

## **“We Can Help!”: Using Creative Drama to Explore Social Justice in Youth Theatre**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Theatre can be a powerful tool for exploring social justice issues, but it can also reproduce whiteness, ableism, and other systemic oppressions. As theatre educators—constrained by many competing demands on our time, resources, and energy—we want to know: how can we leverage our teaching artistry to authentically explore social justice issues with the young people and adults in our communities? Speaking from our experiences at a nonprofit theatre in a majority-white, upper-middle-class community, we offer creative drama as a model for integrating this kind of social justice education into youth musical theatre production camps. We explore the tools that creative drama offers for supporting youth and teaching artists in exploring*

*issues related to inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility; understanding our relationships with oppressive systems; and taking action to transform them. Then, we demonstrate how this can look in practice. We outline a process through which we developed two creative drama adventures and share stories of how these dramas unfolded. Finally, we surface some lingering tensions about our and our students' identities and how they inform our ongoing work. In sharing these stories and tensions, we invite you to consider how creative drama might support you and your communities.*

Fifty kindergarten-through-eighth-grade students gathered after lunch on the first day of our flagship musical theatre production summer camp. It was time to get down to work on *The SpongeBob Musical: Youth Edition*. Suddenly, Dr. Inkling, an octopus bearing a striking resemblance to our theatre's administrative assistant, burst into the room covered in blue tape, desperate for assistance.

"Help! Help! Someone threw all this blue tape in my ocean and now it's stuck all over me!" Dr. Inkling cried. The kindergartners looked shocked. The eighth graders giggled. Everyone's eyes were glued to Dr. Inkling, or "Inky" for short.

Earlier that morning, the camp had played a game of "The Wind Blows" as an icebreaker activity. Each actor had been given a piece of blue tape to mark a spot on the ground, and at the end of the game, they had peeled up their tape and made a giant ball, which supposedly made its way to the trash. However, when Dr. Inkling appeared, we learned that the scraps of tape had found their way to the ocean! Soon, we were hooked on this octopus' drama and eager to help her solve the problem of her increasingly polluted ocean—which was getting worse! The Ocean Council, in charge of all major decisions, wanted to build a giant hotel development right where Dr. Inky lived. This was sure to make the pollution worse, but the Ocean Council did not want to listen to Dr. Inky's appeals. "We can help!" offered a student.

Summer camp staff acted surprised to see Inky, but of course, they were expecting her. It was all part of the plan. But how did Dr. Inkling—or the idea of her—make it to our intimate summer camp stage in the first place (see Figure 1)? And how could this fictional

octopus covered in tape help us explore social justice with our students?



**Figure 1:** Maddie (left) facilitates a conversation between Dr. Inky (right) and PVTC summer campers about the wasteful nature of theatre.

For many theater artists, the link between theatre and justice is self-evident, expressed easily through cliché—theatre changes hearts and minds, celebrates diversity, and invites everyone to speak their truth. While there is truth in these truisms—theatre and the arts can uplift counter-narratives (Gallagher et al., 2017), prompt critical reflexivity (Tanner, 2018), and provoke empathy (Eisner, 1998; Troxler et al., 2023)—there is also an underlying tension. Despite repeated calls for change, the culture of theatre and theatre education in the United States remains steeped in ableism and white supremacy (*We See You W.A.T.*, 2020; Zdeblick, 2023a). Constrained by ever-intensifying and competing demands on our time, energy, and resources, theatre educators want to know: What can we do, in our settings, to shift this culture toward justice for all communities? How can we bring young people along with us on our journey? And how can the tools we already have as theatre artists support us in this work?

In this paper, we will explore how, through creative drama, a form of scaffolded dramatic play (Ward, 1960), our nonprofit theatre has

connected our summer camp shows to issues of inclusion, equity, diversity, and accessibility (IDEA). We have supported our kindergarten through eighth-grade students (and our staff) in developing age-appropriate understandings of systems of oppression, investigating our relationships with these systems, and taking action to reshape our community and the wider world. And, we have done so alongside fast-paced rehearsal schedules that culminate in traditionally polished and lively junior musicals. Integrating socially-engaged creative drama into our curriculum has broadened and deepened our work; yes, young artists leave our camps knowing more about theatre, but, perhaps more importantly, they also leave seeing themselves as change agents. We offer our work not as a one-size-fits-all model, but as an example of how authentic social justice engagement might be integrated into more mainstream theatre education curricula. While this work can go deep—it usually goes deeper than we expect—all you need to get started is one or two enthusiastic educators, a little bit of time, whatever spare props and costumes you have lying around, and a willingness to say “yes, and...”!

