLINT YOUTH THEATRE PRESENTATION**

**(Note:** See also the Flint Youth Theatre case study at: [www.americansforthearts.org/pdf/adi/fyt\\_casestudy.pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/pdf/adi/fyt_casestudy.pdf))

**Bill Ward:** Three years ago, Flint Youth Theatre did a play called . . . *My Soul to Take* in response to the shootings at Columbine High School. In the development phase, there was a shooting in Flint by a six-year-old boy who shot and killed a student. The event added gravity to what we were doing.

Gillian Eaton, a theater director and educator, conducted process drama sessions to inform development of the script. In the process drama called *Michael*, students were invited to take on the role of behavioral psychologists to aid in the finding of a missing boy named Michael. Clues were given to the students who acted out their theories of what had happened to him. In *The Pied Piper of Hamlet* process drama, students took on the roles of town council, the parents, and the children themselves and tackled issues of how an unsafe place become a safe place and vice versa

**Joan:** Remember, someone asked what would happen if all the children were missing? In some schools the answer was get more. (shrugs shoulders)

**Bill:** This was incorporated into play: the idea that children are disposable. We even had parents shopping for new kids to replace the damaged ones.

Another scene (which evolved from a process drama exercise called *Art Gallery*) was an art exhibit. We purchased a gun and had it sit in a plexi-glass case at center of stage. There was this imaginary museum with a gallery opening and people responded to the gun as though it was art.

When we started the project we introduced ourselves as drama specialists, but we never revealed that we were doing a play about shootings because we wanted honest answers. In the case of *Michael*, it didn't take too many steps (for kids to infer) that Michael was angry and would come back to school with a gun.

**Sue Wood, . . . My Soul to Take project director:** We used study circles as the approach for a community-wide dialogue. Each circle met twice before the production, once during the performance, and twice after. We deliberately involved the Beecher community, where the young girl was shot; our experience working with them was nonetheless difficult. One misstep caused them to feel that their tragedy had been appropriated by someone else. The challenge was about honoring what has happened in a community truthfully developed. This became a learning experience for us.

**Woman:** What was the children's response to the play?

**Bill:** They were engaged; and thankful for the truth. There was no honest exploration in their classrooms. The responses were to the heart. Some kids said this is what they had been feeling; what they had to say and hadn't been able to.

**Joan:** What lingers for you now?

**Bill:** We're a theatre with artists interested in these types of projects. We're not a social agency or civic place. The question is do we adjust the organization's role to engage children in these types of dialogues.

### **PEOPLE'S LIGHT & THEATRE PRESENTATION**

**David Bradley:** People's Light and Theatre is the second largest theatre in the Philadelphia area making a place for young people integrally. Developed in 1974, we made a theatre where there wasn't a lot going on. Students from 18 high schools come to see plays—sometimes the work is connected to the curriculum, sometimes it isn't. Typically, our work isn't issue based, but about the process of art making being its own civic dialogue, that is, telling its own story.

For example, even as we were doing Shakespeare, the process was opened up for opportunity to change the text by working with metaphor. This brings up issues of who has a voice, and who doesn't.

One of our projects was a series of performances called 'Power Plays,' which were scenes about thinking about power on both basic and international levels.

Presently, the company is trying to diversify. One of our current projects is exploring how we embrace the populism that is inherent in whom we are as a nation by showing American plays as a response to September 11<sup>th</sup>.

## **QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS BASED ON THE PRESENTATIONS**

### **Challenges of Issue-focused Dialogue with Youth**

- How do you situate the work of art in relation to the community, especially with issues of violence? How do you ask kids to respond to an issue when they may experience that issue in their personal life? From their point of view, it could be very upsetting to recreate their experience publicly. How do you ask people to engage in a way that doesn't manipulate them? How do we get away from re-oppressing and re-abusing the cast and audience? (Shawn Nethercott) Have decompression times. Build in journaling, talking, processing. Don't stir things up and then leave. (Joan Lazarus)
- How do you acknowledge disclosures? What do you do with that kind of a response? (Joan Lazarus)
- How do you express a voice over time? And create a safe space for that over time.
- There's the role of pedagogy. How do you foster coequal discussions? (Shaun Nethercott)

### **Issues of authenticity and voice; naming and framing the issue**

- Who's voice should we be hearing, and are we filtering children's voices through adults? What place is there for authentic young people's voices? (Joan Lazarus)
- Is dialogue coming from within or without the community? Once, we made a classic mistake. A work was created with fourth and fifth graders about the environment and work conditions in auto plants. The woman who led the discussion really coached them during the discussion. We realized you have to allow their voice; adults should shape but not lead. Where does the topic come from? How do children and young people choose topics? What I feel about violence in the community is not what would be felt by a 12 year old. (Shaun Nethercott)
- Working with CTC, all I thought about was how am I going to make this piece. I'm making work and trusting that there were ambiguities and points of entry for the audience to respond; to create dialogue between the audience and the action. I don't want to take responsibility for that as an artist. I want there to be different perspectives. (Rebecca Brown)
- One of the questions that occur to me is whether we have begun to distrust the power of metaphor. Is it possible to create the metaphor and let other people find their way into it? (woman)

### **What responsibility does a theater for young people have in continuing the dialogue within the community?**

- Any response to a work of art goes on and on. And in saying that, we can't go all the way through with a community: it's all just phases. If a work of art has impact, the dialogue will continue regardless. The work of art is larger than the moment. (David Bradley)
- You have responsibility. You've walked over the threshold. Sometimes you've opened a door [around an issue] but as a theater organization, you can't necessarily keep it open. (Bill Ward)
- We work with a group of youth and the goal is retention. The more they learn about their lives, the more involved they become. As a result, do we have accountability? How do we deal with this information? In many cases, they look to us as a retreat and as a way of getting out of their situations, and meanwhile, we're

leaning more and more. It's a mutual relationship. And is there a responsibility now to get them into college?  
(Talvin Wilks)

**How has this work to stimulate dialogue shifted the roles of theaters for young people institutionally? In what ways do we need to change?**

- To what degree do we need to be deliberate about creating dialogue within our organizations?
- What becomes the theatre's larger mission in the context of arts-based civic dialogue work? What do we need to put in place to continue community relationships? And what lingers in the organization from a civically engaged project? (Joan Lazarus)
- What about the process of art making being its own form of civic dialogue?
- Why isn't just making art enough? Do we have to measure our outcomes in terms of changing the world?