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ARTSPRAXIS

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ARTSPRAXIS

Emphasizing critical analysis of the arts in society.

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ArtsPraxis Volume 12, Issue 2 looked to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around current research and practice. We welcomed traditional academic research as well as narratives of practice. The call for papers was released in concert with the publication of *ArtsPraxis* Volume 12, Issue 1. The submission deadline for Volume 12, Issue 2 was October 1, 2025.

Submissions fell under one of the following categories:

- Drama in Education (i.e., studies in drama/theatre curriculum, special education, integrated arts, assessment and evaluation)
- Applied Theatre (i.e., studies in community-based theatre, theatre of the oppressed, the

teaching artist, diversity and inclusion)
- Theatre for Young Audiences and Youth Theatre (i.e., studies in acting, directing, dramaturgy, playwriting, dramatic literature, theatre technology, arts-based research methodologies)

Article submissions addressed the following questions:

Drama in Education
- How and why do we teach drama and theatre in schools and community settings?
- How do the roles and responsibilities of the teaching artist differ from those of the classroom teacher (primary, secondary or higher education)?
- What is the contemporary role of drama and theatre in arts education?
- How do we prepare future theatre artists and educators in the 21st century?
- What are innovative ways of devising original works and/or teaching theatre using various aesthetic forms, media, and/or technology?
- To what extent can the study of global theatre forms impact students' learning?
- To what extent should we distinguish theatre-making from drama as a learning medium?
- How can integrated-arts curricula facilitate teaching, learning and presenting the craft of theatre?
- How do we assess students' aesthetic understanding and awareness?
- What research supports the potential of drama as a learning medium?
- How do drama and theatre make connections across curricular content areas and beyond schools?
- How do drama and theatre education contribute to lifelong learning?
- What role do drama and theatre play in community agencies?

Applied Theatre
- How can drama provide a forum to explore ideas?
- What are innovative strategies for using drama to stimulate dialogue, interaction and change?
- How is theatre being used to rehabilitate people in prisons, health facilities, and elsewhere?
- How do we prepare future artists/educators for work in applied theatre?
- What ethical questions should the artist/educator consider in their work?
- In what ways are aesthetics important in applied theatre? How do we negotiate a commitment to both the process and product of applied theatre work?
- How do artist/educators assess participants' understandings in an applied theatre project?
- What are the major tensions in the field and how are these being addressed?
- To what extent has recent research on affect influenced community-based praxis?

Theatre for Young Audiences/Youth Theatre
- Theatre for young audiences is an international movement and the borders are breaking down so how do we present and respond to work from other countries?
- Who exactly are our new audiences—who are we talking to?
- Are we as brave as we think we are? How does what we think we should do relate to what we want to do as artists?
- Is the writer at the heart of future theatre creation? What has happened to dramaturgy in the brave new world of immersive, experiential, visual/physical theatre?
- Theatre for Young Audiences has always been in the forefront of theatrical innovation.

So what is next?

- What have we learned about nurturing the artist of the future-- playwriting, theatre-making, performance?
- How do artists establish rigorous, intentional new works development processes that are innovative and sustainable?
- How does accountability serve the stakeholders in a new works development process?
- How do we define and measure success in theatre for young audiences?

We encouraged article submissions from interdisciplinary artists, educators, and scholars engaged in work associated with these topics. Our goal was to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that will enrich the development of educational theatre in the coming years.

Call for Papers

Papers were to be no longer than 6,000 words, had to be accompanied by a 200 word abstract and 100 word biographies for the author(s), and conformed to APA style manual. For this issue, articles could include traditional academic scholarship and narratives of practice.

Reviewing Procedures

Each article was sent to two peer reviewers. They provided advice on the following:

- Whether the article should be published with no revisions/with revisions.
- The contribution the article makes to the arts community.
- Specific recommendations to the author about improving the article.
- Other publishing outlets if the article is considered unacceptable.

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Cover image from NYU Steinhardt / Program in Educational Theatre production of *Sonder: The Dreams We Carry*, directed by Nan Smithner in 2025.

ARTSPRAXIS

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ArtsPraxis
Volume 12 Issue 2

Editorial: Complicity

JONATHAN P. JONES
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

As I walked into the courtyard of the apartment building in Albany Park, I had no idea what to expect. I hadn't met anyone from the neighborhood before, but I'd heard many things about what it was like to live there. Among the rumors were that it is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the United States; that 40+ languages are spoken in the streets and bodegas. But most impressive among the rumors were those of a shifting demographic of immigrants over many decades, with populations coming and going over the years, as predictable as the tides.

This courtyard was remarkable in and of itself. Having lived in various neighborhoods throughout New York City and Jersey City, I was very familiar with such an apartment building. The main structure formed a 'U' around a central courtyard and the main entrance was in the dip of that 'U.' A centralized cement walk allowed you to move from the street to the building's main entrance. In most buildings, the entirety of the courtyard is paved over, but there might be a patch of grass on either side of that central walkway–as was the case here in Albany Park. There's nothing particularly ethnic or otherwise

representative of the people who live within the brick and mortar of it all–generic mid-west and northeast urban apartment building from the early to mid-twentieth century, but in a flag that might hang from a window; the scent of dinner cooking in the late afternoon; the music emanating from open windows when the weather permits–these are the first indicators that bring the vibrancy of the inhabitants to life.

Among the current in-flow are immigrants of Mexican descent. As such, Mexican flags are among the accouterments flowing from one window. That flag is not alone, of course; the red, white, and blue of the Philippine flag hangs from a window above; a star of David emblazoned on a bandera below. But on the day that I walked into the courtyard, it was the child of one of the Mexican immigrants who greeted me and my friends. In her welcoming remarks, she told us a little about the building, relaying a version of the rumors highlighted above so that we understood that the current occupants of the building could be temporary–that those who came before have moved on to other neighborhoods and that, in time, those who lived here now would move on too. But today, on this day, a friend of hers was agitated about some issues happening at home. Her friend's agitation was becoming unbearable so she was hopeful that as part of our visit, we would help organize a surprise party for her friend. Unanimously willing, she invited us to go inside the building to meet some of her neighbors who would also help put the party together.

She led us through a gate and into the entryway of the building. In similar buildings in other neighborhoods, gentrification will strip away any feeling of 'lived-in' that we found before us. While a new coat of paint does its best to cover up the ebb and flow of the tide over the previous nine decades, the texture of the walls betrays the newness of the color. We ascended one flight of stairs, and our host led us down a hallway to her friend's apartment. We are welcomed by her friend's mother and invited into their living room.

Given that I had no specific expectations for what I would encounter when I arrived at the apartment building that day, I was pretty open to whatever experiences might follow. And yet, I was confounded by the rush of emotions that overwhelmed me as I crossed the threshold into that apartment. I am not Mexican-American, but my husband is. And twenty years ago when I was a high school English and drama teacher in Los Angeles, the majority of my students were. And crossing that threshold and looking at the photographs that

adorned the walls, the imitation gilding on the frames on the 'artwork,' the small shrine to la Virgen de Guadalupe on the wall among them--I had been in this apartment many times before. In some ways, I lived in a similar apartment at that very moment. For however open I might have been to whatever might come that day, I did not expect to feel as though I had come home as I crossed that threshold into a stranger's apartment. I was home and not home; they were strangers and family. And as I was invited in because a young woman was distressed and there was hope that a party might mask that distress in some way…in a Mexican-American home…in 2024…in the United States of America…I knew instantly all that I was in for. And I wasn't prepared–I wasn't expecting to be invited into someone's home in Albany Park, but that's exactly where I was ten minutes into a production of Port of Entry*.*

Port of Entry is a co-production between Chicago's Albany Park Theatre Project (APTP) and New York City's Third Rail Productions. Founded in 1997, APTP devises theatre works with young people that tell stories from their neighborhood. Over the last decade these works have gained wide acclaim for their site-specific approach to bringing these stories to life. In the case of *Port of Entry*, a local warehouse was retrofitted to become a three-story apartment building, enabling stories from within three apartments to enliven the challenges experienced by immigrants in the neighborhood over many decades. And in the impeccable attention to detail in creating these apartments, we are in living rooms. Young people take us into the private world of bedrooms to share their innermost thoughts about their lives. We sit around kitchen tables, we prepare and taste foods. We laugh. And we cry. And we experience community in a visceral way, both in public and in private. And as it is performed with a panoply of aesthetic conventions, we are reminded periodically that this is theatre–but the rooms, the texture, the environment is so meticulously real that we cannot escape the fact that the problems presented are from real people in the neighborhood–that don't just need space to be heard, but need the energy, advocacy, and sponsorship of the audience to change course. In 40+ years of theatre going, it was–without question–the most incredible experience I have ever had at the theatre.

Since my visit to that apartment building in Albany Park seventeen months ago, I think about it often. For someone who has made their career about theatre by, for, and with youth, it is not surprising that this experience made such an impact on me. In one of many tearful moments that night, while seated across from a young person on an adjoining bed in their character's bedroom, I leaned back against the bedroom wall and remarked, "They're just kids," in acknowledgement of the catharsis I was experiencing as brought to me by these young performers. 'Just kids,' who brought the fullness of their lived experience to the telling of these stories that highlighted complex problems plaguing the inhabitants of their neighborhood. I think about *Port of Entry* not only because of the exceptional nature of the theatrical event, but also because it should be instructive to theatre makers about what theatre can do in terms of highlighting contemporary issues.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was created in 2002 following the attacks of September 11th, and since that time, there are more people in immigration detention than ever before; 65,740 individuals in ICE detention centers as of December 1, 2025, according to a report by *The Guardian* (Craft, Witherspoon, & Olivares, 2025). Total immigration arrests from January 28, 2025 to December 1, 2025 stand at 307,440, up 17,560 in the last 14 days of November, and deportations in the same time period were 307,170 (Craft & Witherspoon, 2025). Given the media attention and condemnation by the political left in the U.S., these numbers need to be contextualized historically, as they are shy of President Obama's deportations averaging some 340,000 people per year of his 8 year term; President George W. Bush averaged 1.291 million deportations per year; and President Clinton deported 1.536 million people per year (Chishti, Pierce, & Bolter, 2017).

While these numbers highlight that the current number of immigrant detentions and deportations are not particularly significant, it is the tactics–the 'show' that is truly alarming. Masked bands of unidentified federal actors from ICE, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, National Guard, and who knows who else are being deployed in cities across the country to make a 'show' of U.S. Supreme Court-sanctioned

anti-immigrant terror following their opinion in a September 2025 case (Ryan, Detrow, Garsd, & Keatley, 2025). In the concurring opinion, Justice Kavanaugh opined,

> Illegal immigration is especially pronounced in the Los Angeles area, among other locales in the United States. About 10 percent of the people in the Los Angeles region are illegally in the United States—meaning about 2 million illegal immigrants out of a total population of 20 million. Not surprisingly given those extraordinary numbers, U. S. immigration officers have prioritized immigration enforcement in the Los Angeles area. The Government sometimes makes brief investigative stops to check the immigration status of those who gather in locations where people are hired for day jobs; who work or appear to work in jobs such as construction, landscaping, agriculture, or car washes that often do not require paperwork and are therefore attractive to illegal immigrants; and who do not speak much if any English. If the officers learn that the individual they stopped is a U. S. citizen or otherwise lawfully in the United States, they promptly let the individual go. If the individual is illegally in the United States, the officers may arrest the individual and initiate the process for removal.
>
> Immigration stops based on reasonable suspicion of illegal presence have been an important component of U. S. immigration enforcement for decades, across several presidential administrations. In this case, however, the District Court enjoined U. S. immigration officers from making investigative stops in the Los Angeles area when the stops are based on the following factors or combination of factors: (i) presence at particular locations such as bus stops, car washes, day laborer pickup sites, agricultural sites, and the like; (ii) the type of work one does; (iii) speaking Spanish or speaking English with an accent; and (iv) apparent race or ethnicity.
>
> (...)
>
> Under this Court's precedents, not to mention common sense, those circumstances taken together can constitute at least reasonable suspicion of illegal presence in the United States.

> Importantly, reasonable suspicion means only that immigration officers may briefly stop the individual and inquire about immigration status. (2025)

Common sense? Per Justice Kavanaugh, as 10% of the population of Los Angeles are illegally present in the U.S. and most of those people immigrated from Mexico, if the government sees people who appear of Mexican descent or speak with an accent or in Spanish and congregate where immigrants are 'known' to congregate, then they should be profiled and questioned.

Where is this heading? This is not the first time the U.S. has engaged in racial profiling or systematized mass detention and expulsion. During World War II, more than 117,000 Japanese Americans were detained based solely on their race (Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, n.d.). The official rationale was that this detention was necessary in order to prevent Japanese espionage, but in time, it was revealed that though the government had assessments indicating that Japanese Americans posed no threat at all and were not likely to engage in espionage, this racist policy was implemented in order to take land, farms, and other businesses from this community and hopefully expunge them from American society (Maddow, 2025).

Just a decade later, more than 1 million Mexican men were similarly profiled and forcibly deported or voluntarily returned to Mexico in "Operation Wetback" (Fernández, 2024). The current policy claims to be targeting illegal immigrants more broadly, but given the Supreme Court decision, we can see that targeting specific racial or ethnic groups is permissible (*common sense,* even).

Some might believe the morally bankrupt position that this is not your fight. Targeting Japanese Americans one day and Mexicans another. In just the last few weeks, President Trump has opined that Somali people in the U.S. are 'garbage.'

> These are people that do nothing but complain (...) When they come from hell and they complain and do nothing but bitch, we don't want them in our country. Let them go back to where they came from and fix it (...) [Somalia] stinks and we don't want them in our country (...) We could go one way or the other, and we're going to go the wrong way if we keep taking in garbage into our

> country. (direct quotes that appear in Kanno-Youngs & McCreesh, 2025)

Which community will they target next? And targeting through words and terror tactics are just the beginning. In the One, Big, Beautiful Bill Act, "Congress set aside roughly $170 billion for immigration enforcement and border security efforts through the legislation, including $75 billion in extra funding for ICE, making it by far the highest-funded law enforcement agency in the federal government" (Montoya-Galvez, 2025). In addition to expanding the agency, these funds also provide for additional private detention centers (Esien, 2025). So the administration is just getting started.

I think about the young people I met in Albany Park, particularly as the terror squads descended upon Chicago in the last few months. I think about those recreated apartments at *Port of Entry* that I stepped into, and the real-life apartments that they represent. I think about my fellow citizens who are disengaged. I think about educators and theatre makers who think these issues are beyond their remit. I think about bystanders. I think about complicity. In this issue, we see our peers and thought leaders investigate how they are fighting back in their way. It's not enough. It's never enough. But it's a start. Let these tools motivate you to examine your practice. Who in your sphere of influence needs your support? What are you doing to stand up in these times that require moral courage? And how can you do more? We will get past this. And when we look back at the ignominy of this time, let us be counted as among those who resisted capitulation and refused complicity.

IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue, our contributors offer reflections and documentation of creative practices that are reimagining the field. Dermott Daly launches the issue with a provocation, asking how and why we need to diversity curricula in theatre programs. Crestcencia Ortiz-Barnet interrogates her experience (alongside students of color) of the imposter syndrome through an analysis of community building work she has instituted at North Carolina A&T State University. Kaitlin Orlena-Kearns Jaskolski returns to *ArtsPraxis* to explore the paradoxes of disability inclusion in theatre through four case studies from The Oasis League, an applied

inclusive theatre project at Oasis Association, a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities in Cape Town, South Africa. Shuangshuang Cai examines the role of applied theatre as a tool for community development within contemporary China's urban context, with a specific focus on its capacity to strengthen community identity and social capital. Lemar O. Archer considers how documentary theatre can be used as an arts-based research method for international graduate students to share experiences of language barriers, financial limitations and cultural adjustment difficulties in order to promote awareness, empathy, and institutional reflection. Couched in the politics of a Southern Indiana school district, Luke Foster Hayden explores how Christopher Small's concept of "musicking" can be used as a methodological framework for critical pedagogy. Nabanita Chakraborty contends that Badal Sircar's 'third theatre' or 'intimate theatre' provides a compelling model for transforming literature classrooms into participatory spaces. Carla Lahey documents the way some evangelical churches provide spaces for children and teens to engage in the arts. Finally, in reviewing Jo Beth Gonzalez's *Temporary Stages III: How High School Theatre Fosters Spiritual Growth and Critical Consciousness*, Lauren Gorelov demonstrates how Gonzalez situates theatre pedagogy within a critical spiritual framework that unites students' inner development with their growing awareness of social structures and inequities.

LOOKING AHEAD

In 1983, Dorothy Heathcote stated that, as educators, we should be asking what sort of schools we want–but also, what sort of society we want. Her words are incredibly timely today: they challenge us to consider questions of purpose, curriculum, access, and stewardship. Our next issue (Volume 13, Issue 1) looks to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around these ideas which were investigated at the recent 2025 Dorothy Heathcote Now Conference hosted at Manchester Metropolitan University, under the leadership of guest-editor and conference chair David Allen. We encourage article submissions from artists, educators, and scholars from different disciplines. Our goal is to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that will enrich the

development of educational theatre in the years to come. That issue will publish in mid-2026. Thereafter, look to the Verbatim Performance Lab for outreach and innovation from the NYU Steinhardt Program in Educational Theatre.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan P. Jones, PhD is a graduate from the Program in Educational Theatre at New York University, where he earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. He conducted his doctoral field research in fall 2013 and in spring of 2014 he completed his dissertation, *Drama Integration: Training Teachers to Use Process Drama in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and World Languages*. He received an additional M.A. in English at National University and his B.A. in Liberal Arts from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Jonathan is certified to teach English 6-12 in the state of California, where he taught Theatre and English for five years at North Hollywood High School and was honored with The Inspirational Educator Award by Universal Studios in 2006. Currently, Jonathan is currently an administrator at NYU Steinhardt. He serves on the editorial board for *Applied Theatre Research* and *Youth Theatre Journal,* and on the board of directors as well as chair of Research and Scholarship for the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) where he serves as Board Chair, 2025-2027.

Jonathan has conducted drama workshops in and around New York City, London, and Los Angeles in schools and prisons. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Jonathan's directing credits include *Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Julius Caesar, Elsewhere in Elsinore, Dorothy Rides the Rainbow, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Bye Bye Birdie, The Laramie Project, Grease, Little Shop of Horrors*, and *West Side Story*. Assistant directing includes *Woyzeck* and *The Crucible*. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of

St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Production credits include co-producing a staged-reading of a new musical, *The Throwbacks*, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival and serving as assistant production manager and occasionally as stage director for the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, most recently directing *Quiet No More: A Celebration of Stonewall* at Carnegie Hall for World Pride, 2019.

At NYU, Jonathan previously served the Program in Educational Theatre as faculty member, coordinator of doctoral studies, and student-teaching supervisor. His courses included Acting: Scene Study, American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Assessment of Student Work in Drama, Development of Theatre and Drama I, Devising Educational Drama Programs and Curricula, Directing Youth Theatre, Drama across the Curriculum and Beyond, Drama in Education I, Drama in Education II, Dramatic Activities in the Secondary Drama Classroom, Methods of Conducting Creative Drama, Theory of Creative Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Elementary Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Secondary Drama, Shakespeare's Theatre, and World Drama. Jonathan was awarded the Steinhardt Teaching Excellence Award in 2025.

Early in his placement at NYU, Jonathan served as teaching assistant for American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Seminar in Elementary Student Teaching, Theatre of Brecht and Beckett, and Theatre of Eugene O'Neill and worked as a course tutor and administrator for the study abroad program in London for three summers. He has supervised over 50 students in their student teaching placements in elementary and secondary schools in the New York City Area. Prior to becoming a teacher, Jonathan was an applicant services representative at NYU in the Graduate School of Arts and Science Enrollment Services Office for five years.

Recent publications include Discoveries beyond the Lesson Plan: A 'How to' (with David T. Montgomery) in Education in the North, 31 (2), "And So We Write": Reflective Practice in Ethnotheatre and Devised Theatre Projects in *LEARNing Landscapes, 14* (2), Let Them Speak: Devised Theatre as a Culturally Responsive Methodology for Secondary Students in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People* (edited by Selina Busby, Charlene Rajendran, and Kelly

Freebody; forthcoming), *Paradigms and Possibilities: A Festschrift in Honor of Philip Taylor* (2019), and Education at Roundabout: It's about Turning Classrooms into Theatres and the Theatre into a Classroom (with Jennifer DiBella and Mitch Mattson) in *Education and Theatres: Beyond the Four Walls* (edited by Michael Finneran and Michael Anderson; 2019). His book *Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Culturally Responsive and Student-Centered Approach* was published by Routledge in winter 2023/24.

Recent speaking engagements include So You Wanna Be a Scholar: Turning Your Session/Workshop into an Article, Workshop Presentation, AATE Theatre in Our Schools (TIOS), Washington, DC and AATE National Conference: Stages of Change, Cleveland, OH. (2025); Communing with the Ancestors, Plenary Performance, International Drama in Education Research Institute at University of British Columbia, Vancouver (2025); Establishing Communities of Practice among Pre-Service Drama Teachers: Revisiting Learning to Teach Drama: A Case Narrative Approach, EdTA Teacher Education Conference: Building CommUNITY, Minneapolis, MN (2024), Amplify & Ignite: Creative Practice in and With Communities, Emerson College, Boston and AATE National Conference: Stages of Change, Cleveland, OH. (2025); Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Culturally Responsive and Student-Centered Approach, AATE National Conference: Rooting Change, Chicago, IL (2024), Face to Face 2024: NYC Arts In Education Roundtable Virtual Conference (2024), and EDTA Connected Arts Network (2025); Communing with the Ancestors—a keynote lecture for Amplify & Ignite: A Symposium on Research and Scholarship (AATE/NYU, 2024) and featured guest spots on Fluency with Dr. Durell Cooper Podcast, speaking about Origins, Inspirations, and Aspirations, and Conversations in Social Justice Podcast, York St. John University, speaking about Activism and Race within University Teaching and Research (2021); panel moderation for AATE Leaders of Color Institute (We Will Not Be Erased: Combating Censorship and Book Bans in Theatre by, for, and about Youth, 2024 and Cultivating Spaces for LOC in Educational and 'Professional' Theatre Settings - Opening Keynote with Daphnie Sicre and José Casas, 2022), invited workshops for AATE Theatre in Our Schools (Reimagining Drama Curriculum: The Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework, Locating Order in the Chaos: Revisiting Assessment in the Drama Classroom and Stage to Page: Reimagining

the Teacher/Practitioner Role in Scholarship) and the AATE National Conference (Classroom Justice: Culturally Responsive, Student-Centered Assessment in the Drama Classroom and Pandemic Positives: What Do We Keep? Looking Backwards to Move Forward); invited workshops for the 2024 NYC Arts in Education Roundtable (Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Student-Centered Approach), LondonDrama, 2023 Dorothy Heathcote NOW conference in Aberdeen, Scotland (Assessment in the Drama Classroom; and co-facilitation with David Montgomery: *The Bear That Wasn't*: A Process Drama Investigating Identity and *The Last Book in the Universe*: A Process Drama Unpacking the Consequences of Book-Banning); an invited lecture on Performance as Activism at the Research-Based Theater Seminar, Washington, D.C. Citizen Diplomacy Fund Rapid Response COVID-19 Research-Based Theater Project, The COVID Monologues, part of the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund for US Alumni Rapid Response made possible by the US Department of State and Partners of the Americas (2020); a keynote lecture on Drama and Education: Why and How for the Drama and Education Conference, Shanghai, China (2020); and an invited lecture, On Creativity, for the University of Anbar, Iraq (2020). Upcoming engagements include hosting Amplify & Ignite, a symposium on Theatre for social and Civic Engagement at NYU Steinhardt in 2026.