In the following sections, we will introduce ourselves and our context before diving into some of the theory that animates our creative drama work. Next, we will outline the steps of our process: selecting a theme, facilitating staff learning, bringing in outside materials, creating a story with a problem, interspersing episodes of the story throughout a rehearsal process, and embracing the inevitable follow-up conversations that arise with students. We will bring these steps to life by sharing stories from two creative dramas that we facilitated alongside more traditional musical theatre productions: *The Drama of Sprinkles the Unicorn* (2022) alongside *Frozen Jr.* and *The Drama of Dr. Inkling the Octopus* (2023) alongside *The SpongeBob Musical: Youth Edition*. Then, we will surface some of the ongoing tensions that we, two white nondisabled cis-female educators in a privileged community, continue to hold as we engage in this work. Finally, we will discuss what this model might offer other theatres and theatre artists struggling to do it all—produce fun, vibrant, full-scale musicals and engage students in meaningful social justice learning.

## INTRODUCING OURSELVES AND OUR CONTEXT

Before we go further, we (Maddie and Noëlle), would like to introduce

ourselves. Though we worked together to develop and facilitate the creative drama adventures described in this article and share many salient identities, we have distinct professional roles and perspectives. We recognize that our identities influence the experiences we've had in theatre education and that our perspective is just one perspective. We are both deeply committed to social justice in theatre and theatre education. The work we're sharing with you played out at Portola Valley Theatre Conservatory (PVTC), a nonprofit theatre whose mission is to create community and inspire individuals to discover their unique passion through pursuit of excellence in theatre arts. Most of PVTC's students and staff live within a 30-minute radius of Portola Valley, a majority-white, highly-educated suburb of San Francisco, CA, with a median household income nearly double that of the surrounding metropolitan area.

I (Maddie) grew up fifteen minutes away from PVTC. I am a cis-gender, straight, white, non-disabled woman, scholar, and teacher with ten years of experience teaching theatre to disabled and nondisabled youth and adults. My brother—who adores theatre—is labeled with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As a result, I've spent much of my academic and professional life focused on making inaccessible theatre spaces more accessible. My whiteness and socioeconomic privilege mean that I've experienced fewer barriers in this work than someone holding different identities. I directed PVTC's production of *Frozen Jr.* in the summer of 2022 and returned to campus as a scholar in residence in 2023 who, among other responsibilities, facilitated PVTC's IDEA initiatives for *The SpongeBob Musical: Youth Edition*.

I (Noëlle) have been in leadership at PVTC for fifteen years and am currently the Executive Director. I produced the production of *Frozen Jr.* that Maddie directed and, in the summer of 2023, I directed *SpongeBob: The Musical Youth Edition*. Like Maddie, I am a straight, white, cis-gender, non-disabled woman who grew up near PVTC. I have always had my basic needs met and have had abundant access to arts and education. Through my years at PVTC, I have witnessed first-hand the transformative power of theatre by aiming to create a space where our world expands through the act of storytelling and empathy-building.

From its inception, PVTC has been committed to inclusive practices, looking for ways to involve all members of the community in the process of making excellent and transformative theatre. While we

have anecdotal history to illustrate how this value plays out in practice, like other theatres, we wanted to do more in the wake of 2020's racial justice uprisings. Motivated by the national call for accountability in theatrical IDEA practices (*We See You W.A.T.*, 2020) and our desire to do more from our privileged space, PVTC grew serious about how values of inclusion flowed intentionally through our curriculum. Summer camp seemed like a great place to start. For one, students are with us for an extended period, usually six to seven hours per day. Unlike the school year, when we see students only once per week for an hour or two, summer camp affords us the time to integrate co-curricular activities into our programming that support the development of a performance-based activity.

## **THEATER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

We pause here to acknowledge the historically fraught relationship between theater education and social justice learning. As previously alluded to, scholars and activists have revealed the *injustice* of many traditional actor training practices. Through reinforcing normative ideas about which texts count as “canon” (Dyches, 2017), which stories and acting methods are “universal” (Dunn et al., 2020), which casting decisions are “colorblind” and “objective” (Schroeder-Arce, 2017), which bodies and minds appear “neutral” (Sandahl, 2005), and which voices sound “natural” and “free” (McAllister-Viel, 2021; Cahill & Hamel, 2022), theater educators often reproduce whiteness and ableism in our contexts (Zdeblick, 2023a). Despite what many theater educators might say about our work's inherent inclusivity (Brown, 2020), the link between theater and social justice is far from inevitable (Finneran & Freebody, 2015).

