

Aesop's Idols: Nationalization of Classic Texts to Create a Culture of Inclusion

KAITLIN O.K. JASKOLSKI

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

ABSTRACT

The Westside Inclusive Theatre Company (WIT) was initially created in 2010 by, with, and for students as a way to build community and tackle oppression together through theatre. A group of advanced theatre students at a public high school in Houston chose to partner with excluded special education students to create and interpret theatre, art and dance in an inclusive environment. All participants (mainstreamed, life-skills, special education and regular education) worked together to teach, learn, and create. WIT has since developed into a company dedicated not only to teaching life skills through theatre, but also to creating an inclusive community.

This narrative of practice highlights the methods used to facilitate, assess and stratify learning outcomes in order to create a culture of inclusion. Case studies from the devising and performance of Aesop's Idols are used to illustrate how and what constitutes an inclusive culture. The current WIT model focuses on Augusto Boal's

nationalization of classic texts to reinforce vocational/life skills training and generate alternative communication methods. The use of peer-mentoring, progressive pedagogies and applied theatre aesthetics derives ownership and authenticity within the performance praxis. Increases in cognitive and vocational skill development occur across the spectrum of participants.

It is from our responses to the exigencies [urgent needs or demands] of life that culture is born. Culture is the *doing*, the *how it is done*, the *for what* and *for whom* it is done. (Boal, 2006, p. 100)

In today's world, the average high school student in the U.S. faces a range of exigencies that may increase a student's risk: gang affiliation, low levels of school engagement, the threat of gun violence, low parental education, work or family responsibilities, problematic or deviant behavior, poverty, drug or alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy and/or a lack of available resources—all which can result in dropping out of school. Adding a disability, whether social, physical, cognitive, emotional or mental, compounds the stress and trauma faced by many youth in the public school setting. Students are bullied, stigmatized, isolated in special needs classrooms, and taught with low expectations and often by burnt-out “special education” teachers. Both special education (including life-skills) and regular education students are taught based on standardized tests, school funding, and state requirements. As Freire would say, they are receptacles regurgitating facts: “suffering from narration sickness...the student records, memorizes and repeats without perceiving” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). The Westside Inclusive Theatre (WIT) Company uses drama processes with mainstream and special education students together in order to facilitate learning and create a culture of inclusion. This narrative of practice analyzes the creation of an inclusive culture through the “*doing*, the *how it is done*, the *for what* and *for whom* it is done” of the WIT model, arguing that the nationalization of classic texts within an inclusive theatre praxis creates a bridge to understanding disability—a culture of inclusion—and thus creates opportunities for education, advocacy, and development of cognitive and vocational skills.

WHAT IS WIT? APPLICABILITY OF THE WIT MODEL

A high school auditorium is packed with parents, social workers, teachers and peers waiting patiently for the show to begin. As the lights in the house dim, two students enter center stage; one is wearing oversized earphones to help with overstimulation. He skips, jumps and paces the stage with energy—looking out to the audience and back to his partner, occasionally yelping or screaming. Though this is his first time performing for an audience, this particular manic action stems from his autism spectrum disorder, rather than just performance anxiety. His partner gently takes his hand and gestures to a grand 9-foot story book on the side of the stage. Together they open the larger-than-life book, and he immediately calms down, grabs a handful of markers and begins to color the pictures in the book. This is the opening scene of WIT'S most recent performance, *Aesop's Idols*.

Westside Inclusive Theatre Company (WIT), was created by, with and for students at a large, metropolitan, public high school in Houston, Texas. WIT pairs advanced theatre students from mainstream curriculums with peers enrolled in special needs, vocational or life-skills classrooms. The goal of WIT is including students with special needs in the activities of drama and theatre to develop and create performances, reinforcing education of life-skills (from the broader ideas of collaboration, literacy, self-advocacy, self-care to specifics such as dating, money management, laundry, or cleaning). The outcomes for all students, mainstreamed and special needs, include developing creativity, problem-solving, teamwork, leadership and performance skills (including devising, acting, directing, design, and public speaking). WIT was formed on the anthropological view of disability as the “social reactions of the community to people with disabilities as the disabling force, rather than implicating the bodily differences as the true source of disability,” which changes the focus from human behavior of people with disabilities to the social environment of the population at large (Shuttleworth & Kasnitz, 2004). The storybook opens, and as the first two partners begin to color, the sound of Lady Gaga's “Bad Romance” floods the auditorium, as thirty-some students emerge from all sides of the stage and auditorium singing along: “A-A-Aesop's fables—tell me a story....”