In addition to his responsibilities at NYU, Jonathan teaches Fundamentals of Public Speaking, History of Theatre, and Introduction to Theatre at CUNY: Borough of Manhattan Community College.

ArtsPraxis
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How and Why to Diversify Curricula

DERMOT DALY
LEEDS CONSERVATOIRE and
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ABSTRACT

Calls for decolonisation and diversification of curricula in Higher Education (HE) have grown. Statements and commitments addressing these calls have been made by HE institutions but can face resistance, meaning the rate of change has not increased as called for. This paper seeks to explore what can be gained through diversification of curricula, tangibly and intangibly, as well as how to begin the process with meaning. It looks to mitigate resistance by exploring the benefits that are tangential to decolonisation, arguing that even if the idea of decolonisation is resisted, its benefits are less so, addressing research questions: Why diversify? How to diversify sustainably and with purpose? And, how, if it is met, to challenge resistance to this diversification? It is contended that cross-disciplinary insights can—and do—offer useable frameworks and understanding to make concrete the commitments made. There is reaffirmation as to why this work is needed, and who it is for and benefits. Suggestions are

offered—through the prism of the performing arts—of where and how to start, how to overcome resistance, and where and how to look for knowledge.

WHY THE NEED?

Curriculum in UK higher education is comprised 'of 'white ideas' by 'white authors' and is a result of [a] colonialism that has normalized whiteness' (Peters, 2015, p. 641). This is evident across higher education, where 'curricula continue to be unashamedly white' (Tate & Bagguley, 2016, p. 291) and acutely in the performing arts, where there is a 'White Eurocentric focus as the bedrock for the canon' (Daly, 2023, p. 465). This is the curriculum that someone not racialised-as-White, such as myself, was taught and is often expected to teach, and therefore legitimise and propagate, uncritically. At base level, if education is based around four functions; socialization, social integration, social placement, and social and cultural innovation, (Barkan, 2016, p. 601) it is ultimately geared toward preparing people to live harmoniously and with understanding of the society, and world, that we live in. That being the case, having a curriculum which posits privileges for certain knowledge(s) and sources of that knowledge, runs counter to that aim. A diversification is needed to redress this. This is especially true in my discipline of performing arts, rooted as it is in the analysing of the human condition.

In scope, alongside and in tandem with diversification, are the effects of colonialism—specifically academic-colonialism—in which 'authors and academics from the developed powerful countries having better access to funding and institutional support [...] have better chances to get their works published' (Sengupta, 2021, p. 204) and therefore added to curricula. This 'capturing' of curricula creates difficulties in addressing and enacting an anti-racist curriculum as 'new pathways for knowing, doing and being in the world' (Hall et al., 2021, p. 903) have, and continue to be colonised. When coupled with clear moral and practical reasons for a front footed redress, the greater awareness and acceptance of the need for decolonisation which has 'risen significantly in recent years' (Shain et al., 2021, p. 920), gives impetus to sustained and motivated action. Discovering, and acting on, reasons for diversification can lead to active decolonisation of the

knowledges that are privileged and through this, an anti-racist, progressive and more socially connected curriculum can be brought into being.

Using questions as headings through the following is a conscious attempt—much like a dramaturg—to create sustained analysis of the issues at hand. Therefore, leading to, it is hoped, critical and reasoned conclusions, giving impetus for sustained and sustainable action(s). This questioning allows for a structuring which begins by looking to disciplines outside of performing arts, where cross-pollination of ideas and routes to new curriculum formation can be seen by laying bare the commonalities across teaching and learning. Working through questioning ensures that there is more than one point of authority, creating a 'practice that is open to, and actively draws on, diverse perspectives' (Tobi, 2020, p. 261)—a key tenet in decolonisation work. Following on, more pragmatically, we look to learn who stands to benefit (and in what ways) giving more motivation to sustain work in this area. Pulling these strands together, this paper aims to offer 'ways in' to begin the necessary work, concluding with a reaffirmation of the necessity and imperative for diversification of curricula, both in the arts and more broadly.

WHY DIVERSIFY?

Even the most cursory glance around campus would make clear that not all university students are the same; this is obvious, but not consistently acknowledged. There are several metrics which show and/or suggest disparities between levels of attainment based on immutable personal characteristics.

The race attainment gap (here in the UK), gleaned through reported statistics, over several years, show substantive disparities between outcomes for racialised-as-White students and those students not racialised in the same manner. UK Government statistics show that a racialised-as-Black student who enters higher education in the UK with three A's at A-Level (the qualification often used as a measure of suitability for higher education study), can expect to attain the same level of undergraduate degree as a racialised-as-White student who enters higher education with two B's and a C (Office for Students, 2021), these figures translate into employment outcomes which follow the same trajectory. The most recent release of UK graduate outcome

data indicates that 61% of racialised-as-White students can expect to be in full time employment compared 53% of those racialised-as-Black (Black or Black British African, Caribbean and other) (HESA, 2025).[1] This significant gap raises questions of what the disparity is and where it resides.

There are a multitude of factors necessitating a need to be sensitive to the fact that '[m]ultiple aspects of advantage and disadvantage, both separately and in combination, influence educational outcomes' (Mcmaster & Cook, 2018, p. 271); it is imperative to recognise the intersectional nature of university students. One size does not fit all. This can be evinced as justification for a more diverse range of canonical work in curricula which include representation of lived identities for those, like mine, pitched at the 'wrong end' of the divide. This is especially important when we consider that on performing arts courses we are incubating and nurturing the storytellers of the future. It should be remembered that,

> Universities transform lives. […] But not everyone benefits in the same way. Fewer students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds go to university, and when they do they tend not to do as well as their more privileged peers. The influence of background continues long after graduation. […] Compared to their peers, graduate outcomes are not as good for black and minority ethnic students, nor for disabled students. Universities have long worked hard to remedy the impact of disadvantage, […]. But differences remain, and are stark. (Dandridge, 2016, p. 1)

McDuff and Hughes theorised an inclusive curriculum framework to enact 'learning that is meaningful, and accessible to all' (Hockings, 2010, p. 1). It hinges around creating an accessible curriculum, enabling students to see themselves reflected, and equipping students to work in a global and diverse world, through interrogation of concepts, content, learning and teaching, assessment, feedback and review. Through a series of questions, prompts are offered to course teams and module leaders to create an inclusive curriculum. This

[1] This data aggregates graduate outcomes across disciplines and is therefore not specific to the performing arts where full time, permanent employment is scarce.

framework works in-so-much as it disrupts homogenous and ‘same old’ thinking but it does not give a concrete methodology that enacts the provocations practically. This is, in part, due to the differences inherent in settings, but it is contended that this lack of practical enaction may be seen as a hindrance or used as a method of avoidance by teams and courses already resistant to proactive change. In building of inclusion and decolonisation of curricula and teaching, reactive change is almost never more than surface deep.

It is possible to decolonise a curriculum by diversifying it and this can come from the impulse to move toward anti-racist education. An anti-racist curriculum can be a direct result of a shift to decolonisation which can be facilitated by a diversification of what is included. Diversification for the sake of broadening, can make clear the colonial roots of curricula which propagate a racist agenda, once we accept that racism and colonialism are bedfellows.

It must be acknowledged that in formal education more and more is being asked of fewer and fewer with less and less time; any bridge of that gap is a necessary tool in efforts to create inclusivity through decolonised and anti-racist learning, equalising all learning (and by extension the society that it is nested in). Within performing arts education, it is increasingly important to see the whole student—the whole performer—holistically; denial of identity can sound the death knell for creativity. Performers, including Emmy nominated actor Regé-Jean Page, have spoken about their need to ‘codeswitch’ knowing that ‘if I was this guy, I’d get access here; if I was this guy, people will accept me in this way’ (McGurk, 2021). Whilst in a society that is still in need of reminders that Black lives matter, it must be recognised that this codeswitching—or assimilating—to fit in with the prevalent norm will be an ever-present tool for all marginalised performers. As long as what is taught is from a position of power that the marginalised are not privy to, this will continue to be the case. It need not be.

Denial of identity, stemming from assimilation and lack of representation of that identity, can lead to psychological distress or even severe mental ill health. The actor David Harewood,[2] in detailing his episodes of psychosis, opines that he ‘fell so hard’ because he had

[2] Harewood graduated from RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts) in 1987; he became President of the school in 2024.

> […] assimilated to the point where I thought colour didn't really matter [...] I had no knowledge of my Black self, no sense of the history and meaning, no sense of the story of my people and the rich culture from which I came [...] I'd built the house without setting the foundations. (Harewood, 2022, p. 86)

The effects of colonisation are not solely in the past; they are very much the precursor of a mightily real present.

The canon of texts used is to be overhauled and re-examined through different lenses. Decolonisation efforts must be squarely focussed on what and where the colonisation that is to be removed, emanates from. By understanding who the status quo benefits and who it disenfranchises, this becomes clear. In doing this, I argue that space for 'continuous, responsive and aware' (Daly, 2023, p. 14) engagement can be found in the creation of an anti-racist—and therefore progressive—curriculum.

For learners to achieve and aim for the best they can be, it seems obligatory to include as many lived identities as possible within the texts that make up the taught curriculum. For there to be greater representation in the texts, there is a necessity for greater representation in those choosing the texts. The problematics of homogenisation of identity are brought to the fore in the wording of the Mba et al. (2023) statistic relaying that 18.5% of academics and only 14.3% of professors at UK universities identify as *B.A.M.E.* (Mba et al., 2023, p. 4 [italics added]). Whilst shocking, in reporting as 'B.A.M.E.' these statistics inadvertently (it is hoped) mask the specificity of the problems around racial identity in academia. 'B.A.M.E.' creates a fulcrum between those racialised-as-White and the implied homogeneity of everyone else, this paper uses 'racialised-as' to draw attention to this. To see the problem fully and understand the nuances involved, this acronym, and those analogous to it, must be challenged to ensure that 'White' is not the default. This is gaining traction across society, with the UK government acknowledging that the acronym 'is poorly understood by many', that it 'obscures important disparities between different ethnic groups' committing to 'be as granular and specific as possible in how we talk about ethnicity' (*Inclusive Britain: Government Response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities*, 2022).

To gain greater representation in the creators of curricula, there

needs to be greater specificity of representation in the texts that *they* studied for them to feel and understand, first hand, the benefits of this representation to go on to champion it. It is within this seemingly intractable problem that the status quo perpetuating inertia has resided. It is this inertia that must be addressed by all, as it is indeed all who will reap the benefits of a broader knowledge and understanding base. The decolonisation of teaching and learning spaces can only occur when—like any harmful ongoing addiction—there is acceptance and acknowledgment of the issue.

WHAT IS ALREADY THERE FOR DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES?

There is already concern 'with the lack of visibility of marginalised communities and the reinforcement of historical stereotypes in the classical canon scripts' (Stamatiou, 2022, p. 96) within the performing arts but there is much to be gained from cross-disciplinary exploration. As decolonisation is the work of uncoupling and/or examining colonial influence on knowledge and its understanding and production, there are areas of commonality across disciplines.

Arts and Humanities disciplines, due to their inherent subjective nature, are ripe for decolonisation practice and in language studies there is much to be gleaned. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us that '[t]he domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised' (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 16); in the discipline of language, we see this clearly.

'The decolonization of German studies as it is currently practiced encourages us to take a critical look at the discipline and to prepare for an undoing of oppressive structures that have shaped pedagogies, theories and curricula at the core of our field' (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 151), in recognition of the need, preparation has already occurred; the imperative for action is implicit in acknowledgement of the imbalance. The ability to prepare is itself a colonialist privilege and for those under the yoke of cultural and scholarly malnourishment, every moment counts. Criser and Knott acknowledge the easily evidenced gains that stand to be made from decolonisationary efforts, through access and participation by 'students who might otherwise not see themselves represented and empowered in the German classroom' (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 152), clearly using decolonisation to lead to greater

diversity. In accepting that the modes of teaching—that which is taught and the texts that propagate that thinking—are contributing factors to oppression, the moral imperative to remove, dismantle and replace such structures with more egalitarian ones is a given. Recognising—and voicing—that '[e]fforts to decolonize our teaching require that we investigate the spaces of our work, the content of our courses, particularly the privileging of Western knowledge, and our pedagogies, foremost with regard to their inclusivity' (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 152) suggests that there is an understanding of a shift of focus from an 'us vs them' mode of thinking to a 'we *and* us' counterpoint, but is still couched in a language that suggests a retention of power, maintaining imbalance. There is an implication here that through changing the scope of work, inclusivity will come. This model looks toward a finite position, an immutability that once inclusion has been 'achieved' it can be filed away in a box marked 'complete' and re-evaluated in ten (or more) years' time—this is a limiting and limited position. It is agreed that '[c]ommitting to the decolonization of our field requires us to rethink our position' (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 159) but the rethinking of the position is still from the 'our'—and therefore—exclusionary, position.

It is important to hold present that German, Italian and (overwhelmingly) English are the languages core to 18th and 19th century global colonial exploitation/expansion and therefore the languages that, through critical examination could be key to a fuller understanding of the effects and benefits of decolonisation. Indeed '[c]ritical engagement with the canon is crucial for any decolonization work' (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 153).

Decolonisation in scientific fields could be argued to be more complex, due to the often-binary positioning of findings within many of those disciplines. Understanding that knowledge is not the preserve of the coloniser will allow for those studying to see themselves represented, thus allowing those students to feel and recognise that they have as much to offer to the discipline and broader society.

Decolonisation of science necessitates that 'we should question our understanding of science as something that grew solely from the discoveries of a series of famous, western individuals [because] there are colonial roots in science that can arise from both commerce and imperialism' (Dessent et al., 2021, p. 5). This acknowledgement highlights a clear understanding of the legacy and its ongoing effects.

This is even more stark in maths which ‘is built on a modern history of elevating the achievements of one group of people [meaning] that the accomplishments of people of other genders and races have often been pushed aside’ (Crowell, 2023, p. 183). Working toward the ‘goal of demonstrating how knowledge drawn from diverse sources can lead to significant breakthroughs’ (Dessent et al., 2021, p. 7), facilitates nuanced discussion around the uses and purposes of scientific knowledge. It also allows for acknowledgment that ‘[t]he problems and concerns of wealthier nations are often very different from those in the developing world, as are the resources available to solve them’ (Dessent et al., 2021, p. 5) thus speaking directly to structural and systemic inequalities. The ability to see gives ability to confront and change.

Moving away from discipline specific literature, and because ‘colonization and its remnants permeate all facets of society’ (Shahjahan et al., 2021, p. 82), that seen as more universal is also illuminating. That students go to university to study subject(s) that they are interested in and look to the academics ‘in charge’ to guide that learning is not in dispute, however through a ‘lack of visibility of plural voices, or of people like them as having contributed to the subject’ students are implicitly being told that ‘you don’t belong, [and] that people like you have made no contribution to this subject area’ (Charles, 2019, p. 2). Within the context that ‘[c]urriculum and pedagogy is deeply implicated in grounding, validating, and/or marginalizing systems of knowledge production’ when it is implied that ‘people like you’ (Shahjahan et al., 2021, p. 74) have had no influence, the suggestion is that you too will have little or no influence. One should know one’s place.

An increase in plurality of voices, could aid the debasement of the dominant viewpoint(s) embedded within the ‘hidden curriculum’, which transmits ‘invisible values and epistemes’ (Shahjahan et al., 2021, pp. 76-77) to learners. The identification of this imbalance by students themselves is an acknowledged precursor to decolonisation calls in, and since, 2015. There is a tipping point where there is less tolerance by (some) students of ‘knowing their place’; a lowering of tolerance that must be matched by those who have the ability to rebalance and adjust. It should, however, be acknowledged that ‘developing student-actors to decolonise themselves through interventions that can be applied by all and target all’ (Stamatiou, 2022, p. 97) is important.

Librarian Elizabeth Charles asserts that ‘knowledge is not a finite commodity’, contending that ‘[t]he aim is not to tell academics what should be included on their reading lists, but to make visible the lack of other voices’ opening a space where subject experts can ‘review their curriculum with a new critical perspective, to investigate and widen their scope on what else should be included’ (Charles, 2019, p. 4). This space is opened when it is understood that ‘we are all the product of the society we live in and thus we all have unconscious biases that we need to be aware of and check against’ (Charles, 2019, p. 4); the ability to check against these biases is predicated on acknowledging that they exist in the first place. These synergies are not solely academic; they could and are—as evinced by Harewood—be societally enriching. It is acknowledged that ‘[i]t may be challenging to find content from the global south, using indexes and abstracts in English, but it is not an insurmountable challenge’ (Charles, 2019, p. 6). If the aim is to look afresh at a system of knowledge acknowledgment which has grown and permeated over centuries—through these indexes and abstracts—recontextualising and looking for gaps (which exist purely because the system of acknowledgement deemed it necessary) will, by design, be difficult (but not impossible) to find. The missing component in this situation is evidence of will.

Interestingly—and logically—Shahjahan et al. ‘refrain from offering a “manifesto,” or a “best practices” statement [...] as it would simply reproduce the coloniality logic of universality’ (Shahjahan et al., 2021, p. 75), thus underscoring an awareness of the nuances needed to enact this work. A series of provocations and/or questions allows for the person doing the work to be actively engaged, as opposed to passively following a set of guidelines, offering ‘educators a framework within which to critically reflect on their own efforts’ (Shahjahan et al., 2021, p. 75)—safeguarding against the spectre of ‘thoughtlessness and distance from reality’ (Whitfield, 1981, p. 471) which can hinder more than help.

The broad themes point to several key concepts essential for change: understanding of the effects of colonisation and therefore the benefits available through its inversion; a guide to thought leading to action, as opposed to a guide to action only; representation and the potential benefits for those represented as well as wider society; power—who wields it and why.

WHY DIVERSIFY—WHO BENEFITS?

The UK funding model for universities is ever more reliant on student numbers (and their attendant fees), leading to many universities creating more courses with broader appeal. Diversifying curricula in a sustained and committed manner could allow for this broadening to be actualised and solidified in a real and tangible way. The diversification of curricula through this model will benefit the University and its budget, and whilst it is argued—strongly—that this should, and must, not be the driving force in this work, it is contended that in order to placate and engage those who are and would be resistant to the necessary work, this can provide leverage. Power distribution and decision making in larger institutions is predicated on the status quo—the notion that things have always been the way that they are and that they work so there is no need to change them. The advent, and intensifying, of the financial squeeze on UK universities signifies and provides a point where this status quo is in danger. Without finance, universities will not exist; if universities do not exist, those who have vested interest will lose their position(s). In this we can see leverage to push past potential resistance. If there is no heart for decolonisation, there may be heart for sustainability of position. One obvious potential pitfall of such an approach is to support and sustain the very systems which are the reason for this work. This runs contrary to Audre Lorde's invocation that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, but the contention is that once it can be proved that this is a way in which to sustain what exists, slowly, incrementally, what exists will be changed. In a manner of thinking, the master's tools are not dismantling the masters house, it would be the master's hubris and self-importance which would prove to be their undoing.

The key beneficiaries—even within the machinations discussed above—will be students. The ability to see oneself represented in the work that one is doing is key to progression and change. If 'diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice heard' (Fosslien & Duffy, 2019, p. 185) it is imperative that belonging is engendered. Thinking outward toward the theatre and performance industry, this initial group of students will take these ideas, innately held because of their education, into an industry that will have little choice but to listen to, and be guided by, them. They will be empowered to widely explore their craft and the stories that they can tell. The manifestation that 'diversity is important in our institutions

because our classrooms are the place where our students will find their voice' (Goering et al., 2022, p. 88) will be seen in their practice and work. This will not only be a boon for students who have hitherto been marginalised, but for all students because 'culturally relevant pedagogy and curricula benefit students across racial and ethnic groups' (Rigell et al., 2022, p. 853). Painting a picture with limited colours and tools tends to be limiting; the imagination not given the freedom to imagine the world beyond. The same is true of education, not only in this narrow performing arts sense, but also in the broader, more holistic, sense of society beyond. There is little dispute that this is a long and difficult road but it seems imperative that the work that has gone before to get to a space where these ideas can be discussed, the calls from current (and previous) students, and the possibility to build the world that is often invoked through speech, is too important and vital to not actively and purposefully work toward.

The breadth of the stories told will be expanded and with it, our collective knowledge of humanity and what it means to be human will be enhanced and expanded, creating a clear path to equality and equity. Granted, telling stories—such is the wont of the artist—does not, in and of itself, change the world, but it can seed the thoughts and create a vision that can do just that.

In the purest academic sense, a space for more connected research can present itself. Understanding the geneses of knowledge and critically engaging with them will give rise to a more intricate and interconnected view on the world and humanity—it will, at the very least, begin to address the conditions that contributed to David Harewood's psychotic episode.

We often make sense of the world through stories and, conversely, make the world make sense through stories; in making the base and breadth of the stories told and heard broader, we can, in effect, make the world bigger. We can include more, think more, see more cogently our communalities.

WHERE TO START?