However, research has revealed how, through making deliberate pedagogical choices and engaging in ongoing self-reflection, theater educators can further social justice goals. Syler and Chen (2017) explored how, through considering students' identities in casting decisions, theater educators might support students' positive racial identity development. Horn (2017) described an applied theater project in which Black boys developed and facilitated an interactive workshop with local police officers that explored the racial dynamics of policing. Winn (2012) explored how a playwrighting program supported formerly incarcerated Black and Brown girls in navigating their relationships with

systematic injustices. And Tanner (2018) described how his predominantly white students analyzed and illustrated how whiteness circulated within their own high school theater program. These examples illustrate how—with a particular focus on racial justice—theater educators have pursued social justice in their work. Scholars have also explored adapting theater education for special and inclusive education contexts, though much of this work has asked how theater educators might help solve the *problem of disability* (see e.g., Bailey 2010; 2021). In better alignment with disability justice activism (Sins Invalid, 2019), a smaller but growing body of research has instead asked how theater educators might help solve the *problem of ableism* (see e.g., Whitfield, 2022; Zdeblick, 2023b).

Against this tension-riddled—yet promising—theoretical backdrop, we found ourselves wondering how to meaningfully engage our young artists in social justice learning. In early 2022, I (Noëlle) was sitting at a board meeting talking about how we might integrate IDEA into our summer camp curriculum. To complicate things, our camp schedule was already jam-packed. There was inherent tension in wanting to expand our curriculum with justice, fully leaning into the joy, fun, and discovery of that process, while also teaching vocal harmonies, sewing costumes, rehearsing choreography, mastering transitions, training high school tech interns, and having fun with water balloons and popsicles. In our work with fifty students ranging in age from kindergarten through eighth grade, we hoped to provoke more than simple awareness. Our summer camp is located on the ancestral lands of the Ohlone people. Like us, our teaching staff and students are overwhelmingly white, upper or middle-class, highly educated, and non-disabled. We wanted our students to reflect on their relationships with difficult social issues, recognize their potential complicity, and imagine changes they might make individually and together to make the world a better, more just place. In other words, we hoped to engage our young actors in critical consciousness-raising. Critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), or understanding the social systems shaping our world and our role in transforming them, cannot be learned through passive listening. Instead, learners develop critical consciousness through practicing agency, transforming what they're given into something new (Sannino et al., 2016).

The connection between theatre education and critical consciousness-raising is well-established, particularly through Augusto

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979). For example, in Forum Theatre, a form of Theatre of the Oppressed, a team of actors presents an audience (called "spect-actors" to emphasize their agency) with a problem grounded in the real-life circumstances of their community. When the problem is well-developed, the actors pause, inviting the spect-actors to imagine how they might intervene to transform the given situation. Spect-actors take turns trying out their ideas onstage, building individual and collective capacity to transform their world. Theatre of the Oppressed methods have been used to develop critical consciousness among middle and high school students (Bhukhanwala, 2014; see e.g., Marín, 2007; Snyder-Young, 2011), teacher candidates (see e.g., Bhukhanwala et al., 2017; Souto-Manning et al., 2008), and teacher educators (see e.g., Stillman et al., 2019). However, we found far less evidence for using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques with students the age of our campers, some of whom were just five years old.

We were talking about curriculum one day when we had a lightbulb moment: every summer, our staff had a tradition of putting on a weekly staff skit. We usually came up with a narrative framework that paralleled the story we were exploring onstage and then dipped into a mostly improvised "episode" of this skit weekly. The skit originated as an opportunity for staff performers to model onstage behavior to budding actors: cheating out, making physical choices, projecting loudly, enunciating, making eye contact—all the skills we were working on with young actors in rehearsal. I (Maddie) wondered, "Could the staff skit be doing more?" Based on my past work, particularly with Seattle Children's Theatre, we turned to creative drama. In creative drama, a form of improvisational role-play (Freeman et al., 2003), teachers and students play characters and collaborate to tell stories (Hallgren & Österlind, 2019). Critically, teachers endow students with "the mantle of the expert," meaning they position students in roles with more expertise than those played by the teacher (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985). Teachers guide students back and forth from in-character problem-solving to out-of-character reflection, and students' agency moves the plot forward. Since the 1960s, educators have recognized creative drama's potential to support students' critical consciousness development around social justice issues (García-Mateus, 2021). In the words of Streeter (2017), creative drama can provide "a platform to explore social issues and interrogate histories through embodied story-

making, for both the facilitator and participant” (p. 88). By marrying theatrical modeling with creative drama, the staff skit morphed into a model for authentically integrating IDEA issues into our summer camp programming.

