

# *...My Soul To Take* Case Study: Flint Youth Theatre

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## PREFACE BY ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

In April 1999, the commando-style shootings carried out by two students at Columbine High School became the first in a series of violent school tragedies that horrified the country. Columbine and its aftermath motivated Bill Ward, Artistic Director of Flint Youth Theatre (FYT) in Flint, Michigan, to think about developing a play that would explore the issue of school violence. Over several months, the theater began to discuss just how it would translate this topic to the stage. Then, the unspeakable occurred—a fatal school shooting at a Flint elementary school. This tragedy lent gravity to Ward’s original idea and challenged the company about how it could treat the subject responsibly. The play, *...My Soul to Take*, was produced a full year later—a multi-layered, non-linear work of art that served as the centerpiece for a larger span of activities.

The project refocused attention on the causes and effects of school violence and what actions this community could take to prevent it from happening again. There were multiple approaches to dialogue over eight months. Young people participated in Process Drama workshops that informed the play’s script; adults joined small group study circles to share ideas about school violence and possible solutions. Nearly 3,700 people attended performances of the play, and more than 2,500 participated in the range of study circle, post-performance, and other community forum dialogues. Nine community organizations developed projects of their own through funding from a mini-grant program linked to the project.

This case study, written by project director Sue Wood, recounts, from the inside, the evolution of this project in the context of Flint Youth Theatre’s social issue-based work. This story shows how a cultural organization can effectively contribute to broader public discourse on a pressing issue and how it might address a community trauma so as not to exploit the incident or victims. It analyzes the particular aesthetic style of FYT’s production, and how that style evolved from and supported dialogue. Finally, Flint Youth Theatre candidly reflects on at once being highly effective in arts-based civic dialogue while also questioning the degree to which it can engage in civic issues.

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## HISTORY AS PROLOGUE

Flint Youth Theatre (FYT) has a history of community-based theater projects that address urgent social issues. That history was both context and stimulation for this project.

Over the years, FYT has also experimented with a variety of methods for creating scripts for community-based projects. In 1996, our artistic director Bill Ward drew from essays written by more than 1,000 Flint ninth-graders to create *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dream*, a play that examined violence in general and its impact on youth. Guided by their teachers (who made up the project's steering committee), the young people wrote about violence they had experienced, observed or participated in, as well as their feelings of anger and depression and their hope for a peaceful life. *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dream* was remounted for a four-month national tour that culminated in performances on Capitol Hill. That same year, we also produced *Growing Up Female*, a collage of scenes and songs exploring the joys and sorrows of being female in this society. The playwright and guest director created the script through interviews and workshops with the cast, who then performed their own stories on stage. A series of dialogues called "Welcoming Many Voices" brought cast members into contact with women and girls in the Flint community over an 18-month period.

In 1998, we created *We the People*, a trilogy of plays addressing issues of race in our society. Two of the shows were scripted, conventional works but the third, *Borders*, drew from a series of focus groups conducted across the city and county over several months. The focus groups, which were generally either all-black or all-white, responded to questions posed by a team consisting of an FYT actor (black) and board member (white). These sessions were tape-recorded and the recordings formed the basis for a script in a game show format, with the Afro Team and the Anglo Team playing for big prizes. The ironic format was a big hit with audiences.

All of the plays were critically acclaimed, but box office response was mixed. *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dream* and *Growing Up Female* played to sold-out houses and *Borders* sold reasonably well, but the other two plays in the *We the People* trilogy attracted very small audiences.

By late 1998 the artistic and administrative staff were feeling conflicted. We found ourselves with many questions. Were we getting pigeonholed by this kind of work? Would our theater colleagues even think this was "art?" Were the methods of creating scripts for this material valid? Was our aesthetic style—non-linear, non-literal, image-driven—suitable for this social issue work?

Because much of our recent work had been supported by grants, we wondered whether we were jumping through hoops for funders. And did audiences really *want* to see this type of work, however critically acclaimed it might be?

In trying to enrich the experience for the people who attended, might we find alternatives to the conventional "Talk-Backs" after performances? We had experimented with different formats but found them to be pretty deadly, or poorly attended or focused almost entirely on technical aspects of the production.

And then there was the issue of follow-up. FYT artistic and administrative staff spent months handling dialogue and follow-up activities for *The 7<sup>th</sup> Dream* and *Growing Up Female*. How could we manage all the community engagement that these kinds of productions engender?

On the other hand, we wondered whether a theater, particularly a youth theater, could find its community "niche" and survive and thrive in an urban area such as Flint *without* doing community-based work. What was our responsibility to the civic realm? What could we contribute to public engagement that is unique and meaningful?

And finally, why, when doing these projects, did we always feel at some point that the tail was wagging the dog?

## THE ISSUE OF YOUTH VIOLENCE EMERGES AGAIN

In spite of (and in part because of) these doubts and questions, when the Columbine shooting occurred, Bill felt compelled to respond with a theater piece about school shootings. Like many communities, Flint had experienced a rash of bomb threats and weapons-in-schools incidents in the wake of Columbine. We thought a theater piece might explore this issue in its many dimensions.

The City of Flint has had a number of violence prevention initiatives over the past several years, ranging from slogan-based programs such as “Just say NO” and “Zero Tolerance!” to conflict mediation, motivational addresses and grass roots neighborhood organizing. We felt we could draw from these initiatives to build a base of community partners, and perhaps contribute to some cohesion and coordination of efforts. When the Animating Democracy materials reached us in 1999, we saw an opportunity to create this piece and also examine the questions that had been nagging at us. We would do so by designing a project from the ground up. At the outset, we would forge partnerships to manage community participation and dialogue, deliberately examine our aesthetic questions, and, through the Animating Democracy Lab, learn from other arts organizations wrestling with similar issues.