Image 1: An opening dance scene of *Aesop's Idols*.

The students onstage encompass the U.S. high school stereotypes. Among the 30+ performing artists are students from life-skills classrooms with autism, Down's syndrome and learning impairments. There are also class leaders about to graduate and head to ivy league universities along with mainstream students struggling with teen pregnancy and gang affiliation. Some are refugees and immigrants who are beginning to learn English as a second language, some read at the university level, some at grade level, and some are still learning to write the letters in their name. Some of the scholars write poetry or beatbox rap verses, others use sign language or adapted communication technology to vocalize. A few are nonverbal, while others prefer not to speak in public. Disability culture anthropologists state: "Disability exists when people experience discrimination on the basis of perceived functional limitations" (Kasnitz & Shuttleworth, 2001, p. 2). Through the dramatic process and culminating performance, the WIT model attempts to defy discrimination for all learners, regardless of ability, class, gender, race, language. We are creating an inclusive culture.

The work being done within the WIT model is not just beneficial to

students with diagnosed disabilities—be it autism or cerebral palsy. Using the anthropological understanding of disability as a social construct, any (and every) secondary student could be perceived to have stigma and discrimination to overcome. Drug use, gang affiliation, anxiety, self-consciousness, depression, the pressure to succeed, and many other stressors can and often do affect all learners. The spectrum of abilities onstage is vast in many ways, from academic to self-care, communication and mobility, but in this moment, they are all creating culture together.

THE DOING: NATIONALIZING OF CLASSIC TEXTS

The nationalization of classic texts, a concept developed by Augusto Boal (1979), is a way of using applied theatre techniques to adapt, rewrite and restructure classic texts—such as fables, fairytales, and folklore, or Shakespeare, Sophocles or history—to fit the needs, interests and concerns of the community involved. The definition of “nationalization” is literally the transferring of private assets into public assets. This is exactly what Boal theorizes: transferring the private, seemingly outdated or irrelevant assets of a classic text, into a relevant, meaningful, entertaining public asset for the community involved. For this case study—WIT nationalized *Aesop’s Fables* to create the performance of *Aesop’s Idols*. Through a dramatic process, classic tales such as the *Tortoise and the Hare* were adapted to appeal to the life experiences of high schoolers, and specifically, high schoolers in a diverse, inclusive classroom community. For example, the tortoise and the hare were no longer just running a race, but competing for praise and attention from their peers; the fable was transformed into an investigation on who had the more expensive shoes. The cheering crowd encouraged them, and the tortoise, played by a mobility-challenged student with cerebral palsy, demonstrated her resourcefulness and creativity in overcoming obstacles differently than her peers.

Why use the nationalization of classic texts for an inclusive drama praxis? Though different theorists and facilitators develop and devise work in a variety of ways, the WIT Company chose to use Boal’s nationalization of classic texts as the foundation of the work:

1. Classic texts are universal and widely known. This creates a comfortable learning environment for students transgressing cognitive, physical, cultural and language barriers.
2. There is a multitude of materials available for classic texts that differentiate levels of learning and comprehension. For example, Aesop's Fables often include pictures, all levels of reading books, cartoons, videos and websites that share the base stories. The ability to find a variety of inspirational material allows accommodation for the spectrum of student abilities, including those who cannot read, who need visual cues for comprehension, or who might have English as a second language.
3. Classic texts are easily adaptable. They can be as simple or complex as needed to fit the community. The characters in classic texts tend to be archetypes—the king, the trickster, the hard-worker, the poor, the rich. They can be used in any context or culture, and distilled into a moral or message that can be applied to many settings and circumstances.
4. Classic texts give an inclusive company a foundation to build upon, and quite often, through the dramatic process, the story is completely changed and only vaguely familiar to the original classic work.