## THE MODEL

In the two summers that followed, we developed the following working model. In this section, we will describe the process of developing two creative drama adventures over two consecutive summers, *The Drama of Sprinkles the Unicorn* (2022) and *The Drama of Dr. Inkling the Octopus* (2023). Following Adelman and others (2020), we invite you to consider how our identities as facilitators—and the identities of our students—impacted the choices we made. As you read, we invite you to learn from our experiences, taking up any practices that feel useful for your contexts and leaving behind those that don’t.

### ***Selecting a Theme***

We always start our work by looking for themes that are authentic to the plays we’re rehearsing. For example, when I (Maddie) directed *Frozen Jr.*, I thought about the character of Elsa and what she represents. Elsa was born physically and cognitively different—with magical powers—and raised to fear her differences. For this reason, disabled viewers have hailed her as Disney’s “first disabled princess” (Resene, 2017). Inspired by Elsa, and informed by my background as a sister to a disabled brother and my research at the intersection of theatre, disability, and education (Zdeblick, 2023b, 2023a), I chose to explore Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019) with my actors.

The following summer, when I (Noëlle) began working on *The SpongeBob Musical*, two possible IDEA-themed lenses struck me. On the one hand, I was interested in the xenophobia that Sandy Squirrel encounters as a land mammal among sea creatures. With mounting bias against immigration and general divisiveness within the US, validating a character who had been “othered” felt like a theme we could sink our teeth into. On the other hand, I was drawn to this idea of environmental justice and of how theatre-making as a practice is or is not sustainable. I began to wonder if we could produce an entire summer made from old set pieces, found objects, thrifted clothing, and

recycled materials. The theme would embrace not just conversations about the ocean home of the characters living with Bikini Bottom, but also push PVTC towards more sustainable design and build practices. Another struggle that we—like so many other small theatres—face is a lack of storage space, so we find ourselves throwing away materials at the end of a production. What if we ended with less waste? Could we avoid ordering the dumpster at the end of camp? I floated the sustainability idea at our next production meeting and asked Maddie if sustainability could even fall within the IDEA umbrella. Maddie gave an enthusiastic “yes” and began talking about how environmental harms disproportionately impact the same populations who often experience racism and other forms of systemic injustice.

### ***Facilitating Staff Learning***

Once our themes are selected for each summer, we immerse our entire summer camp staff in learning. For *Frozen Jr.*, this looked like engaging the whole staff in conversations about how ableism, the system that ascribes value to bodies and minds based on their proximity to constructs like “normal” (Lewis, 2022), showed up on our campus. It also looked like exploring Carolyn Lazard’s *Accessibility in the Arts: A Promise and a Practice* (2019), a guide to creating more accessible art spaces. Since 2015, PVTC has always done a sensory-friendly “Access Preview” of all of our summer camp musicals, so disability was already on our minds. However, we knew we could go further, especially in terms of thinking about how ableism (and racism) showed up in our teaching when we praised certain ways of being and discouraged others.

For *The SpongeBob Musical: Youth Edition*, staff researched ways in which they could embrace sustainability in their designs and lessons. Our props designer mined our craft storage areas for supplies and drew from those for every project rather than purchasing new ones. She built Sandy’s “Erruptor Interrupter” jetpack out of a cardboard box with empty paper towel rolls standing in for the propulsion jets, and bits of scrap ribbon as shoulder straps. She decorated it with paper scraps and paint. The prop looked awesome and did not waste any new materials. Our costume designer similarly explored existing costume stock and built pieces out of scrap fabric and existing pieces where she could. Our set designer collected bottle caps and used them to adorn a ship’s steering wheel that was

mounted to the front of the set. Staff had significant buy-in, even before the campers arrived!

### ***Finding Outside Resources***

The second step is to search for additional story materials to help even our youngest campers connect our production to our chosen IDEA theme. For *Frozen Jr.*, we selected the picture book, *Not Quite Narwhal* (Sima, 2017). In this story, a young unicorn, raised by narwhals, grows up feeling isolated by his differences. When he stumbles across a family of unicorns, he discovers his identity. However, rather than stay with the unicorns, he returns home, determined to find a way to live his truth surrounded by the narwhals he loves. I (Maddie) saw this narwhal's journey as a disability narrative, parallel to Elsa's. I hoped even our five-year-old campers would understand how this narwhal felt out of place, not through a fault of his own, but through a genuine mismatch between his body and his environment.

For *SpongeBob*, the perfect book, *Fur and Feather Stand Together* (Grissold, 2020), fell into our lap. The story spoke to the *SpongeBob* team immediately, as it is told from the perspective of “two unlikely friends—a puffin and a polar bear—joining together with their community to save the ice that is melting around them.” The authors provide resources for teachers in classrooms to use the material and speak about why they as white people centered an indigenous young woman as their main human character. The book, both in theme and the ways it advocates beyond itself, aligned perfectly with the IDEA values we wanted to explore alongside *SpongeBob*.