To begin, there must be questions around the context in which those guiding the learning acquired that knowledge. It must be held foremost that pedagogical shift exists to 'equip every student with [the] high level of life skills and competencies necessary for the twenty-first century'

(Cruz, 2020, p. 98). Most (if not all) of those senior educators who are making the choices that have marked effect on students now, were educated in the twentieth century or, at the very least, in the immediate shadow of the twentieth century, the context—or furnace—in which their knowledge was forged has markedly (and rightfully) changed.

Looking explicitly to the codification of White Supremacy, is it noted that in teacher training 'white supremacy and anti-Blackness [are] a normalised tenet of Western schooling' (Cushing, 2022, p. 45) and that these 'raciolinguistic ideologies are woven by design into teacher education policy assemblages in terms of curricula, assessments and pedagogical materials' (Cushing, 2022, p. 46). This normalisation can be traced through the schooling environment that educators are inculcated in and by. To counteract this, these biases—or normalising traits—are to be uncovered and actively engaged with and challenged in the teaching and pedagogical understandings that underpin that teaching. The intersectionality of identity, beginning with those educating, must be better understood, or at the very least be brought consciously, to the fore, in decision making and the selection and dissemination of learning material. This necessitates a humility in teaching and the acceptance that not everything is known, or can be known, by one individual—mindful of the dictionary definition of 'diversity' as comprising of different elements.

The use of 'accepted wisdom' is key to the perpetuation of things as they are. The inability or systemic impulse to not question is encoded in the ways in which knowledge is 'created' and disseminated. Looking to the culture of land acknowledgement can be instructive in the critique of knowledge systems and understanding(s) of why concepts are taught in the way that they are. It is quite striking that land acknowledgements are commonplace where there is significant lived memory and/or living reminder of the violence inherent in the inequalities that presaged many modern societies. Such land acknowledgements are de rigueur in Australian society, being in usage since the 1970s, gaining prominence in the past 20-30 years after the Mabo decision in 1992 (Meyers & Mugambwa, 1993). In 'overturning the doctrine of *terra nullis*, which assumed that Australia was unoccupied at the time of British settlement' (Hill, 1995, p. 304) these declarations serve as reminders, at the inception of interaction, that those who are currently on the land are not necessarily those who were first settled. They are an acknowledgement of displacement,

creating space to ‘raise awareness about histories that are often suppressed or forgotten’ (Friedler, 2018). How can this be used in pedagogy? Simply put, an acknowledgement of where the knowledge held as sacrosanct came from, makes clear (or raises questions over and about) the knowledge that it may well have displaced, allowing for a reasoned, informed and purposeful critique of colonialism and its effect(s). It is notable that such land acknowledgements are also seen in Canada and parts of the USA but not in the UK whose colonial history, arguably, is the reason for the displacement in all of those areas. Knowing where there may be gaps or suppression of knowledge, creates the space by which these voids can be investigated and brought to light.

Direct alternatives to the knowledge being imparted is to be sought. These alternatives may prove to yield more and deeper connection to the material studied. For a salient example, ‘many acting spaces do not point out that the most common formations and activities in acting classes are in fact ideologies borne of African thought and ways of understanding the world, such as the formation of the circle, improvisation […] musical theatre’ (Luckett & Shaffer, 2016, p. 2), knowing this raises questions of equality, creating space for discussion(s) around equality of dramatic practices in the West. If something that is quintessentially understood as a Western practice was appropriated from elsewhere, what else is being missed, what else is being obfuscated and, more importantly, why? Who stands to gain? Using this as a starting point in a shared learning space can yield positive unforeseen results.

Knowing where we are and moving in the reverse direction to the genesis can yield and uncover riches that have been obfuscated, a suppression that may have led to the hiding of knowledges and ways of being. Understanding this can facilitate a bridging beyond where we are to where we *could* be. Working with what is accepted will ultimately lead to a facsimile of a facsimile which in application leads to a blurring of definition, tending toward the middle of the road, a hall of mirrors, a feedback loop.

WHERE TO LOOK?

Looking is an essential verb. Looking facilitates seeing. Seeing facilitates, and encourages, creating. Creation necessitates change.

Active engagement in decolonisation work (see Winter et al., 2022; Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021; Arshad, 2024) provides scholarship to which one can turn, but that turning must be done in a critically engaged manner. The inherent biases which guide personal thinking and the way in which the world is seen, can lead to confirmation and consensus bias; this must be challenged and consciously worked with.

Other practical and active modes include asking the students. A guide to this can be glimpsed in Udoewa's radical participatory design which offers a salient meta-methodology which 'includes the community members in all activities of all phases of the design process and in all interpretation, decision-making, and planning between design activities' (Udoewa, 2022, p. 15). Given that calls for decolonisation gained traction after various student led protests and movements it would seem obvious for this to be a starting point. There is a disparity in 'knowledge' between teacher and learner insofar as hierarchy is concerned, but if we look at pedagogy as a mode of facilitating enquiry, where teaching is 'imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power' (Freire, 2017, p. 48), there is an impetus for this hierarchy to be challenged. Indeed, embedding of colonial practice is based explicitly on a hierarchical imposition—it could be argued that the first duty of decolonial practice is to debase, problematise and—much like land acknowledgment—make clear the hierarchical position. Till, at least, the mid-twentieth century, it was clear that 'Europe's universities were deeply invested in teaching the colonised to accept their subservience and know their rank and place in the economic, social, and intellectual hierarchy of global knowledge production' (Rangan, 2021, p. 62); this impetus, whilst not always explicit, lingers. If 'sunlight is […] the best of disinfectants' (Brandeis, 1913, p. 10), knowing where the power is held, who it is held by, and for what reason will likely lead to an understanding of how it can be used, challenged and/or changed to initiate the desired outcome. That is not to say that the holding and usage of power is inherently bad but understanding the impetus and uses/abuses of that hierarchical position, is important.

Within academic institutions—especially, in the UK, for those that report to the Research Excellence Framework (REF)—there is good reason for active, impactful, research. This research, naturally, should inform teaching and therefore have demonstrable impact on society (REF, 2025); pivoting toward this in departmental and wider

institutional aims should be actively engaged with as an embodied aspect of research instead of a bolted-on box-ticking exercise which much decolonisational work has come to be regarded by some (see Shain et al., 2021, p. 928). This research, however, should not reside in edicts and statements but in the work being done. This poses a challenge to how research is seen to exist, but in holding true to the notion that research delivers ‘change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (REF, 2025) this is not an incompatible aim. Active research must involve all who are affected, which, by definition, is society at large. If researchers are student facing it could be that some of this work becomes integral to curriculum—there could be teaching activity which compels students to use archives, to trace histories, to find alternatives; in doing this not only will the curriculum become decolonised through the eyes of those that are being taught but collaboration and mutual understanding can be fostered, thus breaking down some of the hierarchical barriers as discussed but also facilitating research skills and critical curiosity for the next generation of gatekeepers and taste makers. If it is not possible or desirable to set such work, seminar presentations and discussions could be planned to facilitate and stimulate thought and discussion around specific points of contention. The use of ‘student voice’ which should be entered into with ‘a willingness to shift power relationships and practices by taking seriously the contributions of students’ (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022, p. 567), is consistently encouraged and, in the UK, formalised and reported publicly via the annual National Student Survey (NSS). It could be that this student voice is actively encouraged to engage in some of the issues that academics are aiming to understand to teach difficult concepts. Basic pedagogical process suggests that there should be baseline assessment to evidence growth—this is a perfect way in which to accommodate and enact this pedagogical aim. Given that the NSS is used by universities to encourage application(s) and therefore attract student fees, which are increasingly responsible for a greater proportion of annual income, the commercial impetus for such work is easy to see and understand for those who may remain cynical.

CONCLUSIONS

Morriera and Luckett pose questions that academics can ask to decolonise their classrooms with the aim of encouraging 'academics across faculties to unearth some of the norms, assumptions and everyday practices that are taken for granted and which may be entangled in the "hidden curriculum"' (Morreira & Luckett, 2018). Here, it is suggested that this cause, if furthered, and the ability to use the tried, tired and tested excuses of the difficulty of disentanglement are made more difficult to assert or defend, this can become a reality. The way to enact change, is to change. Work such as this is only as good as those who enact the provocations within, else there is a very well debated argument which remains just that, an argument; keeping the hidden curriculum intact and suppressing the ability of students to reach their full potential. In reading and engaging with such work there must be a will to bring it to life, given that, '[t]he success of decolonization depends on scholars and instructors in small programs and large departments alike, who are ready and eager to embrace decolonization as essential and imperative' (Criser & Knott, 2019, p. 153). It is unlikely to be easy, and what is opined above—as with all knowledge—is open to challenge, but in that challenge comes engagement and through that engagement comes movement.

The benefits of this course of action are manifest and plenty. If we are to work constructively toward a society where all are enabled, empowered and prompted to be the best that they can be, then this becomes a moral imperative. The role of education is to enable those educated to live a 'more rewarding life over which [they] have more control' (Brighouse, 2006, p. 37); in order to do this there must be 'a wider rather than a narrower range of skills' (Brighouse, 2006, p. 29) facilitating power over what happens to an individual through the course of their lives. These skills are embedded in what it is that is taught, and the vantage point from which that teaching comes. To engender a wider, more nuanced view of the world, a wider, more nuanced view of the world must be recognised—diversifying curricula by examining its colonial roots with an aim to engender an anti-racist approach, allows for that to happen.

Guarding against performative allyship must be a consideration as 'long lasting change and system reform doesn't happen overnight' (Kalina, 2020, p. 480) because this type of allyship 'excuses people from making deeper personal sacrifices' (Kalina, 2020, p. 479). Indeed,

it is argued by Abdi, that the word 'ally' should not be used, that it should be substituted for the word 'solidarity', as solidarity 'requires us to relinquish power and work through tensions and conflicts, [whereas] allyship work often risks very little, having only to deal with social discomfort' (Abdi, 2021). This is pertinent in the drive for a diversification of curriculum because 'the dynamics of power in collaborative spaces, often results in marginalized groups carrying the burden of educating, sharing narratives of trauma and holding to account the 'allies'' (Abdi, 2021)—for there to be a sustained progression, this dichotomy must be challenged and changed—a coalition (as defined by Dabiri, 2021) fermented in solidarity, is needed. This semantic argument compels toward an active engagement as opposed to a passive act which is 'motivated by some type of reward' (Kalina, 2020, p. 478)—this is to be betterment of *all* of society.

To embed equality there must be inclusion; to engender inclusion there must be diversity. This drive for a more diverse curriculum works within that chain of command from whichever end that can be affected actively and measurably. It is hoped that by making these tenets and mode(s) of thinking intrinsic in creation, that the creation, baring the hallmarks of its cognitive genesis, will lead to obvious benefits for us all and through self-reflexive thought and improvement, will continue to warp, shift and bend toward deeper and further reaching equity and equality.

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There's an Imposter in the Theatre: Belonging, Impostor Syndrome, and Community Building, and Its Impact on Students of Color in Theatre

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the general issues of impostor syndrome and the sense of belonging among undergraduate and graduate students of color in theatre programs. Dr. Crestcencia Ortiz-Barnett draws insights from her own experiences as an MFA student in directing at Arizona State University (ASU), and ongoing research with students at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University (NC A&T) where she currently serves as Assistant Professor of theatre and theatre historian. In the article, Ortiz-Barnett defines key concepts, discusses the manifestation of impostor syndrome subtypes, and highlights the critical importance of fostering inclusive communities to combat these challenges. The article also presents practical strategies and initiatives that Dr. Ortiz-Barnett created and implemented, such as the creation of the Black Theatre Organization (BTO) and Black Girl Magic Mentoring Group (BGM), and a pilot theatre exchange program that have all

proven effective in empowering students and promoting a stronger sense of belonging. The findings emphasize that addressing impostor syndrome and cultivating true belonging are crucial for the academic and career success of students of color in predominantly white institutions (PWIs), while offering suggestions for administrators to adopt in the future as well as posing important questions on sustainability, retention and the invisible burdens that students of color bear while clearing a path for those who will come after them.

INTRODUCTION

The journey through higher education for Global Majority theatre students rarely begins at the moment of admission. It begins long before the first rehearsal, the first audition, or the first advising session. This journey is shaped by family histories, financial realities, racialized school environments, and the quiet determination to pursue a dream that few people have ever affirmed for them. Their stories are intimate and textured. They carry with them the weight of expectation, the scars of isolation, and the profound hope that college might finally be the place where they no longer have to fight to be seen.

As they strive to meet the demands of academic rigor, these students frequently navigate subtle and overt forms of exclusion, feeling like "imposters" despite their achievements. This phenomenon, known as impostor syndrome, coupled with a lack of belonging, can significantly impede their academic progress and overall well-being.

I understand this intimately. During my MFA studies at Arizona State University (ASU), I discovered how deeply the absence of belonging impacts artistic identity and academic achievement. I felt the tension of being both grateful to be in the room and exhausted from constantly having to justify my presence there. The community I built was not accidental; it was a survival strategy. Years later, as a professor at an HBCU and the architect of a theatre exchange program designed to bridge HBCUs and PWIs, I now occupy both sides of that story—the student who once needed support and the educator who now works to create it.

When I interviewed students from North Carolina A&T State University and Arizona State University about their experiences, it became clear that the same dynamics I once wrestled with are alive

and well for this new generation. Their stories reveal why mentorship, sponsorship, and intentional community-building are not simply nice additions to a curriculum. They are structural interventions essential to student success.

Consider Corin,[1] a low-income immigrant student whose parents came to the United States to give her opportunities they never had. College wasn't just a choice; it was a responsibility inherited across generations. "I knew college was my way to a better life," she told me (G. Corin, personal communication, December 2, 2025). For Shyla, pursuing theatre felt like both an act of courage and a source of fear. "I felt like I was making a mistake by choosing theatre," she said (N. Shyla, personal communication, December 2, 2025), echoing a narrative many Global Majority students internalize when selecting creative fields viewed as "impractical." Some students arrived in higher education already accustomed to being the only Black student in their learning environments. For eight years, that was Grace's reality. In her words, "I was always fighting stereotypes and just trying to prove I was a good actor" (G. Grace, personal communication, December 1, 2025). Others came by way of interruption.

Loni withdrew from college over a decade ago because the lack of belonging in her program was too emotionally taxing. She returned only after a mentor reignited her voice and reminded her that she still had something vital to say. Her re-entry into academia was a reclamation: "I came back this time with purpose and clarity" (A. Loni, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025). And then there is Christina, the first in her family to attend college, who pursued her degree to break generational patterns of instability, even as college itself sometimes made her feel unsafe, unsupported, and unheard. "I didn't grow up seeing many structures designed to support Black students navigating trauma or instability," she shared (A. Christina, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025).

This article centers these students' voices to examine how impostor syndrome and belonging shape the educational and artistic experiences of Global Majority students. Their stories illuminate what institutions often overlook: that the theatre classroom is never just a classroom. It is a site of identity negotiation, cultural tension, emotional

[1] Note that these are pseudonyms.

vulnerability, and extraordinary possibility. And when institutions fail to create conditions of belonging, they inadvertently nurture impostor syndrome.

Through their narratives and my own, I explore the structural roots of impostor syndrome, the transformative power of community, and the urgency of building intentional support systems, particularly through mentorship models and initiatives such as the Black Theatre Organization (BTO), the Black Girl Magic mentorship group, and the ASU/NC A&T Theatre Exchange Program.

DEFINING THE CONSTRUCTS

Impostor Syndrome

Impostor syndrome, as defined by Clance and Imes (1978), is the internalized belief that one’s success is fraudulent; that one is undeserving of their accomplishments and incapable of meeting the expectations of any given space. For Global Majority theatre students, this belief rarely emerges in a vacuum. It is shaped by systemic inequities, implicit biases, racialized expectations, and institutional cultures that privilege students with generational access to arts education. This condition often results in people feeling like 'a fraud' or 'a phony' and doubting their abilities. This internal conflict can manifest in several distinct subtypes:

- **The Perfectionist**: Primarily focused on "how" something is done and its outcome. A minor flaw in an otherwise stellar performance can be perceived as total failure, leading to shame.
- **The Expert**: Concerned with "what" and "how much" they know. The expectation to know everything means even a minor knowledge gap can trigger feelings of failure and shame.
- **The Soloist**: Believes that accomplishments only count if achieved entirely independently. Needing help is seen as a sign of failure, evoking shame.
- **The Natural Genius**: Measures competence by ease and speed of mastery. Struggling or not achieving perfection on the first attempt equates to failure and shame.
- **The Superhuman**: Assesses competence by the number of

> roles they can juggle and excel in. Falling short in any role—professional or personal—evokes shame due to the belief they should handle everything perfectly.

For Kris, impostor syndrome emerged the moment she entered graduate school. “I was the only one who didn’t have the big musical theatre background,” she explained. “I didn’t know the dance terms. I didn’t look like a ‘true dancer’” (K. Kris, personal communication, November 30, 2025). The pressure wasn’t about talent; it was about comparison—an invisible hierarchy rooted in prior exposure, access, and training that many Global Majority students never had.

Shyla’s impostor syndrome flared in spaces where peers were more vocal and more connected to faculty. “It almost made me feel like speaking up was useless,” she shared (N. Shyla, personal communication, December 2, 2025). For Grace, impostor syndrome had been cultivated since childhood. Years of being the only Black student in academic spaces taught her she had to overperform simply to be regarded as equal. Even when she held leadership roles, she often felt her voice was undervalued. “Despite my résumé, I didn’t always feel qualified,” she said (G. Grace, personal communication, December 1, 2025).

Christina’s impostor syndrome was deeply tied to visibility and emotional labor. “Sometimes I questioned whether I was meant to be here, even when my talent said otherwise” (A. Christina, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025). Moments where she was overlooked or unsupported reinforced the feeling that she had to navigate everything alone and Loni’s impostor syndrome came from an even more painful place: being discouraged not by PWIs, but within her own HBCU. Her initiative and vision were met with doubt or dismissal, often framed as “overstepping.” “My work was thorough, intentional, and professional,” she said. “Yet I was told I wasn’t ready for opportunities I had already demonstrated capacity for” (A. Loni, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025).

These narratives reveal a core truth, that impostor syndrome is not a personal flaw. It is a patterned response to exclusion. It emerges in students when their learning environments fail to scaffold their growth, recognize their potential, or affirm their identities.

Belonging

Belonging is more than mere presence; it is, as articulated by Cornell University (2024), "the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group. It is feeling safe enough to ask questions, take artistic risks, fail boldly, and be recognized for one’s humanity. For Global Majority theatre students, belonging is inseparable from identity, culture, and representation.

Corin defined belonging as feeling “heard by my teachers and my peers” and knowing she mattered (G. Corin, personal communication, December 2, 2025), while Kris felt belonging most profoundly within BTO gatherings, where unity and laughter served as a balm to the pressures of graduate school. “The support from Dr. Ortiz-Barnett kept me afloat,” she said (K. Kris, personal communication, November 30, 2025). For Shyla, belonging took the form of recognition. She was finally being surrounded by Black theatre students who made her feel less like an outsider. “It felt like high school again—the good parts,” she said (N. Shyla, personal communication, December 2, 2025). In rehearsal rooms where community agreements shaped the atmosphere, Grace felt seen for the first time in years. “The rehearsal room felt like coming home to friendship,” she said (G. Grace, personal communication, December 1, 2025).

Christina described belonging as “safety.” She shared that she felt more seen in this program (Exchange Program) than in her first three years of college combined. “Belonging felt like being able to breathe and exist without shrinking,” she said (A. Christina, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025). For Loni, belonging emerged the moment I asked the class to share their “jelly beans”, a simple, humanizing question that allowed her to be not just a student, but a whole person. “For the first time, I felt invited to belong,” she reflected (A. Loni, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025).

These stories underscore that belonging does not occur by accident. It must be intentionally cultivated through pedagogy, environment, and institutional culture.

The Interplay of Impostor Syndrome and Belonging

Impostor syndrome and belonging are not separate phenomena. They operate in tandem; belonging disrupts impostor syndrome, while the absence of belonging amplifies it. For Global Majority students, this relationship is both immediate and profound.

The experiences shared by students highlight how a lack of belonging directly fuels impostor syndrome. When students feel like outsiders, are discouraged from asking questions, or are made to feel inadequate for not possessing pre-existing knowledge, their internal anxieties about being "frauds" are amplified. This creates a vicious cycle: feelings of not belonging lead to self-doubt, which in turn reinforces the belief that they are not truly capable or worthy of their position.

The theatre discipline, often built on collaboration and vulnerability, can be particularly challenging. If the community itself does not foster a safe and inclusive space for all, the inherent pressures of performance and artistic creation can become overwhelming for those already struggling with their sense of place.

Corin articulated this clearly: “When students feel connected, they succeed more. When they don’t, they fade into the shadows” (G. Corin, personal communication, December 2, 2025). Shyla’s entire college trajectory shifted due to this interplay. Feeling like an outsider at her first university, culturally, socially, and spiritually—made it impossible for her to thrive. The result? She transferred schools altogether. Years of isolation conditioned Grace to minimize herself. “I kept to myself so I wouldn’t get negative attention,” she shared. “I needed to be seen as worthy” (G. Grace, personal communication, December 1, 2025). Community later became her antidote.

For Christina, hearing her peers articulate fears she thought were hers alone disrupted her internalized self-doubt. “The group helped me confront the lies I told myself,” she said (A. Christina, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025). Loni’s story offered perhaps the most powerful insight: “You cannot heal where you get sick” (A. Loni, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025). Her impostor syndrome was not born from insecurity but from years of being discouraged in spaces that should have uplifted her. Experiencing belonging at ASU revealed the emotional toll she had been carrying.

The students’ reflections demonstrate that belonging is not simply

a feel-good concept, it is a critical academic intervention with direct implications for retention, artistic risk-taking, and long-term success.

STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING BELONGING AND COMBATING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Across interviews, students identified specific tools and practices that helped them feel grounded and supported. Corin emphasized professors who were "easy to talk to" and didn't intimidate students (G. Corin, personal communication, December 2, 2025). Kris relied on scripture, prayer, and mentors whose lives modeled possibility. For Shyla, BTO was transformative because it offered a rare opportunity to be surrounded by other Black theatre students. Grace found comfort in collaboratively created rehearsal norms that protected everyone, and Christina used creative expression as self-regulation by writing, singing, and acting to process academic and personal challenges.

Together, these strategies demonstrate that belonging is not the result of a single intervention but a constellation of practices that honor the student as a full human being.