Then, just after we submitted our Intent to Apply to the Animating Democracy program, a horrifying event occurred at Buell Elementary in the Beecher School District, a poor urban area just north of the Flint border. Kayla Rowland, a five-year-old student, was shot and killed by a six-year-old classmate who had brought a weapon to school. This tragic event gave immediacy and gravity to our proposed project.

## EVOLVING AN APPROACH TO THE PLAY

The most significant development in evolving an approach to the play was the discovery of Gillian Eaton, a free-lance director and teacher. Gillian’s vast experience includes skill at Process Drama, a British form of experiential improvisation and role-play that engages groups in active speculation and reflection on issues or situations. She joined our creative team when we were developing the Intent to Apply with the understanding she would conduct a series of Process Drama sessions in classrooms and community settings for the purpose of gathering material for a script, which Bill would write.

As Gillian explains it, Process Drama includes multiple strategies for opening dialogue, including:

- finding the correct pretext/allegory/story that distances participants sufficiently from the subject and allows them to approach the issue from an unfixed viewpoint;
- using questions as a primary investigative tool;
- using appropriate acknowledgements to validate response;
- using “Mantle of the Expert” exercises in which participants take on the roles of detectives, child psychologists, or parents, allowing them to “know” and speak as authentically as possible;
- using “In Role” activities for both the facilitator and the participants, which allows everyone to shift rapidly through many points of view; and
- using graduated activities with varied group sizes— one-on-one, small groups, whole groups— to change focus and energy.

“Taking a group through a story, as it would ‘play out’ rather than ‘read out,’ is what makes the process work,” she said. “When we have to immerse ourselves in unfamiliar personae and make decisions from other points of view, our awareness expands.”

As the Process Drama sessions unfolded, Gillian’s role evolved into artistic peer for Bill—the drama teacher as dramaturge. The two traveled across the city conducting sessions and engaging in continuous dialogue with one another. Gillian’s sessions and Bill’s involvement in them became their own unique form of civic dialogue— both within the sessions, where participants grappled with issues and characters, and outside the sessions, where Bill and Gillian synthesized the words and ideas that had come forth.

As they tweaked and refined Gillian’s Process Drama sessions, Bill’s vision of the final production began to evolve and change. His original intention had been to create an audience participation piece, tentatively called *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead*, which would immerse the playgoers into a simulated school shooting—the “viewer as victim.” Gradually he came to question the artistic integrity of such a concept, and began leaning toward a more fluid, collage-type work that would incorporate some of the characters, thoughts and ideas emerging directly from Gillian’s sessions. Gillian ultimately worked with three pretexts—“Michael,” “Art Gallery” and “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” These offered multiple entry points for participants in thinking and talking about the central ideas. Each of these pretexts was done numerous times with several groups, and all yielded rich material for Bill.

The “Michael” pretext was based on a fictional high school student who mysteriously disappears. In the role of psychologists trained in adolescent behavior, high school participants interviewed Michael’s uncle, his teachers and his classmates. “In Role,” they speculated on his background and motives. Then, the “psychologists” created a profile of a troubled teen, alienated from his peers and his surroundings. In the role of townspeople, participants argued with the “Pied Piper” about his payment, then argued among themselves about who was to blame for the tragedy of their lost children. Finally, they whispered last messages into the ears of their lost children, sleeping inside the mountain. In the role of art patrons, participants extolled the virtues of the gun-as-art. They created tableaux and sounds for “original” artwork to be included in the exhibition, *Rage and Resolution*. In the role of ordinary citizens, they brainstormed a list of specific people whose lives had been changed by coming into contact with this particular work of art and created violent tableaux where the gun-as-art was put to use. They animated their scenes by playing “what comes next,” then replayed the scenes, stopping the action at a critical point and imagining a different ending.

In each of these sessions, participants did not specifically discuss gun control, metal detectors in schools or violence in the media. This was dialogue of deeper substance: What happens when a town loses its children? What might a psychological profile of a troubled teen in their midst look like? What makes a safe place unsafe, and what happens at the boundaries? How are lives affected when society is addicted to an object such as a gun? And, who pays the piper?

In all cases, taking the discussion into an imaginative realm distanced the participants from the harsh realities of the topic, enabling them to express “In Role” feelings and ideas that arose from an intuitive rather than an intellectual place. As these imaginative expressions were also essentially dramatic in nature, Bill found himself transferring many of them to the script he was creating.

The Pied Piper story became an integral part of the play, as it contained multiple metaphors that could focus attention on societal problems. From the “Michael” pretext came the character of

The Woman in Black, mother of an unseen teenaged boy. And the gun from the art gallery emerged as the only set piece—placed center-stage in a Plexiglas case throughout the entire performance.

The production became a collage of shifting images, words, sounds and movements, at times realistic and straightforward, at times dreamlike and mysterious. It ceased to be *Bang, Bang, You're Dead*, and became ...*My Soul to Take*.

## PARTNERING FOR COMMUNITY DIALOGUE AND REACH

In the early days, when the show was still *Bang, Bang, You're Dead*, Flint Youth Theatre began to form partnerships to carry the dialogue components of the project forward. At the very outset, we established criteria for partners. A partner's mission needed to be congruent with the goals of the Animating Democracy program. The partner had to have a stake in the issue of school shootings. The partner needed to embed the project in its activities for the year, no add-ons. The partner had to commit some resources to the work. And, ideally, the partner would lend prestige and credibility to the project.

In some cases, as with the University of Michigan-Flint, we approached a potential partner and invited them to participate. Some partners, like Neighborhood Violence Prevention Collaborative and Flint Cultural Center Corporation, approached us and asked to be included. And in one case—the National Center for Community Education—a partner was recommended to us because of its experience with study circles. Ultimately, the CEOs of each partnering organization formed a steering committee that guided the entire project from spring 2000 through spring 2001.