The universal nature of the classic text narrative, when used within the theatre praxis, inherently becomes a way to defy stigma, to establish abilities, and to reveal how disability is addressed within a culture. Not only do these adapted classical stories teach the audience about disability culture, but in creating the performance, students experience hands-on ways to modify and adapt learning with and for their peers. This is further discussed in the following ethics and aesthetics of inclusive drama, or the *how it is done*.

How It Is Done: The Ethics & Aesthetics of Inclusive Drama

Initially, the WIT students could perceive a great difference between the world of *Aesop's Fables* and their own world; and would not see its "relevance." And, plainly, its status as a "classic" would not make it any more pertinent to them. We combined our interpretations of the classic stories with Boalian and Brechtian techniques to explore their

relevance. In the same manner as Boal's "nationalization" of classics brought to Brazilian audiences, so could the 'nationalization' (or 'high school-ization') of works (such as *Aesop's Fables*) for an inclusive high school curriculum concurrently teach students about classic literature, as well as their world and each other.

We adapted the principal goal of Boal's Joker System, which is to "disrupt the singular reality of the world as it is represented in the dramatic text in order to investigate alternative ways of representing and interpreting that world" (Boal, 1979, p.174). The objective, Boal notes, is to "present simultaneously in the performance, both the play and its analysis" (Boal, 1979, p. 174-75). The Joker System relies on a



Image 2: Peer mentors work together during a performance.

handful of basic Brechtian techniques that we also used in creating *Aesop's Idols*:

1. an "alienated" acting style, designed to "reduce" dramatic characters to a relatively simple "social mask" and to distance the actors from characters;
2. continuous role reversal or switching, such that characters are played by several actors, and actors play several characters;

3. stylistic and genre eclecticism from scene to scene (or even within a single scene), with little or no regard for a unified production style or tone; and
4. the use of music as an independent "discourse" to complement, supplement, subvert, or contradict the meanings expressed in the text and performance. (Boal, 1979)

In addition to Boal and Brecht, WIT capitalizes on the work being done within drama in education and with special education theorists to create and devise performances. Key fundamentals utilized by the WIT model incorporate inclusion, peer-mentoring, multidisciplinary pieces and ownership.

Inclusion, as explained by Hargrave, is more than just the involvement of learners with disabilities. The goal of inclusion "ultimately raises the question of what we think of the good life for ourselves as human beings, and whether there is a place for people with [disability] in that life [...] not so much what we can do for them, but whether or not we want to be with them. Ultimately, it is not citizenship, but friendship that matters" (Hargrave, 2015, p.17). WIT constantly examines and explores ways to include learners of all abilities, for if a learner cannot participate, how then can he/she learn? Inclusion is not simply about physical proximity; it is about intentionally planning for the success of all students. The most effective form of inclusion within the WIT methods has been peer-mentoring.

Peer-mentoring (Kempe & Tissot, 2012; Cattanach, 1996; McCurrach & Darnley, 1999; Saur & Johansen, 2013; Trowsdale & Hayhow, 2015) is the process of pairing students of varying abilities together to achieve outcomes. The inclusion of typically developing peer models can facilitate academic learning and improve social functioning while improving behavior in naturalistic settings for individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities (Corbett et al., 2010). For example: Joshua is nonverbal and on the autism spectrum. His form of autism includes the trait of echolalia—wherein he often repeats the last words of whatever is said to him. If one says, "Josh is a terrific dancer," he repeats "Josh is a terrific dancer." Joshua played the part of the Frog King. Initially, his peer group tried to write his lines on large posters that he could hold up at appropriate times. This worked quite well for a while, until Joshua grew bored with it. He then partnered with his peer-buddy, and both played the role of the Frog King. The peer

mentor would say a line, and Joshua would repeat it. However, we became aware that Joshua's life skills teachers were trying to decrease the echolalia behavior, and working to improve his communication skills with verbal cues and gestures. The speech teacher suggested we try to get Joshua to complete lines that the peer-mentor would begin. For example, the peer-mentor might say "My name is..." "Joshua," completed Joshua. The peer-mentor worked with Joshua, teaching him to complete most lines to be uttered by the Frog King. In that way, they worked together to serve as Co-Kings.