Community Building Initiatives

One of my most pivotal accomplishments at ASU was the creation of the Black Theatre Organization (BTO). BTO served as a vital hub for events that brought students together, such as:

- **Soul Food Sundays**: Regular gatherings (at least once a month) that provide a relaxed and culturally affirming space for students to connect, share meals, and build rapport outside of formal academic settings while learning the importance of "Breaking Bread."
- **End of Semester "Kickbacks"**: Informal social events that celebrated student achievements, de-stress, and strengthen bonds at the end of demanding academic periods and the school year.
- **Targeted Events**: Hosting poetry slams, monologue competitions, and URTAS (Unified Professional Theatre Auditions) workshops, which not only provided artistic outlets but also created opportunities for skill development and

networking within a supportive peer group. Non-members were invited to these events

- **Collaboration with Local Schools**: Engaging with Black Student Organizations (BSOs) in local schools helped build a pipeline for future music, dance and theatre students interested in attending ASU. This collaboration provided mentorship and demonstrated that a supportive community exists on campus and that they would be welcomed.

The community-building initiatives I developed as both a student and educator consistently created the conditions in which belonging could flourish. Kris remembered the “laughter and building” that made the group feel like a place where representation and joy could coexist (K. Kris, personal communication, November 30, 2025). Shyla recalled the lunches, pool parties, and game nights and how these informal gatherings revived her love for theatre while Grace felt the rehearsal room itself became a haven.

Community building is not extracurricular. It is pedagogical. It builds trust, expands capacity for vulnerability, and nurtures the courage required for artistic risk.

Mentorship and Pedagogical Approaches

Beyond formal organizations, direct mentorship and thoughtful pedagogical practices are crucial. I spent two years as an undergraduate and three years as an MFA graduate student and teacher immersed in creating spaces where peers felt seen, heard, and guided, ensuring that learning extended well beyond the classroom walls. As a nontraditional student, I believed that I had the life experience to understand what was needed and the resources to remedy the issues

One way this commitment took shape was through my teaching, where I had the opportunity to design courses that centered cultural relevance and inclusivity. There was also the establishment of a mentor group specifically for African American women across the music dance and theatre department (e.g., Black Girl Magic Mentor Group) which provided a safe space for shared experiences, mutual support, and targeted guidance. That group, though I am no longer a graduate student at ASU, continues to serve its purpose.

Effective mentorship recognizes both the struggle and the

brilliance of Global Majority students. Kris described mentorship as affirming because it aligned with her purpose and identity as a Black woman. Christina named mentorship as one of the most transformative aspects of her journey, explaining, "Dr. Ortiz-Barnett spoke life into my talent and helped me understand my worth," While Loni highlighted pedagogical practices such as emotional check-ins, goal-setting forms, and accountability grounded in care, that made her feel deeply seen.

Students' ideal mentorship programs shared key themes:

- Trauma-informed practices
- Mental-health support
- Culturally grounded affirmation
- Networking and alumni access
- Creative workshops
- Intentional identity work

Mentorship, in this context, is not hierarchical. It is communal, reciprocal, and transformational.

EXCHANGE PROGRAM

The ASU/NCA&T Theatre Exchange Program emerged from a simple but urgent question: What would it look like for Black theatre students to experience a PWI where belonging, mentorship, and representation were intentionally structured rather than incidental? This question was personal to me because I had experienced various settings; An HBCU theatre program, A PWI program that was not very open to cultivating safe spaces for theatre students of color, and a PWI/HSI that was extremely open to not only cultivating these spaces but learning how to do so while providing funds to see them developed.

In my first year as an Assistant Professor, I pitched the program to NC A&T leadership as an opportunity to address two critical gaps: (1) the absence of MFA theatre performance programs at HBCUs nationwide, and (2) the cultural, emotional, and academic challenges Global Majority students often face when transitioning from an HBCU to a PWI. The exchange was framed not only as a week of artistic training, but as a research-grounded intervention in belonging, access, and identity formation.

How the Program Was Pitched

I positioned the exchange as a pilot initiative rooted in equity, access, and student empowerment. The proposal highlighted:

- A need for HBCU theatre students to experience advanced artistic training and graduate-level mentorship.
- Opportunities for students to observe culturally relevant pedagogical practices across institutional types.
- The importance of demystifying graduate school for first-generation and Global Majority creatives.
- A goal of identifying "safe" PWIs that actively support Black MFA students while establishing pathways rather than pipelines that lead to cultural erasure.

The pitch emphasized that the exchange was not a recruitment trip; it was an exploratory partnership designed to uplift students and gather insights that could strengthen HBCU theatre programming and student support structures.

The Exchange Program was not selected for funding or support through my home institution and so six students were funded by my husband and myself, with ASU Music Dance and Theatre providing lunch and swag on multiple days. The students had to pay for their transportation while we paid for their hotel rooms, Ubers in the city, the majority of their meals, and any incidentals.

How Students Were Selected

Students were selected through a multi-step process that reflected both artistic readiness and emotional maturity:

1. **Open Call at NC A&T**: Visual Arts and Performance students were invited to apply by answering various questions and submitting a short-written statement describing their artistic goals, their interest in an exchange experience, and the ways they believed the program could support their professional development.

2. **Faculty Review & Interviews**: committee of two NC A&T theatre faculty, including myself, reviewed applications,

focusing on:

a. Commitment to theatre as a field
b. Evidence of self-reflection or leadership
c. Openness to new environments
d. Academic standing
e. Potential benefit to the student's professional trajectory

3. **Final Cohort Selection**: We intentionally curated a cohort of six students, reflecting multiple performance areas: acting, directing, musical theatre and dramaturgy, to ensure interdisciplinary learning and peer-to-peer support.

This intentional selection process created a cohort capable of both receiving and contributing meaningfully to the exchange environment.

Goals of the Planned Sessions & Events

Each element of the week-long exchange had a specific pedagogical, artistic, or psychosocial goal. The structure was not arbitrary—it was carefully curated to address belonging, identity, and access.

1. Hip-Hop & Caribbean Dance Classes with Professor T and Dr. Shola

> **Goal:** To expose students to physically demanding, culturally grounded movement traditions while building confidence in unfamiliar studio environments.

For some students, like Hope and Lily, these classes expanded their understanding of their own bodies as expressive instruments. For others, like Jordan, they shifted internal dialogues around artistic identity.

2. Musical Theatre Voice Masterclass With Professor Yatso (e.g., private vocal coaching)

> **Goal:** To provide personalized training that most undergraduates, especially Global Majority students with limited access to arts resources growing up—rarely receive.

Christina and Trinity left with a renewed sense of vocal possibility and confidence.

3. Acting Workshops with Professor Finley and Student Director Grace

> **Goal:** To reintroduce vulnerability, risk-taking, and emotional honesty within a supportive framework.

This workshop was designed intentionally to help students reclaim emotional expression without the fear of judgment.

4. Directing Inquiry Session and Class Visit with Professor Ruiz

> **Goal:** To expose emerging directors to graduate-level directing pedagogy, including conceptual development, staging, and leadership approaches used across different institutions.

For students like Loni, these sessions offered clarity about her own directing style and revealed practices that had previously been inaccessible in her home program.

5. HIDA Day (Herberger Institute Day)

> **Goal:** To immerse students in interdisciplinary creativity and showcase how multiple arts disciplines intersect at the undergraduate and graduate level at some institutions.

Students interacted with painters, designers, digital artists, dancers, playwrights, and musicians, helping to broaden their sense of what “counts” as artistry and what this looks like in an artistic community.

6. Campus and Facility Tours

> **Goal:** To demystify the physical and cultural landscape of a large PWI/HSI, thereby reducing the intimidation factor that often accompanies graduate school exploration.

Students repeatedly expressed surprise at how welcomed they felt—contrary to their expectations of PWI environments.

7. Attendance at the Broadway Tour of *Wicked* at ASU Gammage performing arts center.

> **Goal:** To demonstrate what high-level professional theatre looks like from a production standpoint and to inspire students to imagine themselves on national stages.

This opportunity was provided by Colleen Jennings-Roggensack, Vice President for cultural Affairs at ASU & Executive Director of ASU Gammage and Michael Reed, Senior Director of Programs and Organizational Initiatives at ASU Gammage. The performance also provided a shared cultural moment that deepened group cohesion and students walked away from this VIP experience more determined to pursue the arts.

8. Graduate Program Info Sessions with ASU Faculty

> **Goal:** To provide transparency around admissions, funding, artistic expectations, and program culture.

For students like Trinity and Christina, these conversations solidified their desire to pursue graduate study.

9. Networking & Community Time

> **Goal:** To build relationships between A&T students and ASU faculty/students, creating long-term mentorship networks and lowering psychological barriers to advanced study.

Students consistently reported that these moments shaped their confidence more than any single class. One student from ASU visited NC A&T later that same semester to support them in their performance of *THE WIZ*.

Overall Purpose of the Exchange Program

At its core, the exchange program had four overarching goals:

1. **Cultivate Belonging in New Spaces**: To help Global Majority students experience themselves as belonging in high-level artistic environments outside of their home institutions.
2. **Demystify Graduate Education**: To replace fear and uncertainty with clarity, access, and mentorship.
3. **Expose Students to Diverse Pedagogies**: To help them discover new artistic practices and compare educational cultures.
4. **Build Cross-Institutional Pathways**: To establish sustainable relationships between HBCUs and PWI/HSIs committed to supporting Black MFA students.

The program succeeded not because of its design alone, but because the students brought courage, vulnerability, and openness to the experience. They stepped into unfamiliar studios and found pieces of themselves again. The Theatre Exchange Program offered students the opportunity to immerse themselves in a new cultural and artistic environment, challenging their assumptions about PWIs and expanding their understanding of belonging.

For Loni, the exchange was a reset: “Sometimes, healing requires movement. You cannot heal where you get sick” (A. Loni, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025). The program allowed her to separate her artistic identity from the emotional burden she carried at her home institution. For Christina, the exchange expanded her vision of herself as a Black creative. “It made me imagine myself on global stages,” she said (A. Christina, personal communication, March 20, 2025-December 1, 2025).

Students left with clarity about graduate school pathways, new artistic techniques, and a renewed sense of belonging. They returned home carrying both new skills and new dreams which was proof that exposure, mentorship, and belonging are inseparable from educational equity.

REFLECTION OVERVIEW

Students consistently reflected that the program shifted not just their skills but their sense of identity, possibility, and direction. Kris discovered she could create something powerful for others, Shyla gained friendships and grounding, Grace now incorporates community-building tools into their directing, Christina grew more confident and open to risk, and Loni left with a renewed academic and artistic purpose.

Student Reflections

The participants' reflections highlight the transformative nature of the exchange program.

- **Sense of Belonging and Community**: Many students expressed that they felt welcomed and supported at ASU, which contrasted with their expectations of a PWI environment. One student noted that she felt a similar sense of safety and community at ASU as she does at her HBCU. Another student expressed surprise at how both alarmed and welcoming their white counterparts were-something she hadn’t anticipated.
- **Artistic Growth and Inspiration**: The program sparked a renewed passion for the arts and encouraged students to step outside their comfort zones. McCoy discussed how the dance classes broadened her perspective and improved her versatility as a dancer. Hope acknowledged that the dance class made her a better actor. Jordan expressed that the environment altered the way he carried himself and gave him a new source of dopamine centered in his field of study, while Christina’s private vocal lessons with Professor Toby Yatso, helped her gain newfound confidence in her vocal abilities.
- **Personal Development and Self-Discovery**: The exchange program facilitated personal growth and self-discovery. Loni described how the experience helped her confront her own biases and emotional responses, allowing her to grow as an artist and individual.
- **Career and Educational Aspirations**: For some of the students, the program solidified their desire to pursue graduate studies and provided valuable insights into navigating the

application process. Trinity and Christina shared that the program solidified their decision to commit to grad school. One of the biggest take-aways was that the students gained a clearer vision of the kind of environment they want when pursuing graduate programs.

Across their reflections, students emphasized themes of:

- safety
- transformation
- community
- representation
- creative risk-taking
- mentorship
- healing

These themes reinforce the program's impact and highlight the urgent need for sustainable, identity-centered educational models.

IMPACT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The pilot exchange program demonstrated that:

- Belonging can be cultivated across institutional and cultural contexts
- Mentorship improves confidence, risk-taking, and retention
- Global Majority students thrive when community is intentionally structured
- Cross-institutional collaboration can dismantle long-standing access barriers
- Artistic identity deepens when students witness themselves reflected in multiple spaces

The pilot theatre exchange program at ASU proved to be a valuable experience for the participating students. It not only broadened their artistic horizons but also fostered personal growth and a greater sense of belonging. The program's success highlights the importance of creating opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and collaboration in

theatre education. As Trinity stated, "I am all in favor of this becoming something that is recurring not just at our HBCU but at other schools as well!" (M. Trinity, personal communication, March 20, 2025).

Building on this successful pilot program, future initiatives could include:

- Expanding the program to include students from other HBCUs and PWIs.
- Incorporating international exchanges to provide students with a global perspective on theatre.
- Creating opportunities for ongoing collaboration and networking between students and faculty from different institutions.

Future iterations could expand participation, build international partnerships (currently in progress with Roverman Productions, Accra, Ghana), extend mentorship beyond the program week, and formalize graduate school pipelines.

FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Creating an environment where students feel empowered to embrace their authentic selves is paramount because it challenges impostor syndrome and actively teaches strategies to combat impostor syndrome, emphasizing that their belonging is wherever their feet land and that they don’t need permission to be who they are meant to be. It also promotes authenticity by enabling students to embrace their full authentic creative self.

An inclusive environment is an active one. It challenges impostor syndrome by:

- affirming students’ full identities
- teaching them how to recognize internalized doubt
- promoting authenticity
- creating space for rest and vulnerability
- countering deficit narratives with culturally grounded support

Inclusive environments do not ask students to fit into preexisting molds. They redesign the mold entirely.

Considerations for the Future

Given the rise of anti-DEI legislation nationally, programs like this face significant political and institutional threats. Yet the stories of these students make it clear that support structures for Global Majority students are not optional—they are essential for survival, retention, and artistic flourishing. My ongoing research, publications, and pedagogical commitments remain rooted in this work: understanding the emotional and cultural terrain that Global Majority theatre students navigate, and building pathways that allow them not only to succeed but to thrive. I often wonder what my own student experience would have been if such structures existed before I arrived. What might I have created if I hadn't been simultaneously building the very community I needed to survive? What brilliance might students unlock when the burden of creating safe spaces is no longer theirs to carry? How many more students could have benefited from the exchange program if it were supported and funding were provided.

The theatre exchange program serves as a model for fostering inclusivity, promoting artistic growth, and preparing students for success in the field of theatre. By breaking down barriers and creating connections, such programs can enrich the educational experience and contribute to a more vibrant and diverse theatre community. By centering belonging, dismantling impostor syndrome, and reimagining mentorship through culturally grounded practices, academic theatre programs can become sites of joy, liberation, and possibility. They can become places where Global Majority students' step into their artistic futures without shrinking, questioning, or apologizing for their brilliance.

CONCLUSION

The journey of students of color in theatre programs is profoundly impacted by their sense of belonging and their ability to navigate impostor syndrome. By intentionally fostering supportive communities through initiatives like the ones presented in this article, providing dedicated mentorship, and promoting an inclusive pedagogical approach, institutions can empower these students to thrive academically and artistically.

Looking ahead, continued efforts are needed to expand the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) call to faculty, staff,

and graduate students; enhance theatre lab and main stage performances to reflect greater diversity; and cultivate a larger, more diverse graduate community. My personal path forward involves:

- **Beyond The Curtain: A Journal for Theater Artists Confronting Impostor Syndrome**: A continued commitment to research and publication that addresses these critical issues.
- **An Impostor in the Theatre**: Further exploration of the specific manifestations of impostor syndrome within the theatrical context.
- **Performance-Based Assessments for Teachers**: Developing new assessment methods that acknowledge diverse learning styles and experiences.
- **Grant writing**: Funds are a constant need, especially with the expansion of the Exchange Program.
- **Rest**: Recognizing the emotional and mental toll these challenges can take and advocating for well-being.

As I rest, I will reflect on what I imagine my life would have become if these initiatives were created and sustained before my enrollment into undergraduate school, which may have allowed for me to enjoy the benefits of not having to worry about creating opportunities for others or sustaining the organizations. I want to explore what happens to changemakers when they spend their precious academic time looking out for others instead of focusing on their career. What is there to say about the burden students of color have to carry in order to pave the way and make it easier for the next generation? I am happy about what I have created for myself and others, however, I can only imagine what my experience would have been if all of these resources had already been established.

Ultimately, by building communities and developing initiatives to ensure every student feels they belong, where their unique contributions are valued, and where they are equipped to combat internal doubts, theatre programs can truly unlock the full potential of all of their students.

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Crestcencia (CeCe) Ortiz-Barnett is a motivated and passionate Educator and Theatre Director from Detroit, Michigan and current Assistant Professor of Theatre and Theatre Historian at North Carolina A&T. She believes that theatre is a transformative art form and has the power to impact lives though the influence of storytelling. Each performance reflects the human experience and gives us a glimpse into our current society. Her aim is to grow as a skilled and recognized Educator and Theatre Director with notable research on sense of belonging for students of color in higher education and the impact of student theatre organizations that center on the Black lived experience and belongingness. CeCe holds an Associate's in Education, a Bachelor's in theatre studies, a Master's in Theatre with a concentration in African American Theatre, A Masters of Fine Arts in Theatre Directing, and a Ph.D in Education (Curriculum Assessment and Instruction).

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Postcards from Oasis: Paradox and Inclusive Theatre in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the paradoxes of disability inclusion in theatre through four case studies from The Oasis League, an applied inclusive theatre project at Oasis Association, a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities in Cape Town, South Africa. Situated within participatory arts research and applied theatre pedagogy, the project brought together University of Cape Town theatre and Oasis residents in six weeks of devising workshops culminating in public performances. Each "postcard" case study captures a snapshot of inclusive practice—superhero soundscapes, tea-time battles, recycling adventures, and the "best worst day"—illustrating both the possibilities and contradictions of inclusion. The postcards dramatize tensions between access and participation, independence and interdependence, visibility and invisibility, and highlight the ways relationships, reciprocity, and collaboration become engines of transformation. While inclusive theatre challenges systemic ableism, paradoxes remain: inclusion risks

tokenism, simplification, or segregation, even as it seeks equity. These tensions, however, are not failures but generative forces that produce innovative strategies for access, artistry, and allyship. The article argues that inclusive theatre training must embrace paradox as method—equipping practitioners to adapt flexibly, center relationships, and build communities that are "perfectly imperfect, exclusively inclusive, and weirdly normal."

Two weathered vans screech through the high-security gates of the Oasis Association Group Home for Adults with Disabilities as torrential rain pounds Cape Town. Doors fling open, and passengers—friends, students, bakers, performers, and workshop employees—spill into the downpour, clothes plastered to their skin, struggling toward the flickering foyer lights. Inside, soggy shoes squeak against the tile as the group transforms the lounge into a rehearsal space. The air is heavy with frustration. Robert groans about a late bus, canceled family visit, and soaking socks; Kim mutters about a fight and mistakes at work; Savanna slumps, burdened by exams and break-ins. Their collective sighs echo as tea and biscuits fail to restore the usual cheer. During check-in, the rain hammers harder as grievances spill out: pollution, abuse, hunger, crime, bad friends, robbery. Words, like the storm, gain force. The warm-up game "Save the World" feels less playful than desperate, laughter thin and brittle. Huddled around the schedule, they finally grasp at hope: perhaps a holiday, a postcard escape to brighter skies, could save the day.

EXCLUSIVELY INCLUSIVE: THE PARADOX OF INCLUSIONS

It was on this stormy afternoon that one participant named the session "the best worst day," capturing a paradox central to inclusive theatre practice. The "best worst day"—an oxymoron—encapsulates how contradiction reveals deeper truths, offering the frame through which this article explores inclusion in applied theatre praxis. This article argues that paradoxes are not obstacles to inclusive theatre but the generative forces that shape and sustain it. By embracing

contradictions—between accessibility and authentic participation, independence and interdependence, visibility and invisibility—inclusive theatre practitioners develop practices that not only build community and empathy but also challenge the systemic ableism embedded in educational, cultural, and theatrical institutions. Through four case studies—"postcards from Oasis"—this article demonstrates how grappling with paradox fosters new approaches to access, collaboration, and allyship, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive training and opportunities that extend beyond disability-led frameworks to embrace neurodiverse and atypical artists.

Situated within applied and educational theatre, the Oasis project used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. PAR accepts research as praxis (Freire, 1993; Lather, 1991) that turns researchers and subjects "into coparticipants in a common moral project" (Denzin, 2003). It is characterized by shared ownership and a "transformative commitment to community action" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 568), enacted through "participation and performance with, not for, community members" (Denzin, 2003). In this spirit, the project brought together an eclectic group of aspiring theatre-makers, actors, teachers, and community facilitators in partnership with creative residents of Oasis Association, a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities. Over six weeks of devising workshops, rehearsals, and touring performances, the project operated as a laboratory for exploring paradox—accessibility and participation, independence and interdependence, visibility and invisibility. Although the article is authored by the facilitator-researcher, the project itself was carried out through this PAR framework in which the Oasis participants functioned as co-researchers. They generated the themes under investigation, contributed lived experiences through storytelling and improvisation, and offered ongoing reflections that shaped each workshop cycle. Their insights informed both the practical exploration and the interpretive lens applied to the project's outcomes. The facilitator-researcher's role was distinguished by responsibilities for documentation, synthesis, and theoretical framing; she recorded observations, analyzed patterns, and connected the collective findings to relevant literature. Thus, the knowledge presented here emerges not as extracted data but as an inclusive co-constructed understanding developed through collaborative rehearsal, discussion, and reflection.

The ensemble of approximately twenty-six participants reflected

South Africa's complex intersections of race, economic status, disability, and opportunity. Roughly 58% of the group identified as white and 42% as people of color—a ratio that echoes persistent access inequalities in the country's education, arts, and disability sectors. Post-apartheid research continues to show that white South Africans are significantly more likely to access well-resourced schools, tertiary education pathways, and arts training opportunities, while Black, Coloured, and Indian South Africans disproportionately encounter structural barriers (Department of Basic Education, 2019; Soudien, 2012). Similar disparities exist in disability services, where access to residential care, therapeutic support, and inclusive arts programming remains unevenly distributed along racial and economic lines (McKenzie & McConkey, 2015; Capri et al., 2018).

