

**Book Review: *Girls, Performance, and Activism:
Demanding to be Heard* by Dana Edell**



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In *Girls, Performance, and Activism: Demanding to be Heard*, Dana Edell takes us on a journey of reflection, revelations, and discoveries charting a course through her more than two decades of work with girls and activist theatre. Recounting personal stories, interviews, pieces of the girls' theatrical writing that Edell has facilitated in the past, as well as voices from the fields of both *girl studies* and *theatre*, the author weaves theory and practice to illuminate the past, present, and future of her work.

In the book, Edell employs case study embedded in an autoethnographic methodology. Of this mixed-methods approach, she writes:

In addition to case studies of activist theatre projects I have co-created, historical and theoretical analysis, and in-depth qualitative interviews, I use an autoethnographic framework as part of my methodology... My own path winds through girlhood studies, theatre and performance, and activism and I situate this book in all three. I grab onto different branches of the fields, rip off buds and land finally in the messy fiery heat at the intersection of all three: girl-driven activist performance. (2022, p. 2)

Rather than making any one definitive case for how or why this work is important, Edell takes us on a personal journey that illuminates the power and failure of theatre programs that lift up the voices of girls as a central and important part of social justice work. We get to understand not only what this work entails, but its short- and long-term effects on the participants and the pitfalls of engaging in work with youth around social justice issues. In Edell's description,

This book invites you into not just the details of the work I did and refer to here, but also to meet other artists and activists and see

the scope and scale of this growing and urgent field. (2022, p. 12)

In the sections that follow, I provide overviews and analysis of each chapter in the book.

Introduction

Edell takes an honest and vulnerable look at how working with girls (primarily Black and Latina) has become her focus and passion. She begins with her own girlhood (age 14) and takes us on an evolutionary timeline through her own background, educational, creative and social justice journey and the various shifts she has taken along the way. She concludes this chapter by providing a roadmap that outlines the insights offered in each of the six subsequent chapters.

Chapter 1: “Under Construction”: Girls, Performance, and Activism

This chapter situates Edell’s work with girl-driven activist theatre in the larger contexts of social justice and feminist movements. She introduces the fields of *girl studies* and *black girl studies* as well as scholars and practitioners within these fields. Additionally, Edell emphasizes the importance of creative collaboration (adult-girl), narrative performance (successes and harms), and the transformative potential of the work.

Chapter 2: “This Is not a Safe Space”: Principles of Theatermaking with Girls

In one of the most substantial chapters of the book, Edell outlines the seven core principles that inform her activist work with girls and details how she uses each of these principles. She also makes a significant argument around the term “safe space” throughout the chapter stating:

We need to acknowledge the impossibility of enduring everyone’s physical and emotional safety at all moments while also making every effort to do just that. (2022, pp. 13-14)

The seven core principles include:

- Negotiating intergenerational power

- Operating with antiracist, intersectional and feminist lenses
- Creating the highest quality, culturally responsive theater
- Educating through critical thinking and liberatory pedagogy practices
- Facilitating with a trauma-informed practice
- Cultivating uncensored, unadulterated storytelling
- Choosing an abundance of joy, play, and love whenever possible

Chapter 3: “Real Im(PERFECT)ions”: Performing Confidence, Expressing Agency

Edell begins to break down the ideals of confidence and perfectionism as the overwhelming issues that face adolescents. Through examples from her own work, interviews with practitioners and past participants of the work), as well as scholarship (studies on the topic), she guides us through why and how society has made this an issue for girls and how using theatre as a source of agency to bolster confidence has both “complicated benefits and drawbacks” (2022, p. 14). This chapter further offers a discussion on girls with disabilities within the performance space.

Chapter 4: “Held Momentarily”: For an Audience of One ... Plus

The relationship between audience and performer is deeply explored here. Specifically, Edell draws from detailed storytelling of girls' experiences in performing with the intent to speak to or reach a specific audience (person within the audience) and the ripple effect that a directed message can have on an overall audience. This chapter is full of personal examples taken from Edell's work over the years. We get to hear the girls' voices through their writings as most of the chapter is divided into individual girl's stories.

Chapter 5: “Shut up and Listen!” Performance in Public Spaces

The creation of work that is meant for public performance and its subsequent impact is examined here. Edell defines public spaces which include not only physical spaces (parks, streets, other site-specific spaces), but also cyber spaces (TikTok) as well. On the impact of public performance, Edell offers two “rings” of impact: one being impact on the girls themselves and the other the public audience (both

intentional and unintentional). Again, she draws from detailed stories of actual experiences she has had with girls utilizing this creative methodology, painting a picture through the girls' words and actions

Chapter 6: "Finally Someone Hears Us": Considering Our Audiences

The role of the audience and the shifting impact of performance is detailed here. Through an analysis of specific performances with specific audiences, Edell outlines the ways in which both the audience and performance is shifted depending on the audience demographics.

Conclusion: Ripples of Change

Instead of a traditional wrap-up of the entire book or a cohesive synthesis, Edell uses this chapter to discuss the larger concept of change. She gives a very honest account of both the pitfalls and uplifting aspects of change and how change works within an activist theatre space. She cites the danger of expectation of change for both audience and performer while also leaving room for the powerful moments where change might be tracked. Again, using both personal reflections and scholarship in the field, Edell engages us in a critical analysis of change concluding that change is incremental and not necessarily trackable.

EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATION

Girls, Performance, and Activism: Demanding to be Heard is a guidebook for anyone wanting to create meaningful work specifically with girl identified youth, however it is not a handbook of activities and specific "how tos." Both novice and experienced practitioners engaged in theatre activist work have much to gain from this book as Edell gives a critical analysis and pathway into work with girl identifying youth. The way in which Edell draws on scholarly studies and writings, as well as the girls' own words is skillfully woven within colorful threads of poetic writing that engages the reader and keeps our attention as if we are an audience experiencing a "performance."

As a self-identified white woman, Edell has insightfully and critically analyzed her specific work within multiple organizations and the shifts her journey has undertaken the more she's grown with the

work. She does not shy away from issues of race, class, and culture but embraces them through deep and honest reflections, looking within herself as well as upon the impact the work has had in real time and space. Beyond her own examination and reflection, this book makes a case for self-reflection, member checking, constant and consistent research, deep listening, and self-analysis as tools for developing one's own work in this field. She also makes a case for the importance of activist performance work with girls.

I highly recommend this book—not only for those specifically seeking to better their understanding of the theoretical and practical work with “girls” —but anyone who works with youth. As Edell herself might say, this book is a reflection of her very specific journey, providing an examination into a place to start rather than a destination as Edell continues to expand her own work. Practitioners can use this book as a roadmap that suggests destinations worth visiting as well as detours we might take in our own work.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Tammie L Swopes is an intersectional artist, educator, storyteller, meaning maker, and disrupter of oppressive structures in and outside of theatre spaces. She is currently an adjunct professor at NYU (Steinhardt and Tisch), Marymount Manhattan College, and CUNY (Applied Theatre). She is also Artistic Director of the Seeing Ourselves Onstage program (New Plays for Young Audiences) and Artistic Associate of the NYU Verbatim Performance Lab, as well as a part time career coach and program associate for the Creative Career Hub at NYU's Wasserman Center. As a doctoral candidate in the Educational Theatre program with 20 plus years of experience in theatre and education, Tammie's work largely centers on issues of art, activism, and amplifying youth voices.