### Study Circles

Ten study circles were formed across the community. The study circle model comes from the Study Circles Resource Center, a national organization that helps communities by giving them the tools to organize productive community-wide dialogues. We chose this model for its emphasis on learning, empathy and equality among participants, and its orientation toward finding solutions and making change. We were not interested in *debating* the issue of school violence. Rather, we hoped participants would gain

### WHAT IS A STUDY CIRCLE?

*This description is adapted from the Study Circles Resource Center web site, [www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org).*

A study circle is a group of 8-12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times to talk about an issue. In a study circle, everyone has an equal voice, and people try to understand each other's views. They do not have to agree with each other. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better. A facilitator helps the group focus on different views and makes sure the discussion goes well. In a large-scale study circle program, people all over a neighborhood, city, county, school district or region meet in diverse study circles over the same period of time. All the study circles work on the same issue and seek solutions for the whole community. At the end of the round of study circles, people from all the circles come together in a large community meeting to work together on the action ideas that came out of the study circles. Study circle programs lead to a wide range of action and change efforts. No single organization or person can create an effective program like this without help— though most large-scale programs start with the vision of just a few people. To ensure diverse large-scale participation, the program organizing must be driven by a group of community leaders and organizations that represents the diversity of the whole community, not just one sector, constituency or group.

information and increase understanding of the complexities of the issue, including the role of race and poverty; the culture of violence in the media; the effectiveness of gun legislation; and the role of educational institutions. The National Center for Community Education and its associate director, Dr. Pat Edwards, took the leadership for the entire study circle process. The NCCE had experience with the national Study Circles Resource Center and its executive director Martha McCoy, and they were eager to help us adapt the model for this project. (See sidebar for more on study circles.)

With the help of the Human Relations Commission of the City of Flint, which had recently conducted a series of study circles on race, we recruited a group of local volunteers to facilitate the circles. These facilitators received two days of training from Frances Frazier, a trainer recommended by the Study Circles Resource Center. Once trained, they recruited their own members. Each circle met five times over six weeks: twice before the play, once at the play, which they attended together, and twice after the play. They each used the violence curriculum developed by the Study Circles Resource Center for the purpose of guiding small group dialogue about the causes and effects of community violence.

Overall, 116 people participated regularly and the circles met a total of 46 times. Participants ranged from non-profit service providers to educators to ministers to neighborhood organizers. Of the 116 participants, 71 completed a survey conducted before the first study circle meeting. According to a survey analysis by Animating Democracy's evaluation advisor, Steve Day, about half indicated they had previously participated in other discussions about the issue of school violence. There were strong feelings that dialogue on the issue was important to the community, and many strongly agreed about their responsibility to confront beliefs that contribute to violence. A majority of the respondents said that they did not often come to Flint Youth Theatre productions, and 23 had never attended an FYT production at all.

After the play, 38 study circle participants returned surveys. While they did not feel that they had heard any new or different perspectives, they indicated that they felt significantly more understanding of opposing views. In the analysis of the survey responses, a significant fact emerged: *seeing the play made a difference in the level or quality of participation in the dialogue that followed.*

Attendance at the study circles was remarkably consistent, and several groups created action plans and next steps for their groups, including a mentoring program for youths, an assessment of the prevalence of guns in homes, and a conflict mediation program for teens.

### **University Symposium**

Flint Youth Theatre approached the University of Michigan-Flint about convening a symposium of scholars and community members. Dr. Juan Mestas, the newly appointed chancellor, was eager to extend the university's reach into the community and to partner with local initiatives. He brought two faculty members into the process to assist with planning and logistics for their event. Together, they chose as guest presenter Peter Boyer, who had written an article, "The Two Mothers," for *The New Yorker*, examining the mothers of Kayla Rowland and the six-year-old boy who shot her. The university also tapped Ira Rutherford, former superintendent of the Beecher School District where Kayla was shot; Peggy Kahn, sociology professor at the university; and Michael Thorp, news anchorman on the local TV station ABC12, who served as moderator.

The event, a Community Conversation, occurred March 13 on campus. In an attempt to get broad participation from those who might not otherwise come, we deployed buses to four sites across the city to bring people to the university. About 175 people attended the two-hour event, which included a presentation by Boyer, comments and responses from the other two panelists, and spirited discussion back and forth between audience members and the panel.

To our chagrin, Boyer's article about the Beecher incident became the focal point of the conversation. Boyer's presence created an adversarial relationship with audience members from the Beecher community, who felt he was disrespectful of their situation, "an outsider in judgment." Although other panelists attempted to discuss the role of the media in covering tragedies in communities of color, the impact of welfare reform on families and children, and the prevalence of guns in our society, the event was dominated by Boyer's defensive reactions to criticism from the audience. Afterward, the steering committee agreed he seemed unprepared and came across as insensitive. Nevertheless, the university counted the event a success as it drew a number of new people to the campus, and provided opportunity for its professors to interact with grassroots community members.

### **Student Conference on School Violence**

Pete Hutchison, who at that time was director of the Neighborhood Violence Prevention Collaborative (NVPC), came forward with a plan for a student conference on school violence as a follow-up for classes that attended ...*My Soul to Take*. NVPC has been at the forefront of school- and community-based efforts in conflict mediation, and Pete was plugged into violence prevention efforts nationwide.

Pete's committee assembled a roster of presenters who developed activities through which students could explore violence and violence prevention. There were sessions in dance, drama and visual art where students had hands-on creative experiences. There were presentations and discussions on conflict mediation and the media. Two superintendents came and facilitated a discussion on school policies, such as zero tolerance. In all, 240 students and their teachers spent the day at the Flint Cultural Center examining multiple facets of the issue through art.

### **Mini-Grants**

The Flint Cultural Center Mini-Grant Program provided small grants for additional work that could be done in the community to connect artistic resources to this issue. The program was initiated after the project was well underway because the Center's new president, Cindy Ornstein, saw the importance of the project and wanted the Center to play a role. With funds from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Cultural Center set aside \$40,000 to give to schools, churches, neighborhood groups and others for arts-based follow-up projects. A steering committee reviewed 27 applications, and funded nine.