Within this landscape, the Oasis project brought together two groups who typically have very different forms of access: university students with training opportunities and adults with intellectual disabilities whose access to arts education and public-facing creative work is often limited. For Oasis residents, the project offered artistic training, community engagement, and opportunities for public performance; for university theatre, it offered practice-based research, facilitation training, and critical exposure to disability inclusion. These intersecting imperatives forged a shared space in which inclusion was enacted through theatre-making.

Exclusively inclusive applies to the ensemble focus of the project in both devising workshops and performances. Inclusive Theatre, as distinguished from Disability Theatre, encompasses companies such as Hijinx (Wales), FTH:K (South Africa), Fusion Theatre (Australia), and The River (USA), which dismantle stigma by creating communities that embrace multiple marginalized identities (Farcas, 2018). These practices resist disability "inspiration porn" (Pulrang, 2019), a term popularized by activist Stella Young to describe the objectification of disabled people as feel-good symbols for the benefit of nondisabled audiences (Young, 2012; Young, 2014). Inspiration porn frames disabled performers not as artists but as motivational devices, obscuring their agency, skill, and creative authorship. Naming this phenomenon is essential for applied theatre practitioners, as even well-intentioned projects can unintentionally reproduce these dynamics if disability becomes something to admire rather than someone to collaborate with. Inclusive theatre counters this tendency by

foregrounding belonging, contribution, and shared authorship through ensemble work, robust support systems, and collective creation.

For some participants, learning to work as an ensemble was “a life-changing experience […] It's easy to fall in the trap of being self-centered or to want to shine in a performance but here I learned to take a step back and understand that it is not about me” (A. Godlo, personal communication). Others noted that “this is the most selfless form of theatre […] integral to theatre training. So much of theatre training is centered upon individualistic improvement and can become rather egotistical, so being forced to step out of the limelight is vital for the development of any actor [..] It was so important to be part of a drama process which created theatre for, and with, others” (A. Harrison, personal communication).

To ground this collaboration, the ensemble co-created a set of agreements balancing access, creativity, and care. These agreements—framed as principles for inclusive practice—offered both practical and ethical scaffolding for the devising process and remained touchstones throughout rehearsals and performances:

- **Presume competence.** Avoid assumptions about intelligence or ability.
- **Be flexible and adaptive.** Improvise solutions and adjust exercises rather than avoiding them.
- **Ask questions.** Seek clarity and preferences: “Can I work with you?” “What’s your favorite…?” “How are you feeling?” Respond to content, not delivery, using repetition, writing, or translation when needed.
- **Be aware of individual needs.** Plan in advance where possible; brief access requirements to support communication and participation.
- **Plan ahead.** Share scripts, worksheets, or schedules early so they can be translated, adapted, or processed. Structure rehearsal with clear timings and breaks.
- **Take risks.** Use disability as a creative possibility rather than an obstacle; embrace mistakes as part of the process.
- **Offer choices.** Provide alternatives and encourage self-advocacy.
- **Promote participation.** Actively involve everyone, checking in on energy and comfort, allowing breaks, and offering

unobtrusive support.

- **Be positive and supportive.** Reinforce successes with specific encouragement. Redirect behavior through agreements, not discipline.
- **Be proactive.** Break tasks into short steps, hold doors, clear obstacles, and rethink objectives to ensure access.
- **Communicate directly.** Speak to participants, not assistants, building rapport through eye contact, gesture, and respectful proximity.
- **Allow enough time.** Create space for interpretation, processing, and movement.
- **Respect personal space.** Always ask before touch or guiding, describing actions and environmental changes.
- **Attend to the environment.** Consider layout, lighting, sound, and climate. Warn of changes like blackouts or strobe effects, and ensure clear sightlines for interpreters, captions, or speakers.

These agreements functioned as a living contract, shaping the atmosphere of rehearsals and informing creative choices. They reinforced the project's central ethos: inclusion is not the responsibility of a facilitator alone but a shared commitment enacted by the entire ensemble. The ensemble approach leads to a team of *individual collaborators*: each participant contributing their personal talents, interests, personalities, and ideas. Rather than a lead or star, the focus is on the relationships and community, yet individuals are not "caught up in a group story" and can "still own their own stories" (Brodzinski, 2010, p. 113). As Tim Wheeler's notion of "dis-applied theatre" suggests (cited in Hargrave, 2015), inclusive practice should not be framed as corrective but as good theatre. Yet systemic ableism in universities and cultural institutions sustains exclusion. Following Mda's (1993) call for progressive pedagogy that names problems, reflects on their causes, and engages communities in collective solutions, inclusive theatre demonstrates how paradox can act as a catalyst for transformation. These postcards from Oasis reveal that paradox is not a barrier but the engine of inclusive theatre, modeling pathways for systemic change in educational and cultural contexts.

The performances and devising praxis are built by *flexible structures*. A repetitive specific structure (warm-up, main, reflection)

and clear learning objectives (established through group agreements) are constant. Within those constants, each category is flexible to what or how they are achieved. Tasks are modified, methods are adapted, and techniques are accommodated, depending on the needs of individuals, the group, or the general atmosphere of the day. Following the check-in and warm-up, the group then divides into pairs or teams. Despite some age differences, it is almost impossible to distinguish visitors from Oasis residents, facilitators from participants, friends from colleagues. Discussions, images, improvisation, and exercises inspire laughter and problem-solving as the small groups create and share performances: bad days and dance parties, hiking and recycling, DJ Ghostbuster's Michael Jackson tribute, and an epic teatime battle for biscuits. The devising process ultimately results in a multimodal inclusive theatre performance entitled *The Oasis League*: an eclectic mix of scenes that depict ordinary situations and everyday events with heroic twists. One participant explained the flexible structure as 'an abandonment of appropriateness and rather an engagement with the intuitive lived bodily experience […] instructions given were left open for one's own interpretation, instead of being closed off with extremely specific directions which would ultimately end up excluding someone, one way or the other' (Jacobs, 2020). The performances themselves followed a *flexible structure* and became a *chaotic routine*. A reflection from a theatre-making-focused participant referenced how his group 'grew comfortable with unpredictability … [and started] thinking beyond patterns' (Lockford & Pelias in Prendergast & Saxton, 2013, p. 19). He further explained,

> Every rehearsal process was different, even the performances. […] if there was a mistake, other performers would step in to perform a moment which was initially assigned to another performer in the segment when the performer had forgotten or gotten distracted. We responded in the moment in order to enhance the flexibility of our reaction to spontaneous occurrences, and understood that when choices are made, they were not the only choices available. (M. Molekoa, personal communication)

The 'improvisatory methodical approach, based on the individual actor's skills and expression, not on a pre-given script' (Saur and Johansen, 2013, p. 250) and used to modify performances, was

accentuated throughout devising and performances. The structure was constant, but its implementation and execution were open to interpretation and flexible to the needs of the group.

These postcards illustrate how theatre fosters community, empathy, and authentic relationships while simultaneously confronting contradictions between accessibility and participation, independence and interdependence, visibility and invisibility. These moments are not the best examples of inclusive performance. They are not the best stories from the Oasis collaboration or even the best resulting performances of the project. Nor are they indicative of the worst moments; these case studies omitted traumatic moments such as when participants were grieving, fell ill, or became aggressive or when participants misled, manipulated, and revealed ableist superiority after weeks of inclusive practice. These projects were not perfect but rather what Hargrave refers to as ‘a laboratory, imperfect yet aspirant, for the prescription of less prescribed social identities’ (2016, p. 227): they were *perfectly imperfect*. Grappling with these tensions produces new strategies for access, collaboration, and allyship, underscoring the need for continued inclusive training and opportunities—particularly for neurodivergent and cognitively disabled artists often excluded from professional theatre (Sealey, 2009; Whyman, 2006).

Figure 1: DJ Ghostbuster saves the World

POSTCARD 1: WE WILL SAVE IT!

An epic soundtrack begins as a league of superheroes enter (in slow motion), led by Justin (aka DJ Ghostbuster). He moonwalks across the stage with a near-perfect rendition of Michael Jackson choreography, accompanied by his partner Kat. The DJ–host pair is responsible for guiding the performance as '[p]re-recorded music is the main structuring process for the narrative and helps to keep a focus' (Trowsdale & Hayhow, 2015, p. 1025). Each team uses music, but Justin and Kat accentuate the importance. Due to unexpected health concerns during the workshop process, instead of the anticipated larger team, Justin and Kat paired together and took charge of music, sound cues, and set decor. Kat, who 'prefers to work within a group rather than lead it,' used her interest in art to create posters and props with Justin and prompted sound cues on a visual script. They were responsible for music cues from an iPhone connected to a Bluetooth speaker. Justin taught Kat the entirety of choreography for *Bad*, recorded video and photos using the iPhone, and provided a plethora of Michael Jackson costume pieces. Together they led the opening

song ‘We Will Save It,’ a rendition of Queen’s (1977) *We Will Rock You* with the words changed to reflect the themes of the performance. The modification of using the tune or background track of well-known songs was utilized by a few different participants. Kat and Justin also decided to adapt Michael Jackson’s (1987) *Bad* by changing ‘I’m’ to ‘It’s’ to fit the context of the story.

Using known melodies gave a framework to be creative and alleviated the stress of having to create or learn entirely new pieces while highlighting the voices and music preferences of participants. Music played an instigating role in much of the devising, rapport, and development of the project. Doolittle refers to ‘recreating excerpts from pieces of favorite popular culture […] with more personalized expressions’ (2016, p. 244) as an effective modification in inclusive work, and this is seen with Justin and Kat throughout multiple case studies. It allowed Justin to showcase his Michael Jackson obsession and dance skills while contributing to the already established storyline. Kat and Justin’s teamwork is a strong example of experiences of reciprocal ‘peer-to-peer teaching as dramaturges and mentors […] to develop capacities in performance, creation, direction, and critical observation’ (Doolittle et al; 2016, p. 244).

The collaboration of these capabilities was not always successfully implemented. For example, at the beginning of the project, Justin had boasted repeatedly of his DJ skills and invited many nonresident participants to his bedroom to ‘check out his equipment.’ Due to ethical and professional standards, all guests to the Oasis home were discouraged from entering private areas. This upset Justin, and he repeatedly asked if he could retrieve his DJ equipment from his bedroom. Justin was inclined to embellish frequently in check-ins and reflections, which lead to an oversight in the magnitude of Justin’s DJ prowess until dress rehearsals. Due to assumptions formed around Justin’s collection of late-1990s memorabilia and his confessions that he was not allowed to bring his equipment to the workshop, it was assumed that his DJ equipment was perhaps a karaoke machine or small stereo system. The group agreed the iPhone and Bluetooth would be used for the two workshop performances, but Justin could set up his full DJ equipment for the closing performance with families invited to the group home. Justin negotiated heavily for the opportunity to DJ and host a dance party afterward. Upon setting up for the final performance, to the shock and amazement of the group, Justin

unloaded three road cases of professional DJ equipment: mixing tables, amps, speakers, microphones, and even some LED lights. Unfortunately, preconceived notions of Justin's ability and equipment were detrimental to the performances, for had it been recognized earlier, it would have been more fully incorporated into the performance.

Justin and Kat compensated for issues in communication and understanding by specifying the importance of specific tasks. Justin's enthusiasm for the project often waned due to concerns of 'not being cool' in front of his colleagues and staff members at the workshop. The opportunity to be a leader with responsibilities (such as the narration roles of DJ Ghostbuster, leading the group entrance and bows, or having input on choosing house music) allowed Justin to voice his concerns and participate; he was empowered by his role within the team. The relationship built with Kat emphasized accountability and provided an opportunity to help her with her input for the project. It also allowed him to support his peers at the group home, ultimately challenging his insecurities. Kat reflected that 'Justin was easily distracted and I found it challenging to pull his focus back. At one point, however, we started to bond and it was easier to focus on getting some work done … we could come up with some ideas together as a duo team' (Berner, K. personal communication). Leadership allowed Justin to build empathy and rapport without forcing him to participate outside of his comfort zone, encouraging reflection on ways to counteract the potential negativity from his peers. Ending the project with a celebration dance party hosted by Justin celebrated his unique contributions and resulted in him having the opportunity to be the life of the party.

Figure 2: The Tea Ladies using structured improv to chat

POSTCARD 2: THE TEA LADIES AND THE BISCUITEERS

"Lean on me, when you're not strong…" Bill Withers' (1972) classic opens the scene as tea ladies in fascinators belt the song while the ensemble sets a table. Estelle refuses to fade with the music cue, finishing verses solo until her friend Francis calls her, in a posh accent, to join for tea and biscuits. Estelle finally complies, eagerly sharing her views on chocolate biscuits—her frequent fixation. Known for latching onto single topics, Estelle often disrupted rehearsals, but improvisation and side-coaching helped sustain her focus. Kempe (1996) emphasizes using questions to engage participants—"Do you want to sit down? Would you share your biscuits?"—and this strategy allowed Estelle's contributions to be celebrated. Johnston (2012) describes such "rehearsed improvisation" as a collective approach where each member is respected for their unique input.

This team, originally two smaller groups, merged into one of eight. Within it, three identities emerged: the Tea Ladies, the Biscuit Eaters, and the Biscuiteers. The Tea Ladies, with spontaneous personalities, thrived in improvisation, lip-sync, and questioning. The Biscuit Eaters, inspired by spy films, worked independently, creating comic banter and a "mission impossible" style movement piece. To unite these groups, facilitators devised a structured chase scene that ended in tug-of-war

over a box of biscuits, modified with hidden cloth. Building the game into performance provided clear, motivating action and avoided distraction (Sealey et al., 2017; Cattanach, 1996; Kempe, 1996; McCurrach & Darnley, 1999). The Biscuiteers, a hero trio led by professional cheerleader Kutloano, contrasted with the improvisation of others, favoring “structured active participation” (Jackson & Vine, 2013, p. 5) through choreography and choral speech. Initially, Kutloano’s enthusiasm seemed patronizing, but reflection helped her adapt: “Once we did less talking and worked with our bodies more, energies went up. The plan changed a lot, but fit better” (K. Headbush, personal communication). Sharing her cheerleading skills while reciprocally learning from her partners created balance.

This team exemplified Doolittle’s (2016) notion that inclusion occurs both in improvisation and choreography, where peer-to-peer coaching “leveled the playing field” (p. 249). Unison sequences reinforced belonging across the cast, supported with taped floor lines, mirrored movement, and visual placards for clarity. Fieldnotes from early workshops emphasized: “Not everyone needs to be the focus, but everyone needs to be included”. The red team embodied this principle, balancing structure and flexibility to ensure meaningful participation.

Figure 3: Grease Lightning on the way to recycle

POSTCARD 3: RECYCLING AND HIKES

"Come on, get in the car, Nikki!" Anathi shouts, gesturing to Nikki's empty spot in the scene. Between an improvised hike—mountains, streams, pollution—the arrival of superheroes, and a mad dash to the Oasis recycling center, Nikki freezes. For a moment, fear flashes across her face. Jerome throws an arm around her shoulders, Kylie cheers, *"Klim in die kar, Nikki! Jy kan dit doen. Vasbyt!"* and Brenden starts the engine. Nikki smiles and joins them, bouncing along to *Greased Lightning*. Nikki communicates volumes without words. A valued recycling worker, friend, and performer, she prefers nonverbal expression—smiles, gestures, proximity—though she speaks Afrikaans and English when needed. Teammates adapted tasks bilingually, offering support when her silence grew heavy. Before one performance, she sat blank-faced, a tear sliding down her cheek. Asked if she wanted to perform, she smiled and nodded firmly, embodying her characteristic quiet resolve.

This team thrived on music, games, improvisation, and above all, rapport. Their greatest strength was "forever supporting and hyping each other all the time" (M. Mkhize, personal communication).

Transitions relied not on choreography but conversation and encouragement: “Kim, can you move this table?” “Michael, great dance moves!” This created what Spolin (1963) calls “moving energy,” an ensemble attuned to one another and the moment. Missed lines or cues were never failures but, in Roulstone’s (2010) words, “the glories of imperfection” (p. 432). Support became both aesthetic and ethic, echoing Wooster’s (2009) emphasis on mutual contribution. Their scene disrupted the traditional heroic arc with episodic, revue-like structure committed to community (Sandahl & Auslander, 2008). A choral chant framed a physical theatre hike, culminating in a clean-up game where audience and ensemble raced to recycle. Jerome appeared as “Recycling Man,” his real-life job mirrored onstage, while brothers Brenden and Michael drove the group car while impersonating his idol, Danny Zuko.

The brothers were inseparable: enthusiastic, affectionate, and contagiously passionate about performance. Michael, the showman, dazzled with improvised *Grease* and Michael Jackson dance moves—“immersive and self-realizing dancing [that] not only transforms him, but also has potential to transform those who watch him” (Doolittle et al., 2016, p. 249). Brenden, quieter but no less vital, excelled in affirming others, pausing rehearsals to offer encouragement until everyone felt acknowledged. His joy in celebrating peers was itself a form of artistry. Together, the recycling team embodied Sandahl’s (2002) observation of disability community: the intention to include all to the fullest extent possible. A participant reflection captured this ethos: “[We] always tried to help each other… This allowed the entire process to be spontaneous and ever-changing… It made the performance fluid and fun rather than stagnant and rigid” (K. Berner, personal communication).

Figure 4: The Best Worst Day team debriefing

POSTCARD 4: THE BEST WORST DAY (BLUE TEAM)

Savannah, a meticulous note-taker and "Type-A" drama therapist, checked in early, stayed late, and offered constant reminders, rides, and support. She admitted she joined the Inclusive Theatre Company "under a misunderstanding of what the process actually was and I am immensely better for it" (S. Brueton, personal communication). Driven by a passion for helping others, she was also anxious about doing too much, too little, or inadvertently causing harm—fears that accumulated into a worry she was "letting the group down." On the rainy day that began this paper, Savannah was overwhelmed with stress. She later reflected: "I didn't want my personal experience to ruin the experience of the day for the rest of my group, but I tried my best to push through" (personal communication). Instead of pushing through, she was encouraged to share honestly, just as she had asked others to do. This shift moved her from advocate to ally. As Hadley (2020) argues, allyship is not simply advocacy but "a skilled practice, pursued over time, in partnership with disabled people" (pp. 184-185). When

Savannah dropped her façade and met the team as an equal, Kim and Robert supported her in return, creating reciprocal partnership. This embodied Hadley's concept of accompliceship: deploying skills in specific contexts to support disabled people on their own terms, without speaking for them or constraining their agency (2020, p. 185).

This team worked at their own rhythm, embracing Karafistan's (2004) principle that "whatever is brought into the working room… can potentially be utilized in the creative process" (p. 268). Some days meant choreography, others venting or impromptu dance parties. Their final scene staged semi-improvised monologues about "bad days," interrupted by Jesse and Tinkie—the dancing duo known for spreading joy through smiles, winks, and hugs. Both primarily communicated nonverbally, so they led the group in a choreographed, flexible routine to ABBA's *Dancing Queen*. Before the first performance, Tinkie was ill and Jesse, heartbroken, nearly withdrew. Yet she rallied, distributing tissues and dancing with renewed joy. By the final show, the duo returned together, amplifying the energy.

The scene embodied reciprocity: every member was included, equitably valued, and supported. What began as a collective lament transformed into movement pieces of superheroes and adventures, where frustrations dissolved into joy. The process was mutually beneficial: participants contributed talents, learned new skills, expressed passions, and deepened friendships. In Sandahl's (2002) words, it reflected the disability community's intention "to include all of the people to the fullest extent possible" (p. 26).

READING BETWEEN THE POSTCARDS: THE PARADOX OF INCLUSION

The paradoxes of inclusion demand ongoing negotiation rather than resolution. The case studies presented here are not a complete picture, but postcards—an inclusive, arts-based method of data presentation and dissemination that accommodates and modifies information into comprehensible, inviting bites. Developed collaboratively during one of the workshops, the postcard method echoes artistic conventions of applied theatre that align inclusive research with broader traditions of visual and narrative inquiry. To describe this praxis on a postcard would require oxymorons: perfectly imperfect, exclusively inclusive, weirdly normal, a flexible structure, a

chaotic routine. These contradictions, far from flaws, are the essence of inclusive work. Above all, the postcards demonstrate the centrality of relationships: forming, sustaining, and sharing them is the foundation of transformation.

An *exclusively inclusive* approach emphasizes reciprocity: participation is not just being present but contributing and supporting others at one's own pace. This reciprocity was especially visible in post-performance workshops, where Oasis performers immediately began facilitating, encouraging peers, and leading familiar activities. O'Toole (1992) observes that audience participation shapes performance meaning, and here it validated the skills and leadership of performers with disabilities. Sharing the stage and the workshop space with families, staff, and peers created genuine inclusivity: not inclusion by presence alone, but by equal status, mutual respect, and mutual benefit (Tomlinson, 1982; Brodzinski, 2010; Sandahl & Auslander, 2008).

Inclusive practice often becomes "weirdly normal." The tools are not different—blocking, choreography, improvisation—but adapted and shared. Initially, many students expressed fear about saying the wrong thing or doubting that inclusive theatre was possible without prior experience (K. Kvevli & M. Mkhize, personal communications). Early rehearsals often mirrored the facilitators' styles, limiting creativity. As each introduced their own strengths—Kutloano's precision choreography, Kylie's bilingual dialogues, Anathi's physical theatre, Frances's improvisation—performances transformed into authentic inclusive works. One reflection noted that when activities were simplified below the Oasis participants' level, energy dropped; when challenged, participants "rose to the challenge, which gave rise to really lovely theatre" (Harrison, A., personal communication). Inclusive training requires resisting the urge to lower expectations and instead creating frameworks that allow participants to meet and exceed them.

The performances combined real-world struggles with fantastical heroics, a form of *magical realism* where authentic stories mingled with imaginative solutions (Hargrave, 2010; Palmer & Hayhow, 2008). The presence of diverse abilities on stage challenges cultural metaphors of disability (Eckard & Myers, 2009) while enacting moments of "magical" inclusion—simple adjustments, shared accountability, and everyday creativity that transform accessibility from charity into common practice. As one participant reflected, "everyone could easily adapt to

be more inclusive" (S. Brueton, personal communication).