### ***Creating a Parallel Problem***

Once we have selected a theme and engaged our staff in learning, we next create what we call “a parallel problem,” a term I (Maddie) borrowed from Seattle Children's Theatre's Story Drama curriculum. Our goal is to create a problem that is related to, yet distinct from, the problems in the various source materials we're using, so that we can engage students in using their expert knowledge of our source materials to help a character solve it. For example, both Elsa in *Frozen Jr.* and the unicorn in *Not Quite Narwhal* experience feeling out of place in their communities. Inspired by this, we developed the

character of Sprinkles, a unicorn (played by our delightfully expressive assistant choreographer, see Figure 2) who was unable to attend school with his fellow sea creatures because his body wasn't made to swim.



**Figure 2:** Sprinkles the Unicorn (horn “hidden” underneath a rainbow top hat) arrives at PVTC.

To explore sustainability alongside *SpongeBob* and the characters from *Fur and Feather Stand Together*, we turned to Dr. Inkling, the Octopus from our opening scene whose ocean had been invaded by blue tape. We learned from Dr. Inkling that she had spent her whole life researching ocean health, but was ignored by the Ocean Council, the rulers of the sea. Not only had our students' wasteful ways disturbed her in her retirement, but the Ocean Council was about to approve plans for a new, massive, wasteful underwater hotel. She desperately needed our students' help. Like *SpongeBob*, Dr. Inkling didn't feel strong enough to overcome this challenge on her own.

### ***Activating the Story***

The next step in our process is to bring our story to life and engage students in solving the parallel problem. To launch each adventure, one or more teaching artists perform a 30-45 minute initial scene, with lots of audience engagement, to get our students excited. Usually, at least one other teaching artist participates out-of-character, mediating discussion between the characters onstage and the students. The scene doesn't have to be polished—we often write a short script that teaching artists have in hand and use as a jumping-off point for improvisation. When the scene ends, students are left with both an understanding of the problem and a hint of their role in it. Through three or four additional episodes, teaching artists and students work together to bring the problem to a climax and navigate its resolution. In these intermediate scenes, students try to solve the problem. As teaching artists, we say “yes, and...” to their agency and activate the consequences! Importantly, all of their attempts work (remember that they are the “experts”), but not completely. They leave some part of the problem unsolved; to resolve it completely, students must invite the main character of our creative drama to their show. Sometimes, we add co-curricular ways for students to engage with the problem in smaller groups with similar-aged peers. Finally, once students have performed, they meet with the main character one last time to arrive at a resolution. To explore what this looks like in practice, let's dive into *The Drama of Sprinkles the Unicorn* and *The Drama of Dr. Inkling the Octopus*!

*The Drama of Sprinkles the Unicorn.*

Remember Sprinkles, the unicorn growing up amongst sea creatures, distraught because he couldn't attend underwater school with his friends? Sprinkles came to PVTC looking for help, but when the students revealed they were producing a play, he panicked, thinking a theatre wouldn't be accessible for him either! Our students, who immediately recognized their own role in creating a space that didn't work for Sprinkles, were hooked. Though Sprinkles left this first episode in tears, he soon returned. Students suggested that he try wearing a costume—maybe if he looked more like a sea creature, he'd feel more at home with his peers. In walked another teaching artist, our costume designer! Speaking in a voice oddly reminiscent of Edna Mode, from *The Incredibles*, she informed Sprinkles in no uncertain terms that his tail would have to go. Our students rushed to Sprinkles' defense. In the words of one early elementary schooler, Sprinkles should “keep all of his body parts.” He shouldn't have to change himself to belong. Instead, the world should change to welcome all of Sprinkles' intersecting identities.

The next time Sprinkles returned, I (Maddie) produced the book, *Not Quite Narwhal*, as a resource that might help us solve our problem. Sprinkles and our students listened with rapt attention as I read. When the story ended, Sprinkles was inspired, but he felt he needed one more story about community transformation and to get up the courage to return home. Our students suggested he attend a performance of *Frozen Jr.*, but again, the issue of accessibility arose. Unicorns don't often sit still in seats and quietly watch theatre. And they're often afraid of the dark. The students immediately thought of inviting Sprinkles to our Access Preview. Around this time, our youngest students began to beg for more time with Sprinkles. They were exhausted from rehearsals, and as it turned out, a social justice storytime with Sprinkles was just the thing to rejuvenate them for performances. After Sprinkles saw our show—which he loved—he felt brave enough to go back to the ocean and demand his friends welcome him as his full and complete self (See Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Inspired by the students, Sprinkles returns to the ocean to see his narwhal friends.