Nearly 3,500 people were involved in some way with the mini-grant projects, and the committee was especially pleased by the depth and breadth of the work, as well as the enthusiasm and creativity of the participants. The grants resulted in classroom art projects, neighborhood safety initiatives, an anti-violence web site, an improvisational theater performance and more.

### **...MY SOUL TO TAKE PERFORMANCES AND DIALOGUES**

When the play opened, *Flint Journal* writer Kathleen Kirby captured the play in a February 9 review:

It is an intriguing production filled with symbolism, metaphor and music, as well as spiritual and interpreted mayhem.

Visual images abound. Filled-in chalked outlines of bodies cover the playing space floor while a tall, museum-style Lucite case placed in the center of the chalk lines displays a pristine and polished automatic rifle. A Woman in Black drifts in and out of every scene repeating a mantra-like phrase that begins “How does it feel?”...

Kids proclaim that guns are everywhere and “Can’t somebody do something?” Possibly the most chilling aspect of this composite gunman is that he is so normal. Even his family didn’t know the killer side of him. Teens seem to recognize this [phenomenon] and voice the fear that they won’t recognize the disguised hatred lurking in their midst until too late...

Nine public performances and 18 school performances took place over three weeks in February in the Elgood Theater. We were not surprised at the school attendance, but we were particularly surprised at the strong showing at the public performances on the weekends. In all, nearly 3,700 people attended, including almost 2,400 students and teachers. After the first weekend, we turned people away at almost every performance. Many families attended together and we also hosted groups from churches, Scouts and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Somewhat surprisingly, many adults came on their own, without a young person.

For the most part, students were hushed and subdued when they left the theater. Many students and adults were crying.

### **Process Drama as Dialogue**

Gillian conducted Process Drama sessions immediately after eight performances, with approximately 215 student participants at each. These were held at the theater, and in all but two cases, the students who chose to attend had participated in pre-performance Process Drama sessions as well. We had thought of these after-sessions as closure for the students but, surprisingly, Gillian came to see them as new beginnings. In every case, students had intense reactions to the performance and to their role in its creation. They recognized their words and ideas, and wanted to do further exploration. Ideally, we would have conducted multiple sessions for these groups, but it wasn’t possible given time and budget.

### **Post-performance Dialogues**

There were also dialogues after three public performances. Two were post-performance “Talk-Backs” for any audience members who wished to stay after the show. One was an event for study circle participants, who viewed the performance and then met in their groups for dialogue. In all cases we asked people to talk about the way the production helped them understand the subject matter. Questions we had developed in advance asked for audience members’ insights on the perspective of the shooter’s parent; the role of the media and the ripple effect as the media takes over; “lost” or “disposable” children, and the gun as a work of art. We also asked how aesthetic choices such as The Pied Piper legend, the gun on stage, the plotless construction, the lighting and music, and the fact that the audience never sees the shooter affected the way viewers thought about the issues.

FYT chose not to hold the dialogues in the theater, but to move into the studios next door, in order to put some space and time between the performance and the dialogue. Study circles were conducted by their regular facilitators. For the two public dialogues, a professional facilitator was engaged. One hundred ten people attended the dialogue session at the study circle performance and 12 attended the other two Talk-Backs. These sessions differed greatly in content and quality.

The study circle groups were deeply engaged in dialogue. There was discussion and speculation about the play's somewhat ambiguous ending, about *The Woman in Black* and about the gun. The study circle groups easily moved between discussion of the play and the issues inherent in the work. The level of discussion was enhanced by the fact they had all been together twice before, to talk about this issue. They knew one another and had established a level of trust and openness. The other two dialogues were poorly attended and discussion focused mostly on people's emotional reactions to the performance and the production style rather than the issues.

The study circle facilitators' wrap-up revealed that participants valued the combination of the play and study circles. Some described the play as "galvanizing" and "riveting," and said it influenced their thinking about the issues. Even those who at first hadn't cared about the play could not now imagine the project without it.

### **Classroom Dialogues**

To assist students and teachers in formulating and processing responses to the performance, FYT created a comprehensive study guide. Drawing from some of the Process Drama activities, the guide poses suggestions for meaningful dialogue in a variety of formats, as well as other group and individual activities.

By providing for varying levels of involvement, we were able to reach a wide array of community members. We were pleased with the overall responses, and particularly with the responses of some of the most active participants.

### **THE IMPACT OF ...MY SOUL TO TAKE**

In Flint Youth Theatre's experience, the intent to stimulate civic dialogue always has a strong and complicated impact on artistic work. The pressure to build in a civic dialogue component has often seemed to imply that the artwork cannot stand by itself but needs discussion and dialogue for meaning to emerge and become clear. That, in turn, seems to suggest that meaning is expressed and derived literally and can be—should be—articulated in words. In fact, it seems to suggest that meaning should be *clear*. Especially in theater for young audiences (TYA), the tendency for "issue plays" is to teach a lesson or impart a message, and it is difficult to resist this temptation in the face of parents and teachers who expect it.

At FYT we heartily resist the temptation to teach and preach. Our artists do not come from TYA or education backgrounds. To impose a teaching requirement, which is what the dialogic component often felt like, seemed to deny the value of intuitive and imagistic work. At the same time, we are drawn to community-based work, since the community always wants and needs to talk about work that addresses its issues.

We appeared to face four related, often competing, desires as we embarked on this project:

- the desire to break out of the traditional theater for young audiences mold where our choices are message plays, lesson or educational content plays or story plays;
- the desire to create work that is evocative rather than prescriptive, emotionally true rather than factually correct, and image-driven rather than literal— using music, lighting or props to propel the story forward;
- the desire to create work that grows out of community needs and concerns; and
- the desire to create dialogue opportunities that encourage and support, rather than restrict, an intuitive, ambiguous response, and that focus on aesthetic questions as well as content or issues.