More than oxymorons, relationships are the true paradox of inclusion: self-contradictory yet transformative. Relationships formed within inclusive practice ripple outward, modeling how theatre can reshape society through adaptation, modification, and accommodation (Franks, 2014; Sandahl & Auslander, 2008). Several participants have carried this focus into their careers—pursuing dissertations, advocating inclusive casting, facilitating dance companies, or teaching in special-needs schools. Such outcomes show how inclusive praxis trains future practitioners to normalize inclusion in both conventional theatre and broader society. Yet inclusive theatre itself remains paradoxical. The label "inclusive" signals difference even while the goal is equity. As Hodgkin cautions, labeling risks marginalization (qtd. in Kempe, 1996), echoing Tomlinson's (1982) paradox that disabled people must accept the label they wish to transcend in order to fight for rights. The Oasis project leaned instead toward ubuntu: "the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others" (Mandela, 2008 in Stengel, 2010). Inclusion here was not a category but a community, a network of relationships in which support and creativity were mutually sustaining.

Inclusion is never straightforward; it lives in the tension between ideals of full participation and persistent systemic barriers (Roulstone, 2010; Hadley, 2020). But these paradoxes are not obstacles—they are engines of innovation. Inclusive theatre trains facilitators to navigate contradiction, to embrace imperfection, to value reciprocity, and to center relationships. In Hayhow's terms, this praxis becomes a "heightened form of everyday human activity," where play, pretending, and performance create spaces to test, shape, and expand capabilities (Trowsdale & Hayhow, 2013). Like the stormy rehearsal that opened this article, inclusive practice often feels like the "best worst day": messy, frustrating, imperfect—yet also profoundly generative. The postcards from Oasis remind us that inclusive theatre thrives not in resolving paradox but in living with it, transforming contradiction into connection, and rehearsal into a rehearsal for society itself.

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Kate Jaskolski is a theatre-maker, researcher, and educator specializing in inclusive and socially engaged performance. She holds a PhD in Applied & Educational Theatre from the University of Cape Town and an MA in Educational Theatre from New York University. She has worked internationally across South Africa, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, and Australia, with a practice centering on sensory and participatory theatre with neurodivergent communities, including sensory theatre for children with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

The Oasis Association, based in Cape Town, South Africa, is a community organisation offering residential care, supported work opportunities, and creative engagement for adults with intellectual disabilities. Its protected workshop and group homes provide safe, empowering spaces where residents can build skills, relationships, and independence.

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From Home to Stage: Applied Theatre as Social Practice in a Residential Community—A Case Study of the Lakewood Hills Theatre Festival in Zhuhai, Guangdong, China

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of applied theatre as a tool for community development within contemporary China's urban context, with a specific focus on its capacity to strengthen community identity and social capital. Drawing on participatory action research, the study analyses two community-based theatre festivals held in 2019 and 2021 within the Lakewood Hills residential complex in Zhuhai, Guangdong. It traces how residents evolved from passive cultural consumers into active co-creators and performers of theatrical art.

The practice followed a four-stage model:

Family Theatre Workshops

Collective Rehearsals
Theatre Forum
Final Performances

Core applied theatre methods—including educational theatre, improvisational, playback theatre and among others, were used to elicit residents' personal narratives. Fragments of lived experience, such as migration memories, neighbour relations, and identity formation, were collectively devised into original theatrical pieces. Ultimately, residents took the stage as performers, presenting their work to the community.
The study argues that applied theatre, through its participatory, process-oriented, and ritual characteristics, effectively transforms physical residential spaces into emotionally connected communities. It offers a replicable model for addressing the prevalent issue of ***neighbourhood indifference*** *in upscale urban developments. The final performance represents not merely an artistic product, but a core outcome of sustainable community development: robust social bonds and an active public spirit.*

INTRODUCTION

China's period of reform, opening-up, and economic transformation has triggered nationwide urban expansion. By 2024, the official urbanization rate reached 67% (Urbanization rate). As populations shifted from villages with stable social ties into high-rise apartments, daily life transformed profoundly. The experience of greeting familiar neighbours and encountering childhood acquaintances gave way to a reality of pervasive anonymity. Returning daily to the same building often involves no greeting, let alone meaningful interaction. Chinese anthropologist Xiang Biao (2021) identifies this condition as the "vanishing nearby," arguing that "the displacement of fujin ('the nearby') in public consciousness is partially responsible...particularly the neighborhood and the workplace where everyday interactions take place, the nearby—vanished in consciousness" (p. 148). Since the pandemic, this phenomenon has intensified. The rise of food delivery, on-demand services, and digital platforms enables urban residents to maintain daily routines without leaving home. Xiang observes that when physical coexistence no longer cultivates intimacy, we lose the

very fulcrum upon which shared meaning is built (2021, p. 148). Therefore, revitalising the tangible connections of the neighbourhood has become an urgent task—one that requires reigniting interpersonal intimacy and reconstructing the anchors of human relationships in China.

This period of rapid urbanisation coincided with China's historic property boom. As mid-to-high-end developments entered the market, targeting educated, professionally established middle and upper-middle-class families, it became clear that purchasing decisions involved more than securing shelter. These buyers sought lifestyles and social identity. As Miao Ying (2017) notes, certain segments of the middle class exercise considerable freedom in purchasing non-essential goods or adopting specific lifestyles to signal social status (p. 638). Indeed, potential buyers now approach property acquisition with more sophisticated criteria, evaluating developments through a multidimensional lens that extends far beyond physical structures. Their decision-making calculus increasingly incorporates cultural ecosystems, community vibrancy, and opportunities for meaningful engagement—precisely the elements that community-based theatre and related initiatives effectively cultivate. This evolution in consumer behavior simultaneously presents developers with both challenge and opportunity: the necessity to transcend conventional amenities and deliver truly distinctive living experiences that resonate with these elevated expectations. Thus, the inherent difficulty in cultivating genuine community became a critical challenge for developers aiming to attract this affluent demographic.

Within this context, a prime example is the Aranya project in Qinhuangdao, Hebei Province, which strategically integrated community-based theatre to achieve exceptional market resonance. From its initial community-based theatre production of *Eight Women*[1] in 2015, through the musical *Nine to Five*[2] in 2016, to its ambitious

[1] *Eight Women* is a suspenseful stage adaptation of the French film *Huit Femmes*. Set in an isolated French country villa, the narrative unfolds after the male host is found murdered, trapping eight women together as mutual suspects. The characters gradually expose one another's hidden transgressions—including infidelity, fraud, and betrayal. The plot culminates in the host, who has witnessed the entire confrontation, taking his own life.

[2] The classic Broadway musical adapted from the eponymous film, is set in a 1970s American workplace. It follows three female employees who, confronting systemic gender discrimination and professional marginalization, orchestrate the kidnapping of their managing director to fundamentally reform company policies.

staging of the Chinese classic *Teahouse*[3] in 2020, Aranya has systematically developed a distinctive brand identity rooted in real-estate-integrated community theatre (Li, 2021). When this demographic—predominantly professionals aged 35 to 45, established in their careers with stable incomes and a conscious pursuit of work-life balance—engaged in Aranya's community activities, a cultural shift became visible. The community fostered what Wang (2022) terms a "return to family, self, nature, and spiritual life." In this context, the vanishing nearby that concerned Xiang Biao has begun, quietly, to recede. Meanwhile, this was reflected not only in appreciating property values and sustained demand but also in the creation of its own cultural landmark: the Aranya Theatre Festival. The 2021 Aranya Theatre Festival featured 40 Chinese and international directors presenting 29 plays across 94 performances, including 16 overseas productions, achieving significant commercial and artistic impact (Cheng, 2025). The process of developing and performing community-based theatre, integrated with the theatre festival's operations, directly facilitated the formation of a shared community identity. Participants in this creative process began identifying as "Aranya people," finding a sense of belonging among like-minded residents (Li, 2021). This fostered a self-sustaining internal ecosystem where the brand and operational model could perpetuate themselves, ensuring the continuous production of cultural identity and the development of a stronger community alliance.

Aranya's strategic adoption of community-based theatre—a distinct branch of applied theatre—stemmed from its unique capacity to address two fundamental challenges in upscale community development: the need for distinctive cultural branding and the imperative to overcome social fragmentation. Unlike conventional marketing approaches or temporary cultural events, community-based theatre provides an embodied, participatory framework that simultaneously cultivates cultural capital and fosters organic social bonds. It's worth noting that applied theatre is a distinct form of theatre that emerged and evolved during the 1950s and 1960s, characterized

[3] Lao She's 1956 dramatic masterpiece, traces nearly fifty years of Chinese social transformation through the lens of the Yutai Teahouse in old Beijing. Spanning the late Qing dynasty, the Beiyang warlord period, and the post-war era, the play captures the evolving social fabric of Beijing by tracing the intersecting lives of diverse characters who frequent the establishment.

by its strong applied dimension. Unlike traditional theatre, which often catered to elite or middle-class audiences and prioritized art for art's sake (Shaughnessy, 2012, p. 16; Nicholson, 2014, p. 8), applied theatre extends its reach into non-traditional spaces such as orphanages, refugee camps, schools, nursing homes, prisons, and other community-based venues. Its core focus lies in cultural engagement, educational innovation, and social change (Nicholson, 2008, p. 273), with an emphasis on marginalized populations, political expression, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Shaughnessy, 2012, p. XVII; Balfour, 2009, p. 349). In these unconventional settings, applied theatre practitioners engage with diverse groups through ethnographic observation, interviews, and theatre workshops, etc., they listen to participants' stories, co-create content tailored to their experiences, and use performances to amplify the voices and narratives of the communities themselves (Denzin, 2003, p. 202; Reason & Rowe, 2017, p. 14; Duffy & Vettraino, 2010).

The Aranya case reveals a complex dynamic between resident-participants and the artistic team, a relationship complicated by the property developer's dual role as funding provider (Freebody et al., 2018, p. 10). But it does demonstrate how applied theatre can activate social dynamics within an exclusive residential community. It connects neighbours who, despite being strangers, share fundamental aspirations for quality of life. In this context, theatre ceases to be a scheduled event and becomes an organic social process—emerging spontaneously within shared spaces and transforming anonymous co-residents into collaborative creators. This represents a significant evolution from applied theatre's traditional role in marginalized communities to its new function in affluent environments: no longer filling social voids but rather reconstituting meaningful connection within contexts of material abundance.

At its core, applied theatre practice is an act of human encounter. Through the lens of Toni Ross's (2006) response to Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, it constitutes a collaborative process where "artists and members of the public, or art and diverse disciplines, converge as equals to form a unified whole" (p. 171). When neighbours enter a theatrical space together, deepen understanding through dialogue, and collectively embody characters' experiences on stage—witnessing the glistening tears and laughter lines in each other's eyes—they enact what Xiang Biao (2021) describes as the

“First Mile Movement”: a commitment to attentively observing all people and things within one’s immediate surroundings (p. 159). This aligns with John Dewey’s (1939/1976) assertion that “For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched” (pp. 229-230).

It is also worth noting that the development of applied theatre in China is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its professionalisation is often marked by the establishment of the Art Education programme (later renamed Drama Education) at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in 2005 (Shanghai Theatre Academy), which began supplying graduates to disseminate knowledge and practice. By 2025, the field will have existed for merely two decades.

This study focuses on one specific branch—community-based theatre—and its integration with real estate development to unlock unique social potential. This fusion of real estate with cultural content generated significant added brand value. Similarly, in 2012, the Jiuzhou and Greentown Groups launched the Lakewood Hills (翠湖香山, cuì hú xiāng shān) project in Zhuhai—an integrated international community featuring residences, a golf course, hotels, and commercial spaces. By 2019, with residents settled, the project team collaborated with the researcher to pilot a community-based theatre model, establishing the Lakewood Hills Theatre Festival. A second edition in 2021, post-pandemic, saw qualitative growth in participation, live attendance, and online viewership.

Notably, Lakewood Hills is an upscale community attracting educators, officials, entrepreneurs, and residents from Hong Kong and Macau, China. Yet, like many new urban developments, it faces the challenge of uniting diverse residents into a cohesive community. Limited shared experiences and weak identity formation among new neighbours are common issues. From the outset, this project defined its theatre festival not as “professionals performing for residents,” but as “residents creating and performing their own stories for themselves and their community.” This practice directly embodies Denzin’s (2003) conception of applied theatre as a democratic art form—for the people, by the people, and with the people (p. 201). It functions as a powerful instrument for fostering social participation and driving tangible change, bringing both hope and substantive transformation to communities. The stage is thus viewed not as an end goal, but as a

ritualised space for consolidating and elevating community bonds—merely the opening act of a longer-term relational process.

Based on this foundation, this study investigates how theatre functions as social practice within an affluent community—a context not typically associated with social intervention. Through practical experimentation and analysis, it examines the mechanisms through which applied theatre exerts influence. The research shares these operational processes to expand applied theatre's theoretical framework, proposing a shift from traditional therapeutic/empowerment models toward well-being/community-building paradigms in developed urban contexts. Ultimately, it seeks to construct imaginable lifestyles through Chinese applied theatre practice, thereby enriching domestic community case studies while providing property developers, community workers, and cultural institutions with replicable models for cultural revitalization.

LAKEWOOD HILLS THEATRE FESTIVAL IN 2019 AND 2021

Process of Community-Based Theatre: The Unfold[4]

The 2019 Lakewood Hills Theatre Festival drew inspiration from the Arayna model, establishing a primary objective for its inaugural two-month program: to position residents—with no prior stage experience—as the central performers. The festival's core mission became enabling these residents to narrate authentic stories reflecting their lived experiences and local culture. Through extensive consultation between the creative and community operations teams, the festival committed to developing an original production rooted in community life rather than staging existing works. The resulting play, *The Unfold*, employed a metatheatrical play-within-a-play structure requiring actors to portray dual roles. Its framework depicts the fictional Xiangshan[5] Theatre Troupe, an amateur ensemble facing dissolution due to financial pressures. The narrative reveals each member's personal struggles and their perceived insignificance within broader historical currents, culminating in a climactic rehearsal argument that paradoxically enables their final successful performance and secures

[4] 破茧, pò jiǎn

[5]香山, Xiāng Shān

renewed funding. To embed the production within Zhuhai's local cultural context, the inner play adapts the local legend the Zhuhai Fisher Girl, in which a celestial being falls in love with a mortal fisherman. Their romance provokes opposition from her divine family, ultimately leading to their tragic joint demise.

While this paper does not focus on dramaturgical analysis, examining the creative process behind the 2019 festival's final production reveals the operational logic of Lakewood Hills' community-based theatre model. The production's framework strategically mirrors the participants' own realities: the amateur actors—teachers, students, and professionals in their daily lives—portray characters whose struggles with compromise and passion directly echo their own commitment to the theatre project. Their fictional troupe's impending dissolution parallels the real-world challenges of sustaining community art, while their fictional perseverance reflects the participants' actual dedication. The play-within-a-play structure, incorporating the local Zhuhai Fisher Girl legend, serves dual purposes. For the performers, it provides an emotional conduit to express themselves through archetypal roles, fulfilling collective artistic aspirations. For the audience, it creates immediate cultural recognition through familiar folklore. The legendary characters' unwavering devotion forms a thematic parallel to the actors' fictional—and actual—determination to persevere despite adversity, completing a powerful narrative cycle that blurs the lines between performed fiction and community reality. This process echoes the "integration of the actual and the imaginary" inherent in dramatic creation (Norris, 2017, Introduction).

Indeed, the participants' engagement in *The Unfold* embodied the same collective spirit as the fictional Xiangshan Theatre Troupe they portrayed. Throughout the creative process, residents contributed essential authenticity by refining dialogue based on their professional and personal experiences. They provided nuanced insights into character depiction—from an investor's demeanor and a migrant worker's living conditions to contemporary intergenerational relationships. Furthermore, participants actively sourced practical production elements, bringing brooms, tables, school uniforms, and work attire from their own homes. These real-life props and costumes significantly enhanced the performance's textual and visual credibility, strengthening its connection with local audiences through immediately recognizable details.

Educational Theatre for Families

The two-month theatre festival confronted a fundamental challenge of applied practice: how to achieve broad community impact when the final production involved only 13 resident performers. Restricting participation to this select group would have contradicted applied theatre's core democratic principle of inclusive engagement. Indeed, participation limited to thirteen individuals inherently contradicts the core objective of fostering community cohesion and alleviating social isolation (Ashleya & Wookey, 2024, p. 4). This limitation was strategically addressed through parallel educational theatre workshops. Simultaneously, it fulfils parents' desire for activities that integrate engagement with educational value. Scheduled weekly throughout the festival, these two-hour sessions invited parent-child dyads to explore picture books through drama games and interactive dramatic techniques. The workshops created an accessible entry point to theatrical experience, allowing families to encounter drama's expressive potential while deepening their understanding of narrative through "embodied learning" (Trowsdale & Hayhow, 2014). This auxiliary programming effectively expanded the festival's reach beyond performing participants to engage the wider community as active spectators and learners. As Baumol William J and Bowen William G (1968/1973) acknowledge, "[o]bviously much remains to be done before the performing arts can truly be said to belong to the people" (p. 470). Nevertheless, when such activities become habitual over time, they cultivate a future audience for theatre. Participants cease to view the festival as separate from their lives; rather, they recognize that each element is interconnected—and that without an audience, no performance can be truly complete.

Using the picture book *As Red As Rose*[6] in an educational drama workshop on 24 August 2019, we engaged twelve families (twenty-five participants). The session began with a fundamental question: How many are experiencing drama for the first time? Nearly universal hand-raising confirmed the group's novice status. When invited to voice their concerns, participants revealed telling assumptions:

- Participant A (parent) asked if Chinese opera singing would be required.

[6]像玫瑰那样红, Xiàng méigui nàyàng hóng

- Participant B (child) inquired about performance expectations and audience.
- Participant C (parent) expressed immediate anxiety: “We have to perform on stage? I’m completely unprepared. Can I quit now?”
- Participant D (child) referenced their school recitation experience instead.

Rather than addressing these individually, the facilitator reframed the context: “We’ll spend two hours together in this level space—no stage, just chairs and simple props. Your presence alone makes this workshop possible. Let’s experience first, and return to your questions afterward.” This approach immediately established the workshop’s participatory, non-performance-based nature while validating participants’ contributions through simple presence. The process never seeks to provide definitive answers but arrives at meaning through shared exploration. Indeed, such participatory programmes “reflect and reproduce a more inclusive and democratic use of space within theatres” (Ashley & Wookey, 2024, p. 5). This democratic and inclusive environment fosters a profound sense of safety and belonging among participants. In turn, this security deepens their commitment to active participation, establishing a positive feedback loop between facilitators and attendees that elevates the entire workshop dynamic.

The workshop began with spatial immersion, establishing the narrative world of the White Cat Clan residing on White Wind Mountain in the picture book. The facilitator transformed a simple white cloth into a three-dimensional mountain range through theatrical staging, eliciting spontaneous awe from participants as they witnessed theatre’s transformative potential. Participants then organized into family units to explore the story through two core educational theatre techniques. First is still image: each family collaboratively created physical tableaux depicting moments from the white cats’ daily lives—enjoying meals, sunbathing, or mountain climbing—establishing both character relationships and narrative normality. When the story introduced the disruptive arrival of a red cat, families created new still images revealing diverse responses: some huddling in suspicion, others expressing fear or hostility, while several showed openness through concerned or welcoming gestures. Second is thought tracking: this foundation of physical expression naturally transitioned to thought

tracking, where participants vocalized their characters' inner monologues, deepening emotional investment and narrative comprehension.

The integration of educational theatre workshops fundamentally transformed the festival's scope and impact. While the final staged production involved only 13 performers, the parallel workshop series engaged dozens of families, expanding participation across generations—from preschoolers to parents in their fifties. This strategic expansion addressed applied theatre's core democratic imperative while creating multiple access points for community engagement. Through techniques like still image and thought tracking, participants experienced theatre not as a predetermined script but as spontaneous co-creation. As Michael Kimmel and Dayana Hristova (2021) observe, such improvisation enables free-spirited exploration, inviting families into novel territories, and within a framework of safety and mutual respect, this space holds infinite potential, allowing participants to be drawn toward the unexpected and willingly embrace the unknown (p. 354). Meanwhile, each engagement undoubtedly transforms participants' perspectives, demonstrating how theatre's unique capacity extends far beyond the narrow conception of drama as merely a vehicle for transmitting information or moral lessons (O'Toole, 1977).

The workshops demonstrated that meaningful theatrical expression could emerge in ordinary spaces without professional staging, effectively demystifying theatre's perceived elitism. Community-based theatre not only continues its established work in specialized settings like prisons and orphanages but also proactively enters ordinary households and neighborhoods, thereby becoming a binding agent within communities (Johnston, 1998). This approach revealed theatre's dual capacity: as both a polished performance art and an immediate educational tool. Most significantly, the program enabled residents to recognize theatrical potential within their daily interactions—something to be created with family and neighbors rather than merely consumed as distant entertainment. This paradigm shift, from spectator to co-creator, represents the essential transformation that sustains community cultural development.

Forum: Theatre Makes Life Better

The festival further cultivated interdisciplinary dialogue through its public forum entitled *Theatre: Making Life Better*, which convened

theatre scholars, directors, and a psychologist. Following keynote presentations connecting their expertise to the festival themes, a roundtable discussion examined rehearsal anecdotes and family workshop experiences, concluding with audience interaction. Audience composition revealed meaningful patterns: alongside returning community-based theatre participants, many new attendees appeared—some engaging deeply during Q&A sessions about balancing humanistic and academic education, while more reserved individuals absorbed content as listeners. Notably, elderly residents who initially attended for casual participation reported unexpected enjoyment, and the psychologist's dual role as both expert and community member tangibly embodied the festival's commitment to amplifying local voices.

Performance Night

Following extensive preparations and six weeks of collaborative rehearsals, the 90-minute production premiered at Hong Kong Baptist University (Zhuhai)'s UIC Theatre. The 250-seat venue reached full capacity, with an audience comprising almost exclusively community stakeholders beyond the essential property management staff. For most attendees, this represented not only their first theatrical experience but their inaugural encounter with a professionally staged production created and performed by their neighbours.

The performance featured comprehensive production design—including lighting, costumes, multimedia, and direction—meeting professional theatrical standards. Backstage, as artistic director, I observed both performers and audience throughout the show. Notably, the auditorium remained devoid of phone illumination, with spectators completely engaged in the dual narratives: the fictional troupe's struggles and the embedded folk legend's romance. Audience members watched with palpable anticipation, witnessing their neighbours' transformation through the intensive creative process.

The production's emotional authenticity clearly resonated. From the butterfly metamorphosis sequence symbolizing sacrificial love to the troupe's perseverance through financial hardship, the performance culminated in both artistic success and personal fulfillment for the participants. Post-performance, social media platforms—particularly WeChat Moments—flooded with documentation, generating community-wide celebration and regional media attention.