During the rehearsal of this process, the peer mentors realized that unknown to the teachers, Josh would also complete lyrics of favorite songs when prompted—especially Disney lyrics. Throughout the devising and rehearsing of their scene, the group created moments where Josh could fill in the blank, or complete the lyrics to create dialogue. This peer-mentoring allowed for all students to be independent of teachers and therapists (Kempe & Tissot, 2012). Additional support systems were included to allow all students access to the dramatic process, including modifications, visual cues, side-coaching, prompting, group work, imitation, multisensory exercises and addition of props and costumes (Kempe, 1996; Cattnach, 1996; McCurrach & Darnley, 1999; Bailey, 2010; Sheratt & Peter, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2016; Peter, 1995; Ramamoorthi & Nelson, 2011). The peer-mentor system structures learning, but more importantly, keeps the work inclusive and fulfills Hargrave's goal of building friendships and contributing to the culture of inclusion. These peer-relationships frequently continue outside of the WIT rehearsals, bringing the inclusive culture into other classrooms and social spaces.

The aesthetics of inclusive drama are one of many ways to spotlight the talents and abilities of the inclusive company (see Tomlinson, 1982; Kempe, 2010; Bailey, 2010; McCurrach & Darnley, 1999). Ownership is critical, because in order to showcase the abilities of the group, then the group must take responsibility for all that is onstage. The idea of ownership (Freire, 1996; Howell & Heap, 2001; Heathcote, 1995) allows the learners to control and guide their experience together. In order to allow inclusion, the WIT model creates "multidisciplinary pieces" (Lipkin & Fox, 2001, p. 124) served by a "rich eclecticism" (Hargrave, 2015, p. 229). The "episodic nature of the piece, and its reliance on movement, music, and constant shifts between the types of dialogue and teamwork occurring has Brechtian

underpinnings, with a similar bow towards the audience” (Lipkin & Fox, 2001, p. 131). In order to tell the story, the scenes contain dialogues, music with lyrics changed in popular songs, dances, and games played onstage; all created through peer mentoring with the foundation of Aesop’s Fables. In the WIT model, everything was made by and with class participants. This created an eclectic hodgepodge of design. Costumes were sourced, sewn, cut, glued, stapled and glittered by each group as they devised their pieces. The set was built with recycled materials, paper, cardboard, original artwork, and colored or painted by the members of the group.

FOR WHAT: COGNITIVE AND VOCATIONAL LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Cognitive skill development is inherent in the educational drama process. Students and theorists indicate that drama education enhances skills such as confidence, collaboration, teamwork, thinking, literacy, remembering, paying attention, and problem solving, to name a few. (Lipkin & Fox, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2016; Corbett et. All, 2010; Ramamoorthi & Nelson, 2011; Jindal-Snape & Vertraino, 2007). Throughout Aesop’s Idols, the most significant skill improvement acknowledged in each participant, regardless of ability, was relationship-building with peers.

Vocational and life-skills are specifically taught and reinforced through both the process and performance of inclusive theatre. Vocational and life skills curriculums are guiding forces for WIT performances, and considered through each step of the process. For example, in *Aesop’s Idols*, one devising exercise was for groups of students to create a company that the characters in their fable might own, or where they might work. *The Tortoise and the Hare* group decided that the hare would own a competitive sports shoe company. Working on marketing skills, they created posters, a commercial, and presentation for the shoe company. Each student then created his/her own personal CV/resume, and took turns interviewing for a job at each of the created companies. This gave each student actual experience in job interviews, as well as the opportunity to be a supervisor looking for people to hire. Additionally, the commercials created for this lesson were included during the “commercial break” of the performance.