Within Animating Democracy, we saw an opportunity to fulfill all four desires as well as to test some assumptions about dialogue.

### **The Aesthetic**

To help us analyze these aesthetic dimensions, Flint Youth Theatre engaged our colleague Joan Lazarus, Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of Texas at Austin, to visit FYT to observe performances, interview artists, students and audience members, and then write about the project. Her resulting articles cover such topics as arts-based civic dialogue; aesthetic issues of didacticism and imagery; youth theater issues about student actors’ competencies; and the importance of multiple critical perspectives when examining work that addresses civic issues. The play itself, as artistic product, is described in her article, “Theatre as Civic Dialogue” (Volume 15, Number 2, *TYA Today*):

(The) original performance piece entitled *...My Soul to Take...* confronts, surprises and challenges school and public audiences and itself represents public discourse. In an interlacing of light, sound, movement, music and language, FYT artists capture the swirl of opinions surrounding a school shooting.

More than a play, this multi-layered performance collage juxtaposes time and space and is deliberately non-prescriptive as it sheds light on the multiple and conflicting issues influencing school shootings. The role and perspective of the media, politicians, government workers, researchers, parents, classmates, victims and ultimately the perpetrator himself are woven into this provocative work. And all the while, ever-present, just left of center stage stands a high-powered rifle propped vertically in a tall, Plexiglas case. We come to ignore its presence, only to be haunted by that indifference by the play’s conclusion.

Artistically, the production achieved the goal of eliciting a complex array of responses in audiences -- intuitive as well as intellectual. Many commented on their flood of conflicting and surprising emotions as they viewed the show. There was, however, a disparity between the reactions of the general public and the theater professionals who viewed the performance. Again, Joan Lazarus writes:

...Many audience members find the layering of multiple production elements to be engaging, powerful and meaningful. Many comment favorably on the effectiveness of lighting and costumes and the highly provocative nature of a scene set in an art museum

around the encased gun, the series of monologues by The Woman in Black (the shooter's mother), and a section in which the Piper interacts with modern day parents in the purchasing and exchanging of children. Among a handful of theater artists and theater teachers present, there are comments that certain sections of the piece seem excessively wordy, redundant or didactic and need cutting. Another theater person in this same group wonders if the didacticism is deliberate and itself a commentary on our failure to do more than talk about school violence, a sentiment this audience member holds personally. Theater professionals also share that while the adult actors are all capable (and some remarkable) actors, the teens who are cast to play teenagers are not consistently "in the moment", playing specific actions and objectives or finding the sub-text and nuance in their dialogue. These theater artists and teachers vary in their opinions about whether this is a deliberate style choice or a style not fully realized.

Yet a Mott Middle College high school student in the audience was inspired to write:

The metaphors, symbolism, dude everything was on point. Personally it pisses me off how most media groups who speak on non-violence always try to use scapegoats or don't want to address the real or whole problem. Society as whole has become a loveless machine, working for the sake of the economy instead of those around us. Your play pointed out the facts, and got it from everyone's perspectives, including the killer's, but not as a killer, as a human.

These varying perspectives underscore the need for multiple critical responses to work such as this. The question "Who is a critic?" becomes significant when writing about arts-based civic dialogue.

### **The Dialogic and Civic**

Our primary assumption going into the project was that civic dialogue can be more than a facilitated conversation about the content (issue) addressed in a performance. This assumption proved true. The real surprise, however, was the degree to which the Process Drama sessions were also civic dialogue. They produced greater participation at a deeper level than we had achieved in the past with more conventional discussions.

Our second assumption was that audience members won't (or can't) talk about aesthetic elements of a production. This was proven incorrect. Because of the *fusion* of aesthetic choices (lighting, music, choral passages, movement) with provocative content, audiences *did* talk about aesthetics by exploring questions such as: Who or what was the Pied Piper? Why was the gun on stage the whole time? Where was the shooter? What did it mean when the small children touched the older, dead children at the end?

The third assumption was that we would not resolve complex social problems with any work of art; maybe we wouldn't even generate ideas about solutions. The dynamics embedded in this assumption turned out to be more nuanced and less simplistic than we realized. *Everyone* is against school violence, so what are the options for action? We let go of the hope that our production would affect legislation or public policy in a significant way. We discovered that we can encourage attention, speculation, questioning and critical response. Activating multiple approaches to dialogue proved an effective strategy because it gave people choices about how to engage. Through the study circles and the mini-grant program, small, active community-based groups were galvanized to contact legislators, address neighborhood issues and educate people

about gun usage. Looking back, the project can be viewed as a series of concentric circles: dozens of people had multiple, in-depth experiences; hundreds of people had a single, intense experience; and many more had contact with the project and its civic ramifications.

In Joan Lazarus' article, "Theatre as Civic Dialogue," Bill Ward reflected on the work's impact:

"This work doesn't offer any kind of prescriptions. It doesn't pretend to do that. But it... serves as a way to illuminate issues and to cause people to think... And that's on one end. On the other end, maybe the work actually causes people to either have dialogue or in the most wonderful of cases, causes people to become activists themselves and do something in their community."

### **Organizational**

This project heightened awareness of the internal stresses and strains that civically engaged theater can put on the organization and raised many still-unresolved questions.

How does the theater define how much community input will ensure both artistic and community integrity of the work, and still keep the project manageable for creative staff? Developing a script through dialogue and/or with the intent for dialogue proved much harder and messier process than developing other original work through Flint Youth Theatre's typical community-based research. Juggling this more intensive process at the same time that other productions are in development or being staged continues to be a huge challenge for Bill and other artistic staff. During ...*My Soul to Take*, Gillian provided training to FYT artists in Process Drama in order to begin to build our capacity to do this work in the future.