Selected audience responses captured the impact:

- “I never imagined a neighbours' performance could move me to tears.”
- “Their emotional authenticity rivaled professional actors.”
- “I deeply regret not participating—when is the next festival?”
- “Seeing my ordinarily reserved neighbour transformed on stage revealed incredible human potential.”
- “This wasn't just acting—they were telling their own journey.”

To maximize accessibility, the performance was live-streamed, unexpectedly attracting over 110,000 online viewers and significantly extending the project’s community impact.

As Table 1 illustrates, the 2019 Lakewood Hills Theatre Festival achieved unprecedented audience reach. The digital broadcast fundamentally transformed the event’s scope, enabling over 110,000 online viewers to participate beyond physical and temporal limitations. While the stream attracted some local residents prevented from attending, its primary viewership consisted of national audiences drawn through social sharing within community networks. This digital expansion not only demonstrated the project’s inclusive ethos but effectively repositioned a local community initiative as a shared cultural experience with national resonance. The overwhelming predominance of viewers with no prior connection to the development reveals a crucial dynamic: the production’s appeal lay precisely in its authentic representation of ordinary experience. Audiences engaged not for professional spectacle or celebrity appeal, but to witness people like themselves articulating shared human experiences through art. This demonstrates community-based theatre’s unique capacity to transcend its immediate context and achieve universal resonance when it foregrounds authentic collective expression rather than theatrical virtuosity.

Table 1: *Distribution of Participant Types*

Participants	Numbers (person)	Percentage
Actors	13	0.01%
Parent-child workshop participants	53	0.05%
Offline audiences	250	0.2%
Online audiences	110, 000	99.74%

2019 TO 2021: IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA, THEATRE BREATHED NEW LIFE INTO EVERYDAY EXISTENCE

The second theatre festival, postponed from 2020 to 2021, inherently carried a profoundly different significance. It emerged after over a year of pandemic restrictions—a period marked by health code monitoring, suspended live performances, and diminished collective celebration. Against this backdrop of cultural deprivation and emotional isolation, the festival answered an urgent communal need. For Lakewood Hills, the question was not whether to proceed, but how essential this gathering had become. The resounding affirmation to stage the production represented more than artistic programming; it became a vital act of cultural reaffirmation, offering participants and audiences alike the long-denied gifts of shared artistic immersion and collective hope.

The 2021 festival retained its core structure of community performances, family workshops, forums, and staged productions, but introduced a significant innovation in its play source material. The community-based theatre production drew from Ba Jin's[7] novel *Home* and Cao Yu's[8] dramatic adaptation, recontextualizing this Republican-era narrative for the post-pandemic reality.

This choice resonated deeply with audiences who had spent the pandemic reevaluating the meaning of family and human connection.

[7] 巴金, Bā Jīn (1904-2005) is one of the most important and influential Chinese writers of the 20th century.
[8] 曹禺, Cáo Yǔ (1910-1996) is a seminal figure in 20th-century Chinese theatre.

While maintaining the original plot concerning the Gao family's conflicts and romantic entanglements, the adaptation emphasized the youthful idealism of May Fourth intellectuals (五四青年, wǔ sì qīng nián) striving for personal and national transformation. The production's climax featured performers advocating for social change through physical theatre set to The Internationale, creating an electric moment of collective catharsis.

From the lighting booth of Zhuhai Grand Theatre, I witnessed the complete dissolution of theatrical boundaries as the audience spontaneously joined the chorus. The fourth wall vanished entirely—spectators became participants, actors became witnesses, and the space transformed into a communal forum where complex emotions flowed freely. In that transcendent moment, theatre fulfilled its highest purpose: not as spectacle to be observed, but as a medium for shared human experience and collective meaning-making.

The 2021 festival marked a substantial expansion in both scale and impact. Actors participation more than doubled compared to 2019, while maintaining consistent workshop attendance. The relocation to the thousand-seat Zhuhai Grand Theatre created a significantly more ambitious production scale. A strategic decision to offer free nationwide streaming proved transformative, attracting over 300,000 online viewers and establishing new benchmarks for audience reach, public engagement, and cultural influence.

Table 2: *Distribution of Participant Types*

Participants	**Numbers (person)**	**Percentage**
Actors	34	0.01%
Parent-child workshop participants	60	0.02%
Offline audiences	1035	0.34%
Online audiences	300, 000	99.63%

- Actor A reflected: "Portraying how our predecessors broke feudal constraints created dialogue not just with my character,

but with the original authors themselves."

- Actor B observed: "My character's tragedy reflects how individuals become insignificant within historical currents—a resonance with the upheavals we all face today. Classics continue enlightening us through contemporary relevance."
- Actor C noted: "Despite my minor role, contributing to this inspiring classic felt profoundly meaningful for both performers and audience."
- Audience Member A shared: "This sophisticated adaptation made classic themes accessible, revealing our neighbors as hidden artists."
- Audience Member B recalled: "The collective singing and applause from a thousand people created a rare, precious communal moment."
- Audience Member C inquired: "Will this be recorded? I'd re-watch it repeatedly. Will the theatre festival continue next year?"

As both a researcher and a practitioner, I found out that these authentic responses reaffirm community-based theatre's transformative capacity. The 2021 Lakewood Hills Theatre Festival represented a qualitative evolution from its 2019 predecessor. While the initial festival emerged during China's final property market surge—emulating models like Aranya by partnering professionals with residents—the 2021 festival demonstrated a matured ecosystem. The original vision of cultivating internal community creativity had materialized: residents now cyclically assumed roles as directors, performers, and visual artists, with each production attracting new participants. This established a self-renewing cultural mechanism where residents became the primary agents of their own aesthetic and social fulfillment.

This transformation begins with cultivating aesthetic awareness among participants and organized groups. As community-based theatre establishes itself at Lakewood Hills, it generates a cultural ripple effect: Tai Chi clubs, painting societies, photography groups, and other artistic initiatives gradually emerge. Residents spontaneously organize activities and document their work through WeChat platforms, creating digital archives and virtual exhibitions to a wider range of audience. This visibility enables broader audiences to recognize

Lakewood Hills' organic cultural ecosystem, demonstrating how every resident possesses the potential to become an artist of daily life. Through this process, the cumulative development of aesthetic sensibility progressively guides individuals toward their personal ideal of fulfilled living.

Secondly, these initiatives directly address the "neighbourhood relations" central to this study. The pandemic and subsequent years of hardship have intensified the fragmentation of civil society in China, with the struggles of ordinary people permeating daily existence (Lems et al., 2025, p. 774). This accumulated weariness fuels a withdrawal from reality, creating a self-perpetuating cycle characterized by interpersonal alienation and a deep-seated loss of belonging. In the wake of pervasive social exclusion, community-based theatre serves to focus on those small and seemingly ordinary acts of repair undertaken by people to reclaim this world. While such initiatives neither seek therapeutic solutions nor offer comprehensive remedies, their very existence represents a conscious refusal to accept alienated existence as inevitable (Lems et al., 2025, pp. 775–776).

Community-based theatre and associated cultural activities function as relational bridges, drawing residents from isolated digital existences—characterized by phone-based shopping, food delivery, and private entertainment—into collaborative creation with neighbors within their immediate physical environment. This engagement represents not forced socialization, but purposeful collaboration through shared artistic projects. Participants temporarily adopt new identities, creating constructive distance from daily routines. This collective endeavor fundamentally repositions individuals within a social fabric, transforming vertical co-existence ("neighbors upstairs/downstairs") into horizontal collaboration ("fellow performers"). Through character interpretation, residents articulate emotions and perspectives otherwise inaccessible in daily interaction, while dramatic conflicts prompt reconsideration of real-world relationships. Supported by professional staging and training, many experience theatrical expression for the first time, incorporating "drama," "performance," and "art" into their personal lexicons. This expansion of expressive capacity and social connection represents a fundamental form of adult growth—not merely artistic skill acquisition, but the development of new modes of being and relating.

The 2021 festival demonstrated how community-based theatre

facilitates social reconnection after collective trauma. Beyond its artistic function, it created a vital space for processing pandemic experiences. When engaging new participants, conversations naturally began with shared pandemic experiences—quarantine frustrations, canceled plans, and bureaucratic challenges. These exchanges became raw material for artistic creation. In rehearsal circles, participants openly discussed pandemic-induced stresses—family dynamics, work pressures, and personal struggles. As facilitator, I encouraged channeling these authentic emotions into the Republican-era production of *Home*. Though temporally distant from the characters' feudal constraints, performers discovered profound parallels in experiences of confinement, powerlessness, and yearning for freedom. This emotional transference enabled genuine portrayal of characters resisting oppression.

Through this process, theatre revealed its enduring capacity for collective catharsis. The shared emotional journey—from personal storytelling to artistic expression—created what ancient Greeks termed katharsis: not merely emotional release, but transformative understanding through shared experience. The performance's climax, achieved through integrated ensemble dance and music, extended this healing potential to audience members, completing the cycle of artistic empathy and demonstrating theatre's unique power to address contemporary trauma through timeless dramatic frameworks. As John Casson (1997/2018) depicts:

> The first theatre audiences who attended shamanic ceremonies, Greek tragedies, mystery plays and dramatic rituals did so for more than entertainment: these theatres were for healing purposes, for spiritual uplift, fertility, catharsis and community benefit. Entertainment was important but these events also contained symbolic processes that spoke to deeper aspects of the individual and collective consciousness of the audience with the intent of providing relief from psychological and social tensions. (p. 43)

The 2021 community-based theatre project particularly demonstrated how theatre embodies the enduring aesthetic and social power inherent to the form since its origins. Such initiatives remind practitioners to consistently honour theatre's innate capacity for

healing. By upholding this legacy and strategically amplifying community voices through artistic practice, the field moves progressively closer to realizing its highest potential for social transformation.

SHORTCOMINGS AND FINDINGS

It must be acknowledged that despite the documented successes of the Lakewood Hills community-based theatre, its long-term sustainability proved unattainable. As The New York Times reported: “Evergrande’s collapse, with $300 billion in debt, mirrors the slow and painful unwinding of China's property sector” (Wakabayashi & Dong, 2025). While the 2021 property market decline directly impacted the festival’s viability, the fundamental challenge lay in its developmental stage: two years of programming had merely cultivated initial community interest without establishing institutional resilience. The model remained dependent on real estate subsidies and professional mentorship. Without ongoing financial support and specialized training in directing, design, and technical production, the initiative lacked the foundation for autonomous operation. While participants gained basic theatrical understanding, comprehensive artistic development requires sustained incubation far exceeding the project's timeline. Ultimately, China’s abrupt property market collapse eliminated the necessary conditions for nurturing this emerging cultural ecosystem, demonstrating how vulnerable community arts initiatives remain when tethered to volatile economic sectors.

Nevertheless, the Lakewood Hills Theatre Festival established a valuable operational paradigm. Its “community-based theatre creation—educational family workshops—interdisciplinary theatre forums—public performances” model provides a transferable framework for producing complete theatrical works with novice participants while expanding public engagement. This demonstrates how to make theatre accessible within Chinese urban contexts. Regarding sustainability, the key insight lies in transitioning from developer-dependent funding to cultivating endogenous community capacity. Since Chinese residential communities already maintain property management structures and neighborhood centers that offer subsidized courses, these existing platforms provide ideal incubation spaces. By integrating theatre courses—acting, directing, design—into

existing community education programs at accessible fees, three critical objectives are achieved: creating sustainable operational funding, building foundational skills through progressive learning, and naturally forming creative teams from course participants.

This approach enables experienced community members to mentor newcomers while allowing specialized roles to emerge organically. When these groups eventually produce performances, they operate from established skills and relationships rather than temporary professional support. This model offers Chinese property managers, community centres, and even local governments a practical pathway for nurturing self-sustaining cultural ecosystems where theatre becomes rooted in—rather than temporarily grafted onto—community life.

CONCLUSION

The sustainable development of community-based theatre in China will inevitably be a gradual process requiring sustained commitment. While the Aranya model demonstrates successful localization, having just one exemplar remains insufficient. As Xiang Biao observes, the global phenomenon of the “vanishing nearby” creates a paradoxical reality where physical neighbors remain strangers while digital connections simulate intimacy. A common critique of applied theatre such as community-based theatre is its occasionally naïve discourse, which posits that art inherently benefits the mind and body, transforms groups, and empowers participants without clearly defining the nature of this empowerment (Balfour & Freebody, 2018, p. 20). This research, however, provides compelling evidence within this very framework of critique. The evidence does not seek to claim moral superiority but to validate the essential space in which applied theatre operates and realises its value.

In an increasingly AI-dominated world, our engagement with technology intensifies as authentic human interaction diminishes—evident in subway headphones isolating commuters and phones interrupting family meals. Community-based theatre offers crucial counterbalance. It creates protected spaces where people temporarily disconnect from digital saturation to rebuild tangible human connections. While we cannot reject technological progress, we can consciously cultivate complementary realms of meaningful interaction.

Through collective artistic creation, participants rediscover the profound significance of physical presence, shared vulnerability, and collaborative meaning-making. This represents not nostalgia for pre-digital eras, but active construction of necessary counterweights to technological immersion.

The ultimate value of community-based theatre may lie in this reparative function: restoring the “nearby” as the fundamental arena where life acquires depth and meaning through direct human encounter. Its careful cultivation across Chinese communities could help rebalance our relationship with technology while strengthening the social fabric one neighborhood at a time.

Can community-based theatre help people rediscover lost neighbourhood connections and reduce interpersonal alienation? While this research cannot offer definitive answers—just as theatre itself resists standardized solutions—it reveals significant potential. Carl Marx theorized alienation as a condition where individuals become estranged from their productive capacities and creative outputs (Øversveen, 2022, p. 446), losing substantive identity formation through labour (Lems et al., 2025, p. 767). Community-based theatre directly counteracts this by creating spaces where participants reclaim agency through collective creation. As Christopher B. Balme (2015) notes, engaged participants naturally evolve into audiences, sustaining theatre’s ecosystem. More crucially, Reason Matthew and Nick Rowe (2017) identifies how theatrical narrative cultivates empathy—a quality that dissolves barriers between self and other, transcending differences to uncover universal truths (p. 149).

This practice heightens awareness of what Lems et al. (2025) term our “entanglement with the world” (p. 770), preventing the complacency of self-forgetfulness. While not a panacea, community-based theatre functions as that invisible hand guiding participants toward recognizing human interconnectedness, potentially opening pathways to more hopeful futures through shared creative practice.

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Telling Their Stories: The Role of Documentary Theatre in Addressing International Graduate Student Challenges

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ABSTRACT

International graduate students often face challenges such as language barriers, financial limitations and cultural adjustment difficulties while pursuing higher education in the United States. This study examines how documentary theatre can be used as an arts-based research method to share these experiences and promote awareness, empathy, and institutional reflection. A devised documentary theatre performance incorporating multimodal storytelling and Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to engage audiences was presented at a northeastern liberal arts college. Audience responses were collected through post-performance surveys and a facilitated talkback session. Findings indicate that the performance increased audience understanding of international student challenges, evoked strong emotional responses and motivated attendees to consider actionable solutions. Audience-generated recommendations included

pedagogical adjustments, expanded employment opportunities, improved administrative support, and greater institutional advocacy. Although limited by its sample size, the study demonstrates the transformative potential of documentary theatre as a tool for engaging audiences in dialogue and to inspire collective responsibility for structural change. This research contributes to applied theatre scholarship and international education by highlighting performance as a powerful tool for illuminating marginalized experiences and fostering institutionally meaningful conversations.

In 2021, my life changed forever. I left my birth country, Jamaica, to study in the United States as an international graduate student, embarking on a journey filled with immeasurable changes and challenges. During my commencement speech in May 2022 for my Master of Arts program, I shared:

> This massive change affected me mentally, emotionally, physically, psychologically, and financially… I had heard a lot about depression but didn't quite understand it until I realized I was not doing okay - no motivation, loss of interest, overwhelming sadness, insomnia. After being tested and diagnosed by my doctor, I learned that I was experiencing major depression. This was a scary time for me, as I had always been okay and felt in control… This phase of my journey was the hardest and most difficult experience I have undergone thus far in my life.

From my experience enrolled in a U.S. northeastern liberal arts college, I encountered firsthand the various challenges international graduate students face during our transition. For me, these included language barriers, language discrimination, financial difficulties, healthcare access issues, and a lack of knowledge about available services. While one could say these difficulties can affect any student, navigating them as international students in an unfamiliar country amplifies their impact. These challenges disrupted my studies, increased my stress levels, and made me wonder whether my experiences were shared by my fellow international classmates.

I soon realized that they were. Upon a random field observation for

my Qualitative Research class at an International Graduate Welcome Dinner, I had a conversation with a group of female international students who I was meeting for the first time. This group of young women expressed their struggles with self-esteem, acculturation stress, struggling with positive or negative thoughts that impacting their sociocultural adjustment and the challenge of forming new friendships. One student confided that she felt pressured to fit into U.S. culture, while another worried about job prospects post-graduation. Our discussion revealed that many of us faced challenges unnoticed by those around us.

This realization led me to a critical observation: the average person, including my classmates, professors, staff members and other Americans was largely unaware of the deep struggles international graduate students face. Our challenges often remain invisible, unacknowledged, and misunderstood. I wanted to ensure these stories were shared in ways that provoke understanding and change, and I asked myself: *What better way to do so than through the power of theatre?* - particularly documentary theatre which is rooted in real testimony that offers a powerful medium for making hidden experiences visible.

This article explores the impact on audiences who attended *ACCULTURATION—American Dream: International Students' Nightmare*, a devised documentary theatre performance created to illuminate the lived realities of international graduate students. Using verbatim material, movement, multimedia and participatory elements informed by Theatre of the Oppressed, the performance invited audiences not only to witness these stories but to collectively reflect on them and consider pathways for change.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate how the performance shaped audience knowledge, emotional engagement, and willingness to take action. Through mixed-methods audience surveys and a facilitated talkback session, the study examines whether documentary theatre can function as a catalyst for institutional reflection, empathy and the development of more equitable support systems for international students. By focusing on audience response, this article highlights how applied performance can transform passive spectators into active participants in dialogue, advocacy and community change.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

International Students in the U.S.

Like me, a great number of tertiary level international students study outside their home country every year, making use of the expansive education and career opportunities. According to Akanwa (2015), historically international students have sought educational opportunities in countries other than their own with the intention of getting advanced education that is capable of making them exceptional among their peers upon returning home. International students continue to have a tremendous impact on the U.S. in all aspects. The United States is regarded as the top destination for international students worldwide. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2022), “over the years, the numbers of international students enrolling in the U.S. has been steadily increasing” (para. 9). According to Lyken-Segosebe (2017), “during their stay in the USA, international students create an impact both economically and educationally for their host country. U.S. colleges and universities depend on international students to contribute to diversity and culture of their campus and increase enrollments” (p. 66).

Despite the educational and economic potential international students have in the United States, they encounter a myriad of challenges during their stay. According to Lyken-Segosebe (2017), “international students generally tend to experience a magnification of common student problems coming to the American campus. These problems relate to their initial transition, academic life, social life, and psychological experiences” (p. 67).

Language proficiency is a primary challenge affecting both academic success and social integration. Low confidence in English fluency can lead to anxiety, isolation, and difficulty engaging in coursework (Chennamsetti, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2019). Even when students meet language requirements, adapting to fast-paced lectures, idioms and academic writing expectations remains a hurdle (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

International students often struggle with different pedagogical styles and are sometimes mischaracterized as passive learners (Bjork et al., 2020). Adjusting to independent learning models, critical thinking expectations and faculty-student interactions can be difficult (Lyken-Segosebe, 2017). Beyond academics, international students frequently

experience cultural disorientation, social isolation, and financial stress (Rodríguez et al., 2019). Some also face racial and cultural discrimination, which negatively impacts their mental health and sense of belonging (Katsumoto & Bowman, 2021; Watson & Barton, 2020).

While existing research explores these challenges through traditional methodologies, arts-based research, in particular documentary theatre, offers an alternative approach that foregrounds lived experiences and fosters institutional awareness and change.

Documentary and Devised Theatre as Tools for Social Justice and Advocacy

The use of theatre as a medium for social commentary and advocacy has a long and impactful history. Documentary theatre, in particular, is a form of performance that constructs narratives from real-life interviews, transcripts, and archival materials to authentically reflect lived experiences (Odendahl-James, 2017). Since its rise in the 1930s, documentary theatre has served as a dynamic platform for activism, offering audiences a lens into underrepresented or overlooked realities (Gardner, 2021). In this study, documentary theatre was chosen as the primary form to amplify the voices of international graduate students, whose challenges often remain invisible within U.S. higher education institutions.

Documentary theatre encompasses a range of practices, including verbatim theatre, ethnodrama, and Theatre of Witness, all of which share a commitment to authentic representation and the elevation of marginalized narratives (Schipper, 2010). Scholars such as Parenteau (2017) highlight its potential as a form of investigative storytelling, where it brings artists to engage with individuals or communities to make discoveries and then through theatrical performances actively engages audiences into pressing discourse in the investigative process before, during, and after performance. By using direct testimony, these performances create heightened audience engagement and emotional impact. This is particularly relevant for international students, whose experiences with language barriers, cultural adjustment, and institutional inequities are rarely addressed through conventional research or institutional reports.

Within the broader framework of documentary theatre, this project integrates elements of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO), a participatory theatre methodology designed to promote dialogue and social

transformation developed by Augusto Boal (2008). TO aims to transform passive spectators into active participants by inviting audiences to intervene, suggest solutions, and even step into roles during a performance to propose solutions to real-world problems. Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz (1994) describe TO techniques like Forum Theatre and Image Theatre as tools for challenging oppression through collective action. In this study, these interactive components are integrated to create opportunities for audiences to engage directly with international students' narratives and contribute ideas for institutional change.

Complementing these methodologies is *devised theatre*, a collaborative approach where performances are created through improvisation, storytelling, and ensemble-based development rather than a pre-written script (Oddey, 1994). Devises theatre is especially significant in the context of this project and is relevant to international students' narratives, as it enables them to shape their own stories rather than having them interpreted by an external playwright. Govan et al. (2007) emphasize devised theatre's capacity to serve as a community-driven tool for exploring social issues through collective storytelling, making it a fitting approach for capturing the collective and individual struggles of international students, ensuring that their voices remain central to the performance.