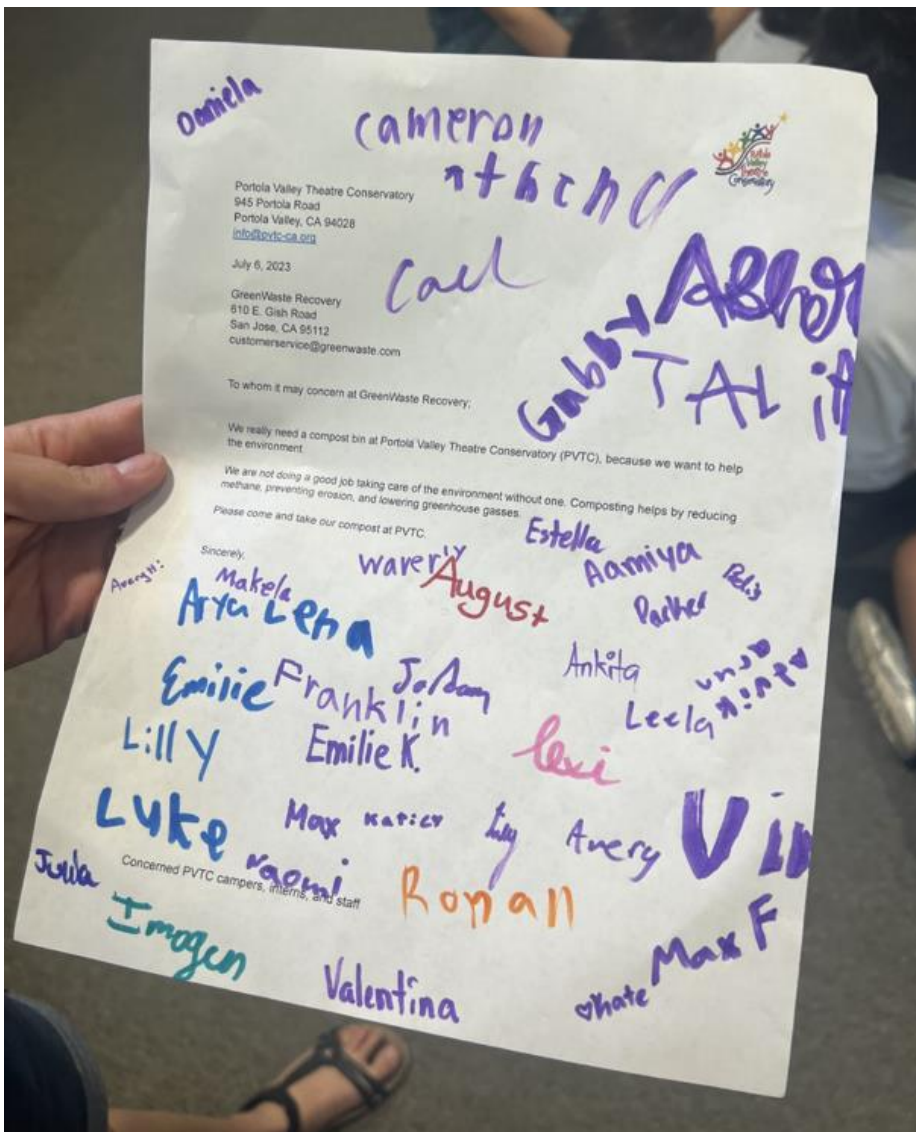
In our last scene, Sprinkles returned to the ocean, only to find his friends trapped in a thick sheet of ice. The students suggested that maybe the very thing that made Sprinkles different (his unicorn horn) and his love for his community could thaw the ice. Referencing *Frozen Jr.*, a student called out, “Love will thaw!” It worked! And, more importantly, Sprinkles and his community learned to appreciate that the differences in their bodies and minds made them stronger. They could find a way to move together.

### *The Drama of Dr. Inkling the Octopus.*

A year later, Dr. Inky stumbled into our theatre, covered in blue tape, distraught over our campers’ wastefulness and her superiors’ indifference to ocean health. When Dr. Inky learned that students were rehearsing a play, her anger intensified. Theatre was so wasteful! For the health of the planet, theatre should be abolished. Our students resisted—there had to be a way to keep doing theatre, but more sustainably. Dr. Inkling reluctantly agreed to stay her judgment, but only if the students worked together to imagine more sustainable ways of making theatre. She said she’d be back next week to check in on their progress. Now our students had a problem to solve: How could the choices they made in the next four weeks of camp impact Dr. Inkling’s life for the better and rehabilitate theatre? In small groups, the

students set to work.