How does Flint Youth Theatre build the administrative and programmatic capacity to take on the added pressures and burdens of civically-engaged work? FYT did not have the programmatic or administrative infrastructure to design and coordinate the community dialogue aspects of the project. I was the project manager, but was not actually on staff for most of the implementation phase. Had I not been available, it is likely we would have had to scale back some of the community components. Even the basics—compiling meeting minutes, doing extra mailings, setting up rooms for dialogues and staffing big events like the study circle evening—created additional work for an already busy group of people. Since this work was outside the norm for most productions, it was essential to inform staff from the very beginning what the project entailed, why we believed it was important, and what we expected from each of them in order to get buy-in. Because this work is so taxing to the organization, and until we can build greater internal capacity, FYT limits its community-based original work to only one arts-based civic dialogue project a year.

### **Advancing the field of theater for young people**

Flint Youth Theatre's reputation was greatly enhanced by this project—locally, statewide and nationally. As a professional theater whose focus is work for intergenerational and young audiences, we were able to advance issues to the forefront in the several arenas where we operate. These include the Cultural Center, the school district, the city of Flint, statewide umbrella organizations such as the Michigan Association of Community Arts Agencies (MACAA), national organizations such as American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) and the International Association of Theater for Young Audiences (ASSITEJ), and other arts organizations through Americans for the Arts and *American Theatre Magazine*. In 2001, FYT

## **Beecher Anti-Violence Rap**

*With mini-grant funds, Beecher Community School District engaged Gillian Eaton for follow up interactive drama sessions for students in grades 9 through 11. Their work resulted in this group anti-violence rap, which they performed for more than 100 people. Participants in Beecher's project later served as discussion leaders on gun violence prevention in the school and community drawing upon insights gained in this program.*

### **WHAT CAUSES VIOLENCE?**

People – people – Because Man was made to make mistakes;

Payback – retaliation, one little thing just escalates  
Jealousy, envy, hatred, nosiness, rage

Is equally distributed between race, sex and age.

### **WHAT CAUSES VIOLENCE?**

People who take their emotions out on others-

The media, the environment we live in – fathers, mothers,  
Misunderstandings – TV shows – the homes where we live  
Bad or no role models – people who take and don't give.

### **WHO WINS WHEN VIOLENCE RULES?**

Nobody wins – it's lose lose lose

### **WHO WINS WHEN VIOLENCE RULES?**

Everything around will lose lose lose

The vicious cycle continues, continues

### **WHO WINS WHEN VIOLENCE RULES?**

Funeral Homes – gun dealers – Prisons, just grow  
Making big money from this violent show

### **WHO WINS WHEN VIOLENCE RULES?**

Violence does.

### **WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

Don't give in to it – figure out your feelings deep down –

Relate to something, relate to someone, don't frown –

Walk away, Campaign, Let it ride...

Get involved, stop it before it starts... don't hide

### **WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

Be yourself, try to help – try to make things better,

Turn to God, do some Art, write a protest letter,

Most of all – Tell the adults, keep it positive

We can't compete with negative, so keep it positive

Keep it positive, for our sake, for our sake.

received invitations from MACAA, AATE and Americans for the Arts to present at their conferences. These opportunities were gratifying and worthwhile. Sharing our experience was important for FYT and, we believe, for the field. Although we don't claim to have the best model or to have resolved all the issues related to this work, we did raise authentic questions in the field of theater for young people and the realm of arts-based civic dialogue. We shared our predicaments as well as our successes, and we advanced our strong beliefs in the value and power of this work.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

We learned a great deal in the process of conducting this project. We gained new insights into the role of the media; the consequences (positive and negative) when community partnerships are autonomous and operate outside the purview of the theater, and the attempt to forge diverse community efforts on this issue into a more cohesive whole.

### **Addressing But Not Exploiting Tragedy**

It was inevitable the shooting of Kayla Rowland would loom large in this project, even though the theater chose not to address it specifically in either the production or in the community and ancillary activities. We did not want to appear to be taking advantage of the shooting to stimulate interest in our own project. As it turned out, members of the Beecher community quickly found us and were welcomed and honored through to the project's end. We were pleased that a counselor at the high school formed a Beecher study circle of parents and educators. (In fact, it was the largest one.) Those of us unconnected to Beecher were humbled to be part of their healing process, while at the same time we knew we had a lot to learn from them. A school shooting was a hypothetical, abstract six-o'clock news shocker for most of us. They had lived it and were still living it.

None of us envisioned a problem when Pete Hutchison created a handout for the facilitation training in which he aligned the Study Circles Resource Center's "causes of violence" with the Beecher incident. He was extremely

aware of community sensitivities about race and class and was simply trying to give the handout, and the issue, a local perspective. But when the handout reached the Beecher study circle, it caused an uproar. Members were offended that the document contained, in their view, some

factual errors (that the mother had a crack cocaine problem, that a playground incident the day before had spawned the shooting). They were outraged that it had been published and disseminated without their knowledge. They also expressed sadness that—in their perspective—outsiders continued to misrepresent their pain and suffering.

Through an immediate series of phone calls and face-to-face meetings we achieved a resolution. We withdrew the handout, apologized for the mistake and invited the Beecher folks to make changes before it was recirculated. (They did not, and it was not.) The episode faded away and the Beecher group continued to be very active, to the degree they received a mini-grant for some follow-up Process Drama activities that Gillian conducted in the late spring.

Even though we had given careful thought to our relationship with the Beecher community, we learned that it's not possible to control what happens or to anticipate everything. We were still surprised at how often the media referred to the Beecher tragedy when reporting on ...*My Soul to Take*, even though we repeatedly said, "This play is not about Beecher; if anything, it is about Columbine." We decided that the most we could do was stay the course, insist on framing the issue our own way and hope the power of the work would carry the day.