In developing and creating scenes, we strive to incorporate skills such as cleaning, getting dressed, counting money, and other ‘life skills.’ If the life skills curriculum is working on laundry, then each group tries to add laundry skills, such as folding or ironing, into their scene. Monique—who played the milk maid—was not responding well to doing laundry in her life skills class. But in a peer setting, with her peer-mentors and her friends all trying to fold and iron while in character—Monique could accomplish every task. The group decided to incorporate laundry skills into their performance scene, and with the repetition of rehearsal, seeing/learning different ways to fold and iron, Monique became a laundry pro, as well as a sassy, fashion-obsessed milk maid. I am proud to say that her laundry skills have come in handy and after aging out of public school, she secured a job at a local salon, where she is paid to wash and fold the towels, while learning other skills from stylists. Vocational and life skills development does not just apply to the special needs learners—many of the mainstream students have gone on to study special education, teaching, and therapies that they attribute directly to their positive experiences within the WIT class.

FOR WHOM IT IS DONE: THE PERFORMERS, THE AUDIENCE, THE FUTURE

The dramatic process of inclusive theatre is done for all students within the WIT Company, but looking back to the anthropological idea of disability as a social construct—that disability exists when people face discrimination based on *perceived* functional limitations—the creation of a culture of inclusion branches much farther than that. The audience at a WIT performance, including parents & families, teachers, therapists, social workers, and fellow classmates—are literally *for whom* it is done. The performance is designed to involve the community at large (McCurrach & Darnley, 1999; Lipkin & Fox, 2001). Inviting the whole high school community to witness the finished product, the skills, abilities, and achievements of the students are acknowledged and appreciated. Confidence is improved and accomplishment is savored. But also important is the modeling of successful techniques and unique perspectives and processes that can come together to create an inclusive future.

CONCLUSION: CREATING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION

“It is from our responses to the exigencies [urgent needs or demands] of life that culture is born” (Augusto Boal, 2006, p. 100). A culture of inclusion is being born from responses to the needs and demands of both mainstream and special needs learners, and this inclusive culture is being spread outside the rehearsal room and school hallways. As WIT ventures into its 7th year, we are proud that many of our alumni have continued inclusive theatre work in their churches, universities and homes. Some students have gone on to study special education, and are working in centers for adults with disabilities. Friendships have been maintained, and past and present members of the company continue to support each other. Although inclusive theatre offerings are rare in American public schools, WIT is by no means the only inclusive theatre company, and this culture of inclusion is slowly being born internationally as theatre practitioners continue to research and advance ways to include all types of citizens in the drama process.



Image 3: Celebrating a culture of inclusion onstage.

Aesop's Idols ends with all of the fables and characters in a state of chaos, battling over which themes are most important or relevant.

As the chaos builds, the two students who initially opened and colored the large storybook quickly close the book. The ensemble of characters is silenced and frozen. The two narrators reopen the cover, throwing the cast back to the beginning and a chorus of “a-a-aesop’s fables, tell me a story.” The cast bows and proceeds to celebrate the culture they have created. In the actual performance, Jorge, the student on the autism spectrum with the headphones to prevent overstimulation, had fallen asleep onstage. Whether he was reacting to overstimulation or boredom, his partner was left to perform both of their duties. When the time came to slam the book shut, the sudden silence awoke Jorge from his slumber. He looked around at his frozen-in-place classmates, and abruptly jumped to his feet to help reopen the book. The music swelled, and he joined the celebrations onstage with gusto. This quite possibly illustrates one of the morals from Aesop’s Fables: that, in terms of inclusion as an educator or learner; “*Together everyone achieves more!*”

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kaitlin Jaskolski is a PhD candidate at the University of Cape Town. She received her MA in Educational Theatre at New York University in 2013 and her BA in Directing and Design at Pepperdine University in 2008. Her research reflects interests in cross-cultural inclusive theatre, with a focus on community and neurodivergency. She founded the Westside Inclusive Theatre in Houston, and has collaborated with

inclusive theatres in Los Angeles, New York, and the United Kingdom. Kate is currently navigating the pandemic from Papua New Guinea, continuing to work remotely as a teaching-artist/educational consultant in Nigeria, Lesotho, and South Africa.