First up, the campers went on a sustainability scavenger hunt across the PVTC campus. They noticed details that were environmentally friendly (e.g., recycling bins everywhere, a water fountain where reusable water bottles could be refilled) and places that needed work (e.g., a lack of compost, aerosol cans for spray painting). Subsequent small-group conversations varied based on the ages of campers involved. For example, our youngest students researched the rules about what could and could not be recycled, while our middle schoolers discussed the reasons for the issues they observed on campus (e.g., convenience, lack of services), their impacts on climate and ocean health, and the lower-income communities of color disproportionately affected by these impacts. In the second episode of our creative drama, impassioned campers reported their findings to me (Noëlle) and other members of the leadership team, demanding change. To motivate the next stage of our drama, the leadership team admitted students' observations were excellent, but their demands were overwhelming! We were too busy supporting their show to take on anything extra. To gather ideas on how to build a movement in the face of resistance, students turned to *Fur and Feather Stand Together*. Inspired by the story, a group of middle schoolers wrote a rap about the importance of using sustainable materials in our design practices. Elementary schoolers wondered about transitioning more of our lighting instruments to LEDs and suggested we raise money to replace our traditional fixtures. The camp co-authored a letter to our local waste management facility requesting that they consider offering composting service in our area (see Figure 4). All campers made posters celebrating sustainable practices.



**Figure 4:** Students' letter to the local waste management agency, requesting compost pickup for our campus.

Students presented their work to the leadership team, which "convinced" us of sustainability's importance. Together, we started making small changes around campus. Inky was thrilled to hear about this progress when she returned to PVTC. She was so inspired that she built up the courage to go back to the Ocean Council to advocate against the hotel development in her ocean (see Figure 5). But the council did not budge! They believed their project signified progress,

the way of the future! That is, of course, until the campers invited the Ocean Council to come see *SpongeBob*. Sitting in the audience of *SpongeBob*, the Ocean Council learned how even the littlest creature can make a big difference. After the show, the Ocean Council announced that they would be ending their ocean development project, to the joy of Dr. Inky! Through sharing their stories, onstage and off, students helped Dr. Inky change hers— and made our campus more sustainable along the way.



**Figure 5:** Dr. Inky advocates her case to the Ocean Council.

### ***Following Up***

Inevitably, when we explore challenging issues with young people, they bring up challenging questions. These questions might surprise us, make us uncomfortable, or even force us to confront our own practices and complicity in systemic injustices. When these questions arise, it can be tempting to brush them aside with the excuse that we don't have time to explore them fully. As educators, it is our responsibility to be brave and make that time. Maybe it's after our show has opened, maybe it's in small group conversations with students who aren't in a particular rehearsal, but these questions deserve our full attention. If we let them, students' questions can

transform the heart and soul of our work in profound and meaningful ways.

For example, when I (Maddie) was directing *Frozen Jr.*, a middle schooler interrupted rehearsal one day with some tough questions about mental health and accountability. From our creative drama, she knew that Elsa hadn't intended to freeze Arendell—she acted out of anxiety and shame about her physical and cognitive differences—but ultimately, Elsa had still caused harm. Why were we ok with crowning her queen? I panicked. I had forty kindergarten through eighth-grade students onstage learning the blocking for our show's finale. However, rather than shut this student down, I took a breath, emphasized what a good question she had, and promised to return to it soon. After their show had opened, I gathered all but the kindergarten students together onstage. We sat in a circle and discussed her question. Ultimately, we agreed she was right. While Elsa hadn't intended to cause harm, she had. And, by the end of the story, she was likely still dealing with trauma. I wondered aloud, "What might be a better resolution for Elsa than becoming Queen?" An eighth grader responded tentatively, "Therapy?" The rest of the circle cheered, "Therapy!"

In *The Drama of Dr. Inkling the Octopus*, students asked hard questions that demanded an immediate response. Recall how students worked in groups to conduct a sustainability scavenger hunt across the PVTc campus. On their journey around campus, a group of our students observed our set designer cutting styrofoam in the parking lot. As he chiseled out large cartoon flowers to attach to our set, tiny bits of white foam floated everywhere. The students were horrified. Maybe Dr. Inkling was right. Theatre was terrible for the planet! As a staff, we were embarrassed and ashamed. Students had caught us failing at exactly the thing we were trying to do. After camp, a core group of our staff came together to respond. We determined that our set designer had likely thought he was using a sustainable form of styrofoam, based on the product's advertising. We devised a plan to clean up the styrofoam and created a new policy explicitly banning styrofoam from new design projects. However, as the flowers had already been cut, we determined that the most sustainable thing we could do was use them. We apologized to our students and explained our plan for moving forward. Ultimately, we all learned a valuable lesson about moving towards justice: mistakes happen. It is our job to own them, learn from them, and find a way to move forward.

## TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

Even as we've learned so much from these creative drama adventures, questions remain. For one, we continue to wonder about our role as facilitators of these dramas. We know how important it is to center marginalized voices in social justice learning; as straight, white, nondisabled women, should we be the ones leading these dramatic explorations? While we don't have an answer to this question, here are some of our ongoing thoughts. First, we welcome all of our summer camp teaching artists to help develop these dramas, but few hold marginalized identities (a symptom of systemic inequality in our organization and theatre more broadly). While we're actively working to diversify, we don't want to tokenize our current teaching artists of color by assuming they want to lead our community in this work. We're cautious about using our positionalities as excuses for avoiding difficult and uncomfortable work or pawning off the work on others. As those who've benefited from systems of oppression, we know we have a responsibility to help dismantle them. We've tried to navigate this tension by drawing from books and other inspirational source materials created by marginalized artists (e.g., *Not Quite Narwhal*) and that support organizations led by marginalized peoples (e.g., 50% of the proceeds from sales of *Fur and Feather Stand Together* go to three nonprofits working towards climate justice: The International Indigenous Youth Council, Center for Biological Diversity, and Sunrise Movement). By doing so, we've tried to center marginalized voices without shirking our responsibility to act toward change.

We also continue to wrestle with how to empower our (majority nondisabled, otherwise privileged) students to see themselves as changemakers without reproducing white, nondisabled savior narratives. While we again cannot pretend to answer this question, we've tried to attend to it through constructing parallel problems that illustrate our and our students' complicity in systems of oppression. For example, in *The Drama of Sprinkles*, our students were complicit in excluding Sprinkles from attending *Frozen Jr.*, as they had not thought about how inaccessible it might be for a unicorn. In *The Drama of Dr. Inkling*, our students had littered the tape that had traveled to the ocean and attached itself to Dr. Inky's tentacles. Through these creative choices, we've tried to help students see themselves not as outsiders, sweeping in to solve social justice problems, but as insiders, deeply entangled with these problems' existence. We've also been

intentional about the kinds of stories we tell. While choosing inspirational source material for *The Drama of Dr. Inkling*, we were drawn to *We Are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020), a beautiful picture book about a young indigenous girl standing up to protect Earth's waters. However, when we considered this story, we struggled to imagine a parallel problem that would result in something other than our (privileged) students "discovering" the importance of protecting Earth's waters, a practice that indigenous communities have understood since time immemorial. Ultimately, we did not feel we could engage this story responsibly, so we chose another direction. Though we have not yet done this for a creative drama, we have also hired cultural consultants to lead lessons that our staff, given our identities, could not appropriately facilitate (e.g., for our 2018 production of *Mulan Jr.*, we brought in two consultants who taught students about elements of Chinese culture). This might be another option for theatres interested in exploring a particular theme, but who lack the lived experiences to do so responsibly. Finally, at the end of our dramas, we've tried to avoid giving our students too much closure. We want them to feel as if they've helped someone navigate systems of oppression, not that they've "solved ableism" or "solved climate injustice." These are pervasive systems; we cannot "solve" them in a four-week summer theatre camp (or perhaps ever). However, we can begin to see ourselves as entangled with these systems and capable of resistance.

## CONCLUSION

To help our summer camp community authentically learn about IDEA issues and resist systems of oppression, PVTC has turned to creative drama adventures. Through multi-episode, interactive stories like *The Drama of Sprinkles* and *The Drama of Dr. Inkling*, our students and staff have learned about systems of injustice, acknowledged our complicity in these systems, and practiced leveraging our agency towards change. We've seen students engage in this critical-consciousness with passion and joy, developing artwork (e.g., the sustainability rap) and begging for more time with our creative drama characters (e.g., Sprinkles' popularity with our Kindergartners). And, our creative drama adventures have supported our other summer camp goal: producing high-quality musical theatre performances with

our kindergarten through eighth-grade youth. While we continue to grapple with ongoing tensions, we offer our story in the hopes it might support other nonprofit theatres and theatre educators interested in exploring social justice issues with students but unsure about how to begin.

Nothing that we do as theatre educators will “solve” systems of oppression, but we hope you’ll join our students in recognizing how “We can help!” Incorporating creative drama adventures into your existing educational theatre programming might be a good place to start.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Zdeblick, M.N., and Gibbs, N.G.M. (2024). “We can help!”: Using creative drama to explore social justice in youth theatre. *ArtsPraxis*, 11 (1), pp. 14-38.

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