### **Empowering Partners, and Letting Go**

From the beginning, we wanted our partners to feel empowered to make decisions and take ownership of their activities. We did not want them doing their work "as a favor" to Flint Youth Theatre. In a couple of cases, this resulted in FYT feeling slightly disconnected from decision-making, even though we had regular contact and input. The most striking example was the decision to bring in Peter Boyer for the university conversation. We had several heated discussions with the chancellor and his team about that choice. We feared it would inflame passions in the Beecher community. We anticipated Boyer would draw conversation away from the other panelists' concerns. And, as described earlier, what FYT feared would occur did, in fact, occur.

However, it was gratifying that the university took complete control of the event. In that regard, it was an ideal partner, and the organizers did listen to our concerns and try to address them. The overall quality of the partnership was solid, as evidenced by the investment of time and resources by the university, and its obvious commitment to the project. The event reached a number of new people, many of whom heard challenging and troubling perspectives on the issues. Looking back, the fact that FYT was less than thrilled with the quality of the event itself seems a relatively insignificant complaint. Our lesson is this: If community partnerships are to be authentic and mutually-beneficial, a partner can *influence*, but not control, what the other does.

### **Coalescing Community Efforts to Counter Youth Violence**

We had hoped the project would help coordinate the sometimes-fragmented initiatives for violence reduction. To the extent it is possible to ascertain, this seems to have occurred. Based on his years of work in violence prevention from neighborhood to national levels, Pete Hutchison observed that the project resulted in more focused efforts, more recognition of deserving efforts, and more interplay and dialogue between stakeholders. Certainly the project captured the attention of the funding community (one study circle was made up of funders and community leaders), and has engendered dialogue about what works and what doesn't work in funding violence prevention. In summing up the project, one steering committee member commented, "Being involved with this process has brought up many issues for me and has

reminded me of how intertwined our many social issues and problems are.” It remains to be seen how long-term and sustained this coalescence of efforts will be.

A second reason to be optimistic is the range and depth of the mini-grants. Several grantees had worked in violence prevention before, and saw this as an opportunity to ratchet up their efforts. Many projects grew out of a group’s experience with the performance. Several projects, like the web site created by students at Mott College, will endure indefinitely and could have long-term impact. And the impact on individual student participants has been powerful. Marie Milkovich, Middle School Drug Prevention and School Safety Coordinator at McKinley Middle School, said in a letter to the community, “This exercise has given our students a sense of pride and hope. We are celebrating our efforts to create a caring atmosphere at McKinley where hurting of any kind is unacceptable.”

### **MOVING AHEAD WITH NEW MATURITY**

This project has tested and affirmed Flint Youth Theatre’s beliefs and practices about creating original, community-based work around a critical issue, forging a theatrical treatment of the issue in a complex and layered aesthetic format, engaging and interacting authentically with community partners, and promoting meaningful civic dialogue.

While this work was extremely difficult, it was also gratifying. Much of the gratification came via response from our own community members but we were also pleased by the attention the project received at the state, regional and national levels. Our success was due in part to the incredible resources, human and financial, available to us. Start-up resources are *critical* if a theater company such as FYT is to risk and stretch beyond the already challenging work of producing a successful season of plays.

Now we know more, and resources tend to follow successful projects. Flint Youth Theatre has implemented two more arts-based civic dialogue projects and has reached a level of maturity in the field of arts-based civic dialogue. We will continue to forge ahead.

Although this project didn’t solve the problem of school violence, we believe we did avoid “the tail wagging the dog” phenomenon. We maintained the integrity of the artistic product by designing multiple dialogue opportunities and moving post-performance dialogue activities to another location. We succeeded in nudging audiences to talk about aesthetic questions as well as perspectives on the issue, and to see the relationship between the two. And through Process Drama and study circles, we provided opportunities for people and groups to convene and to be engaged on successive occasions, and to do something about the problem of youth violence.

...*My Soul To Take* amplified for Flint Youth Theatre that, whenever doing civically engaged work, ultimately we see the role of the theater as two-fold: to create a compelling artistic product and to assemble, activate and inspire community partnerships that become pathways to dialogue and action.

\* \* \* \*

**Sue Wood** was executive director of Flint Youth Theatre and fine arts coordinator for the Flint School District from 1985 to 2000. Under her leadership, FYT was one of 32 cultural organizations included in Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts. FYT subsequently received the Governor's Arts Award for the state of Michigan. Susan was the recipient of the 2000 Arts Advocate of the Year Award from ArtServe Michigan, and was named Youth Theatre Director of the Year (with William Ward) by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education in 1999. After her tenure at FYT, Susan served as consultant in theatre, arts education, and community cultural planning for the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. In her work there, Susan facilitated the planning and development of the Flint Cultural Center, researched models of arts-based learning across the country, and examined the intersections of artistic processes and products and the foundation's civil society and civic engagement work. She is an adjunct lecturer at the University of Michigan Flint in the theatre and education departments. Her most recent publication is *Creating a Future for At-Risk Youth in Michigan*.

## ANIMATING DEMOCRACY'S REFLECTIONS

What does Flint Youth Theatre's experience reveal about arts-based civic dialogue? What factors has Animating Democracy observed as contributing to the success of the ...*My Soul to Take* project? And how does this project challenge our thinking? Building upon FYT's own solid reflections and analysis, here are further observations and reflections from Animating Democracy.

### **Charting (and Staying on) a Civic Course**

Flint Youth Theatre had deep feelings about the issue of youth violence, based on relationships with the young people of Flint as well as its past work exploring the issue. Therefore, when FYT took on youth violence this second time, in the wake of its own community's tragedy, it went forward with a sophisticated set of questions. The theater and its partners knew the potential for harm in reopening a still raw community wound, and they asked how to approach the local school shooting without exploiting the incident or its victims. They allowed the distance of a year between the incident and play, they deliberately chose not to refer to the shooting in any way, and they made sure community members directly affected by the shooting were involved in planning, implementation and monitoring the project. This sensitive approach became especially important when difficulties occurred.

FYT earnestly struggled from the outset to define what difference a project like this could make in relation to other efforts and discussion in the community. When concealed weapon legislation passed in Lansing and was coming up for statewide adoption, FYT raised the daunting question of whether it should try to influence state legislation but, after carefully assessing needs in Flint, saw that its greatest effect would be local. It focused on reinvigorating attention to the issue, bringing together fragmented efforts in the community, and moving people from dialogue to deeper understanding of causes and effects of youth violence.

Early in planning, FYT seized the opportunity to work with Animating Democracy's evaluation coach, Steve Day, as a way to at once clarify project goals and build a framework for evaluation. They developed a logic model to methodically chart community needs in relation to youth violence and to simultaneously map an unwieldy number of potential program elements. The logic model helped to rein in the project by crystallizing feasible short-term outcomes and suggesting which project components could best achieve them. The logic model became a trusty guide that kept the project from straying from priorities and also helped facilitate choices about evaluation strategies.

### **A Driving Aesthetic and an Evolving Dialogue-based Artistic Approach**

The project succeeded in generating dialogue in large measure because the play was excellent—imaginative and richly layered with meaning. ...*My Soul to Take* embodied Bill Ward's continuing desire to address difficult subject matter without condescending to youth audiences and without shying away from complexity and ambiguity. His nonlinear and imagistic aesthetic and the play's use of a strong central metaphor effectively prompted individual contemplation of the issue and supported meaningful dialogue that moved back and forth from art to issue. From Animating Democracy's first encounter with FYT, Bill was curious about the merits of this aesthetic in stimulating civic dialogue. The dialogues themselves, Joan Lazarus' well-founded observations, and our own experience of FYT's work suggest that FYT's aesthetic is a powerful route to civic

dialogue. These same sources also underscore the power of the play as a quality theatrical experience, independent of all the related dialogue events and activities.

New to Flint Youth Theatre was the degree and nature of community input made possible by Gillian Eaton's Process Drama activity. This partnership with Gillian brought Bill directly into the community's hearts and minds in a format unlike his own previous community-based research. Gillian's expert design and implementation opened up community participation in a significant way without burdening Bill with the work of making it all happen. Bill had the full benefits of observing Gillian's community work, the added value of peer exchange with her as the play was forming, and the freedom to focus on his writing. For Gillian, the collaboration opened up a whole new way of viewing Process Drama for its dialogic potential. Both Gillian and FYT continue to evolve their dialogue-based artistic approaches.

### **Leadership Within and Outside the Organization**

...*My Soul to Take* benefited from extraordinary leadership from both Sue Wood and the steering committee. Sue is adept at navigating both the theatrical and civic worlds. She knows theater for young people as well as the tensions felt at Flint Youth Theatre in balancing civic and aesthetic goals. Bill trusted Sue to do the right thing when it came to civic connections, and to execute the difficult work of implementing the project's community dimensions. Likewise, Sue trusted Bill's artistic vision and sensibilities. Their mutual respect and understanding enabled them to bring their full selves to their roles and, in doing so, to bring depth and integrity to efforts in both the artistic and civic realms.

Sue's knowledge of the community and natural ability to connect people, ideas, and goals began to weave a tighter and stronger web of relationships among those with a stake in the issue. She infused the endeavor with a spirit of inquiry and an energizing give-and-take. All of this created a climate conducive to creative thinking that motivated executive-level leaders from the civic, social, and educational realms to fully engage as partners. With Sue's leadership skills, FYT has more than once proven its ability to play a leadership role in civic life. This was especially true for ...*My Soul to Take*.

### **Capacity Challenges**

It is clear to all that the good fortune of having Sue and Gillian at the ready has significantly supported and advanced FYT's recent good work in arts-based civic dialogue. It is just as clear that they will not always be there and the theater will need to consider how to integrate this as a priority within its own staff. In the two arts-based civic dialogue projects that have followed ...*My Soul to Take*, Sue and Gillian have continued to play lead roles in making authentic links to the community and developing dialogue opportunities. However, as an organization, Flint Youth Theatre has not internalized this capacity. For Bill Ward, the demands of his work as artistic director and his desire to stay focused on the creative dimensions of the theater prevent it. Nor has the capacity been absorbed into the responsibilities of the managing director. In addition, some board members and actors continue to question to what degree FYT can and should be doing this work. Investing greater resource in civic engagement work will require that these organizational misgivings be resolved.

The nature of support from the Flint-based C.S. Mott Foundation and Greater Flint Community Foundation allowed sufficient time for planning and for the project to get its community footing. Such support is rare for most cultural organizations. For better or worse, Animating

Democracy observes that successful projects like this one raise expectations for more future projects of comparable scale and impact. The challenge is to understand the range of possibilities that can be adapted to different civic goals and to the resources available.

### **Continuing the Work**

Less than a year after completing ...*My Soul to Take*, Flint Youth Theatre was asked by community leaders if it would create a work in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The request was almost immediate, emphasizing just how much the community has come to see FYT as a forum for dialogue about issues that matter. *Strands: The Legacy of 9-11* was created in FYT's aesthetic style and built upon what the organization learned from its youth violence project. Flint Youth Theatre is a civically engaged theater. It may deliberate the appropriate balance of civic responsibility and pure artmaking but, undeniably, it has a social conscience that has motivated effective work time and again in this arena. It is hard to imagine that it will not continue to do so, at least while Bill Ward is its artistic leader. The greatest challenge remains to build capacity for the important community work. FYT has been evolving to work more wholly as civic player through its art, and, we believe, has at the same time mounted innovative artistic investigations. This civically engaged work, positioned within an exceptional and diverse repertoire of theater for young people, is a significant model for the field of theater for young audiences.