Bringing these methodologies together, this study leverages documentary theatre's commitment to authentic testimony, Theatre of the Oppressed's participatory activism, and devised theatre's collaborative creation to foreground the lived experiences of international graduate students. Scholars have demonstrated that audiences engage more deeply with real-life narratives when they are experienced theatrically rather than read in a report (Parenteau, 2017; Weltsek, 2021). This integrated approach positions theatre not only as a storytelling vehicle but as a catalyst for empathy, dialogue, and institutional reflection. Weltsek (2021) found that arts-based research helps participants explore their identities within a communal setting, reinforcing belonging and resilience. By situating these practices within the specific context of a U.S. liberal arts college, the study contributes to the growing body of arts-based research advocating for more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The ultimate goal of this study was to examine the impact of documentary and devised theatre in sharing international graduate students' stories, raising awareness of social justice issues, and inspiring institutional reflection and change. This study used a qualitative mixed methods design to examine audience responses to *ACCULTURATION—American Dream: International Students' Nightmare*, a devised documentary theatre performance about international graduate student experiences.

Creative Process

As part of my Qualitative Research course at Emerson College in Fall 2022, I conducted a preliminary study using field observations and interviews to identify challenges faced by international graduate students. Four interview participants were selected for diverse perspectives, represented different national backgrounds including, Nepal, China, Russia, and Belgium, and were enrolled in graduate programs in Strategic Marketing Communication, Film and Media Art, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Publishing and Writing.

Data were transcribed and analyzed using Saldana's (2016) qualitative coding method to identify recurring themes across responses. These themes, supported a field observation, formed the foundation for the devised documentary theatre performance.

Building on the preliminary research, I developed a devised documentary theatre piece as part of my Master of Fine Arts thesis project in Spring 2023. The creative process began with script development, which was initially designed to include all four interview participants from the interviews. However, due to scheduling conflicts, only two students participated. As a result, the script was adapted for a three-person performance, including myself. Over a three-week devising process and eight rehearsals, we co-created a script using interview excerpts, personal reflection, and improvisational exercises.

The performance incorporated Theatre of the Oppressed Techniques and Forum-style interaction to encourage critical engagement and audience participation. The final staged reading was performed before a live audience on May 3. 2023, including students, faculty, and staff from across departments.

During the performance there were interactive audience call-to-

action activities designed to engage viewers in discussion on in the challenges faced by international students. Through guided prompts, the audience reflected on their own experiences, discussed possible solutions, and contributed ideas to support international students. The activities culminated in a symbolic final engagement titled “Ripping the Burden,” inviting audience members to step onto the stage, share their collective insights and remove labeled papers posted on the actors that represented the struggles faced by international students. This participatory gesture embodied the project’s goal of moving audiences from awareness to empathy and, ultimately, to advocacy.

Research Design

To evaluate the effectiveness of the performance, data were collected through post-performance surveys and a facilitated talkback session. These methods enabled a multilayered understanding of how the performance influenced audience awareness, emotional engagement, and willingness to take action.

Participants

Twenty-five individuals attended the performance, including international and domestic students, faculty members, administrators, and staff from offices such as International Student Affairs and Student Success. Thirteen completed a post-performance survey, yielding a 52% response rate. Participation was voluntary, and no demographic information was collected beyond role affiliation.

Data Collection Procedures

Talkback Session

A facilitated talkback session followed the performance. Audience members shared reflections, proposed solutions, and asked questions about the experiences presented. I took written notes, capturing salient comments that contributed to thematic analysis.

Audience Surveys

Following the performance, audience members were invited to complete an anonymous survey designed to assess their emotional, cognitive, and reflective engagement with the theatrical event. The survey employed a mixed-methods structure, integrating Likert-scale

items, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended qualitative prompts to capture both measurable audience responses and rich narrative feedback.

This multi-layered survey design allowed for a holistic understanding of how audiences interpreted, felt, and responded to the performance. The combination of scaled data and open-ended reflections provided insight into not only the degree of impact but the specific theatrical and thematic elements that shaped audience engagement.

Ethical Considerations

The project adhered to ethical guidelines for qualitative and arts-based research. All audience members were informed that survey participation was voluntary and anonymous. No identifying information was collected, and data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

My analysis, based on post-performance surveys and the facilitated talkback session revealed several key themes related to audience awareness, emotional engagement, and motivation toward action. Consistent with literature on applied theatre and arts-based advocacy, the results demonstrate that documentary theatre can effectively illuminate complex issues, evoke emotional resonance and stimulate critical reflection among diverse audiences (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Thompson, 2012).

This discussion draws on a blended theoretical framework integrating critical pedagogy, narrative identity theory, and applied theatre performance theory. Together, these frameworks allow us to understand how the process of devising and performing real-life stories not only raises awareness but is a transformative act of learning and agency while moving audiences toward collective reflection and change.

Based on the data collected, the findings are organized into two primary categories: (1) the positive effects of the performance experience on the audience, which include audience quantitative survey findings, participatory theatre and the power of engagement,

the effects of multimodal aesthetics, and the validation and representation of international students; and (2) toward action through advocacy and institutional change, which includes advocacy for international students, adjusting curriculum and teaching strategies, prioritizing job opportunities for international students, and providing college support programs and outreach.

Positive Effects of the Performance Experience on the Audience

Audience Quantitative Survey Findings

To assess the impact of the performance, audience members completed a quantitative component of the survey that included several 5-point Likert-scale questions. Of the 25 attendees, 13 audience members responded to the post-performance survey. The following data were gathered:

Table 1: *What Extent Did the Performance Inspire You to Take Action?*

Rating scales	**Description of scales**	**Number of Participants**
5	Extremely inspired	9
4	Very inspired	3
3	Moderately inspired	1
2	Slightly inspired	0
1	Not inspired	0
Total	-	13

When asked how inspired they felt to take action on the issues presented in the performance, the majority responded at the highest level. As shown in Table 1, nine respondents selected “5 - extremely inspired,” three selected “4,” and one selected “3.” No audience member selected ratings indicating low or no inspiration. While the sample size is modest, the consistency of high responses suggests the performance prompted meaningful reflection and action-oriented thinking an outcome aligned with Freire’s (2005) concept of praxis, in which reflection leads to transformative engagement.

Table 2: *How Did the Performance Impacted Your Knowledge of The Challenges Faced by International Graduate Students?*

Rating scales	Description of scales	Number of Participants
5	Strong impact	10
4	Moderate–strong impact	0
3	Moderate impact	2
2	Slight impact	1
1	No impact	0
Total	-	13

When asked about their knowledge of international students' challenges, audience members reported increased understanding of the challenges facing international graduate students. As shown in Table 2, ten respondents rated the impact of the performance on their knowledge as "5 - strong impact," two selected "3," and one selected "2." These findings support the literature suggesting that documentary and participatory theatre can function as an accessible bridge between lived experience and public understanding (Aune, 2017; Parenteau, 2017).

Table 3: *What Issues Highlighted in This Performance Were Most Resonant?*

Issue Identified	Number of Participants
Language barriers	8
Lack of job opportunities	8
Discrimination	7
Limited knowledge of resources	7
Healthcare challenges	7
Adjustment to academic expectations	5

Note: Participants could select more than one issue; numbers indicate the amount of respondents endorsing each theme.

Audience members were also asked to identify the issues that resonated most with them. As shown in Table 3, the issues that

resonated most were language barriers and lack of job opportunities, both selected by eight participants. They were followed closely by concerns around discrimination, lack of knowledge on resources and systems, healthcare challenges, and academic adjustment. These responses reflect an increased recognition of several often overlooked or misunderstood aspects of international student life and affirm the value of narrative-based performance in making invisible struggles more visible (Parenteau, 2017; Weltsek, 2021).

Participatory Theatre and the Power of Engagement

Audience members emphasized how the theatrical elements deepened their engagement, especially the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques embedded in the performance. Attendees particularly noted how the use of participatory theatre devices heightened their engagement with themes of the play. One audience member praised the interactive format saying, "I loved the direct communication with the audience, the invitation to come on stage, and the Q&A."

The Forum Theatre approach, where audience members actively engage in problem-solving, was particularly well received. One audience member said, “I thought the use of forum theatre as a device to connect with the audience made the work incredibly engaging.” Audience members also appreciated peer discussions and emotional support during the event. One member said, "I listened to and supported a peer who was having an emotional reaction to the show." The inclusion of Forum Theatre and interactive call-to-action moments turned passive spectators into co-creators of dialogue and change, an approach central to both Boal’s (2008) pedagogy of the oppressed and contemporary applied theatre practices.

The call-to-action segment, in which audience members brainstormed solutions, was frequently cited as a highlight. One member said, "SO IMPACTFUL!!!!! Brainstorming ideas together and sharing them was brilliant!" Another said that "it activated the audience’s thinking, exploring ways to transform the status quo and speak up." While another said, “to ask us to think and try to come up with ideas/solutions on the spot was extremely impactful.” These responses embody Boal’s pedagogy of the oppressed, in which spectators become “spect-actors,” actively co-creating meaning, imagining solutions and creating moments of collective agency within the performance itself (Boal, 2008).

The post-show talkback session further deepened the engagement, prompting reflection beyond the immediate narrative into action. One participant noted, "It was a beautiful example of theatre moving beyond awareness into action and make us grapple with finding solutions and not just seeing your struggles and just walking away." Another remarked, "The requests to participate were a great reminder that it is not enough to just watch; we must take action."

Beyond awareness, the performance initiated ongoing discussions about institutional change: An audience member asserted that "it encouraged us to actively listen and engage with one another on continuing the conversation around how to better support and celebrate international students moving forward." These reactions embody what critical pedagogy demands of learning spaces: transformation, not just information (Freire, 2005).

The Effects of Multimodal Aesthetics

The integration of multimedia, choreography, music, poetry, and recorded visuals significantly enhanced audience engagement. One audience member noted that "the blending of recorded visuals, printed text, and live performance was incredibly engaging."

For those new to theatre, the multimodal approach was especially impactful. One member said:

> I'm a bit of a theater newbie, but from my perspective the rich variety of modalities was extremely effective. I've never seen so many elements, recorded scenes, dialogue, choreography, music, a fight scene woven together so seamlessly. It felt cohesive and like every modality used served to heighten a particular emotion.

This layered aesthetic approach supports applied performance theory, which values emotional resonance and symbolic representation as legitimate forms of knowledge production and community-building (Thompson, 2012). The diversity of theatrical modes amplified the story's emotional core, helping audiences both feel and understand the lived experiences being portrayed.

Overall, the play was described as "entertaining and thoughtful", "moving", "thought-provoking and challenging", "wonderfully poignant and educational", as well as "wide-ranging and impactful"

Even audience members familiar with international student

struggles found the performance deeply moving: One person stated that, "This was incredibly powerful. Even though I already knew about these challenges, seeing them portrayed this way made them feel urgent and real. I think every single person should see this." Another attendee noted the importance of storytelling in making complex issues accessible, saying, "the narrative playmaking was brilliant. I learned so much about the power of theatre to connect people across barriers."

One participant highlighted how the performance transformed their perception of theatre when they said "This was a reminder that ‘good’ theatre doesn’t need high production value. The story had me on the edge of my seat."

Validation and Representation of International Students

For international students in the audience, the performance provided a sense of validation and empowerment from seeing their realities mirrored on stage. One attendee reflected on the significance of witnessing their friend's moment of representation on stage saying, "I was honored to witness my friend experience this moment of empowerment." From the perspective of critical pedagogy, this act of representation is more than emotional affirmation; it is an awakening of critical consciousness, where individuals recognize their shared struggles (Freire, 2005). Another international student shared how the performance captured their personal struggles, saying, "The scenes about isolation and language barriers hit me the hardest because that’s exactly what I have experienced." This articulation of recognition and self-identification aligns with narrative identity theory (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1993), which emphasizes the power of storytelling to construct and affirm personal and collective identities. By witnessing their experiences performed publicly, international students were able to reconstruct their sense of belonging and agency within a community that often renders them invisible.

Even members of the college’s Office of International Student Affairs acknowledged the play’s importance in highlighting graduate student struggles. One member said that "the play did an excellent job voicing the challenges of international students." A staff member noted that graduate students, in particular, receive less structural support than undergraduates, saying, "The undergraduate population has more institutional support. This play helped expose that gap." These reactions demonstrate how documentary theatre can generate visibility

within administrative circles - bringing lived realities into public view, potentially influencing policy and programming, a clear example of theatre functioning as both cultural critique and institutional catalyst.

Toward Action: Advocacy and Institutional Change

The performance experience demonstrated significant potential in fostering dialogue and generating actionable solutions. Audience responses from the open-ended surveys and the talkback session, reinforce the performance's function as a space for critical consciousness and transformative pedagogy (Freire, 2005), where participants engage in collective dialogue to analyze systems of power and envision alternative futures.

Advocacy for International Students

Audience members emphasized the need for stronger collective advocacy at institutional and legislative levels. One staff member noted the challenge of advocating alone, saying, "I have many ideas for solutions, but it can be difficult to push for change as a single voice." Others stressed the importance of collective action: "It will take advocating as a unit to demand sustainable action for international students."

This framing of advocacy as a collaborative and systemic endeavor aligns with critical pedagogy's call for dialogical education, wherein all stakeholders including students, staff, faculty, must participate in co-creating more equitable institutions (Freire, 2005). A college staff member suggested that the Office of International Student Affairs collect student testimonies to present a strong case for change. They suggested that "a dedicated office should compile student voices and make a compelling argument to senior administrators." Additionally, a student proposed that domestic students could play a more active role in supporting their international peers, saying that "resident students should work together to find ways to advocate for their international peers." This further affirms how the performance prompted a shift from individual awareness to shared responsibility and collective empowerment.

Adjusting Curriculum and Teaching Strategies

Audience members suggested modifications to classroom practices to

support international students facing language barriers. One domestic graduate student recommended that educators and students normalize literacy checks in classrooms, “professors should create an environment where students feel comfortable asking for literacy checks or clarifications if they don’t understand.” Another American graduate student proposed implementing multi-modal teaching strategies to enhance accessibility to help students who may be struggling with the language barrier saying, "there should be multiple access points to instructions; visual, auditory, and embodied exercises to help those struggling with language." A further suggestion was to foster one-on-one interactions between students and professors to build stronger academic relationships. An audience member said, "Educators should have one on one conversations in the classroom, with students and lecturers to identify challenges and build bonds and build relationships outside the classroom.” Such proposals reflect the influence of critical pedagogy, urging educators to move beyond traditional, monologic modes of instruction toward inclusive, student-centered learning environments Freire, 2005.

Prioritizing Job Opportunities for International Students

Financial hardship due to limited job opportunities was a major concern. Audience members suggested institutional changes to prioritize on-campus employment for international students. A domestic alumnus of the college argued that international students should be given preferential consideration for campus jobs, stating "There are so many opportunities for non-international students to work off campus. On-campus jobs should be prioritized for international students." Another audience member proposed that on-campus employment be guaranteed as part of the acceptance package for international students, "The college should guarantee an on-campus job for every international student upon acceptance."

Additionally, a domestic graduate student suggested that integrating fieldwork into graduate programs could provide financial and professional benefits. They said, "more opportunities for international students to gain fieldwork experience in their studies and build network in their field would ease financial burdens." Another audience member proposed that scholarships and graduate assistantships be expanded to support international students financially, "The university can give more scholarships and provide

graduate assistantships for international students. This would greatly reduce financial struggles." These conversations align with applied performance theory, positioning theatre as both a mirror for social realities and a catalyst for structural critique and change (Thompson, 2012).

Providing College Support Programs and Outreach

Audience members emphasized the need for enhanced institutional support, including translation services, orientation adjustments, and administrative guidance. One suggestion was to incorporate performances like this documentary theatre piece into student and faculty orientations. They stated that "This is the kind of work that needs to be seen at the front end of college experiences."

Other audience members highlighted the need for translation services and administrative support, as many international students struggle with navigating bureaucratic processes. A graduate student noted how even domestic students find required paperwork confusing, saying that "workshops should help international students navigate required paperwork. These forms are confusing even for Americans." Additionally, one audience member suggested the creation of an International Student Canvas resource course to centralize and streamline access to information: "The college could create a dedicated online resource center/course could provide guidance on healthcare, visas, and frequently asked questions."

As applied performance theory reminds us, theatre thrives not only in the rehearsal room but in its ability to transform institutional practices and provoke lasting conversations. In this way, the performance served as a “rehearsal for revolution” (Boal, 2008, p. 136), equipping both students and staff with the tools and imagination to re-envision higher education structures and responsibilities.

These findings demonstrate that documentary theatre not only communicates the emotional and structural realities faced by international graduate students but also activates audiences as potential co-advocates within higher-education institutions.

LIMITATIONS

A primary limitation of this research is the survey sample, which was relatively small. Only thirteen of the twenty-five audience members

completed the post-performance questionnaire. Although the responses revealed strong and consistent themes, the limited sample size constrains the generalizability of the quantitative results.

Most audience members completed the surveys directly after viewing the piece, meaning their responses likely captured the heightened emotional impact of the moment rather than long-term attitudinal or behavioral change. Future studies might incorporate follow-up surveys to assess the durability of audience reflection and action.

Given that all audience members were affiliated with a single northeastern U.S. liberal arts college, the findings should be interpreted as context specific. Institutional culture, student demographics, and available support systems vary considerably across higher-education environments. This familiarity with international students at the institution may have influenced audience responses.

The preliminary study included four interview participants from different countries, which does not fully represent the diverse international graduate student population at the college. Additionally, the study focused only on graduate students, limiting the breadth of perspectives. Students from other universities or national backgrounds (e.g., Europe, Africa, or South America) may face distinct challenges that were not fully explored.

Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful insight into the capacity of documentary and applied theatre as a storytelling and advocacy tool to foster awareness, empathy, and institutional dialogue. The findings lay important groundwork for future research with larger, more diverse audiences and across multiple institutional contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study offer insights into how theatre can serve as a powerful medium for storytelling. It demonstrates the significant potential of documentary theatre to deepen audience understanding of international graduate student experiences and to spark advocacy, and meaningful institutional reflection. The performance not only highlighted complex challenges, such as language discrimination, financial barriers, social isolation and limited access to resources, but also mobilized audience members to consider their own roles in

fostering a more inclusive academic environment. Even with a small sample size, the consistency and richness of the qualitative responses indicate that arts-based approaches can effectively humanize institutional issues that often remain invisible.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by highlighting the unique capacity of documentary and applied theatre as a transformative process amplifying marginalized voices, fostering empathy, prompting dialogue and encouraging participatory problem-solving. Beyond raising awareness, documentary theatre mobilizes communities toward action, offering international students a platform to express their lived experiences in ways that traditional research methods may not capture as effectively. By examining how documentary theatre conveys these experiences, this study contributes much-needed literature on international graduate student experiences - an area often overlooked in research, which predominantly focuses on undergraduates.

Moreover, the solutions proposed during the talkback session reveal how performance-based inquiry can inspire audiences to imagine new institutional possibilities. Suggestions ranged from expanding multimodal teaching strategies and improving administrative support to prioritizing on-campus jobs and enhancing orientation programs. While some recommendations may be aspirational given institutional or legal constraints, they nonetheless reflect a shift toward collective responsibility and advocacy, demonstrating how theatre can influence not only individual understanding but also institutional discourse.

While the effectiveness of documentary theatre in amplifying international student voices is evident, at the same time, real and lasting change requires institutional action. Documentary theatre can illuminate structural inequities, but it cannot resolve them alone. The insights offered by audience members underscore the need for institutions to re-evaluate policies, strengthen support services, and address the systemic gaps that disproportionately affect international graduate students. Implementing the recommendations raised through this performance would foster more inclusive learning environments and affirm the value of international students within the campus community.

By transforming lived experiences into shared performance, this study underscores that storytelling is not only an act of representation,

but also one of resistance, empathy and transformation. Audiences do not simply witness these stories, but they are invited to respond, reflect and participate in shaping the future. In telling their stories, international graduate students are not merely seen; they are heard, validated, and empowered to help shape the systems that shape them.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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APPENDICES

1. A video recording of American Dream - An International Student's Nightmare can be accessed on YouTube.
2. The script of American Dream - An International Student's Nightmare is archived in the NYU Faculty Digital Archive with this issue of *ArtsPraxis*.

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Dramatic Sonata: A Musicking

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ABSTRACT

Couched in the politics of a Southern Indiana school district, this paper explores how Christopher Small's concept of "musicking" can be used as a methodological framework for critical pedagogy. The paper is presented in sonata form and with dialogue detailing the author's experiences advocating for his students to perform Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition in front of his local school board. It begins with a brief discussion on the political climate in Indiana, followed by exploring how musicking can be used to counteract these policies and how these policies impact the lives of students. The dialogue portion demonstrates musicking in action as all participants can music together.

INTRODUCTION: A PASSAGE AT THE BEGINNNG OF A WORK AND PREPARATORY TO THE MAIN BODY OF THE FORM[1]

A School Board Meeting, a Play, and a Culture

Instead of enjoying my summer break, I am in a well-appointed boardroom dressed in my nicest serious-but-artistic suit and my worn brown leather shoes I bought from Goodwill. The past month has been filled with meetings, phone calls, and exasperated emails. I was in this boardroom with microphones and cameras everywhere arguing for the local school board to approve the theatre summer camp and the play attached to it: *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*. In the past I had been to school board meetings, even contentious ones, but the attacks on free expression and the demonization of educators have only increased since then. I watched the meetings and always read the meeting minutes; I had never spoken at one before. I'm not scared of public speaking, but I was scared that I would become a martyr in the war on the human condition and that my students might lose one of their few safe places. School boards have become some of the most hotly contested and deeply politicized institutions in American public life and many of the local ideologues feel that it is their calling to fight a war on the students' right to free expression (Wong, 2021; Hetrick, 2023) and ultimately their self-made identities. It had been only a year-and-a-half since a dramatic election swept in three new board members (out of seven) who ousted the sitting superintendent two weeks after they took office (DeCriscio, 2023). 74.5% of this district voted for Donald Trump in 2025 (2024 Lawrence County General Election Results, 2024). This iteration of the school board was motivated and ready to take action. This had become a public fight and I was caught in its crosshairs.

The public schools in Indiana are being shaped to more easily dominate students as opposed to provide students spaces to discover and learn (Freire, 1970, p. 72). The Indiana Republican super-majority legislature has passed a number of laws that challenge the self-expression of all students and make the marginalization of LGBTQ+ students easier: Indiana HB 1608 is Indiana's attempt to copy Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, SB 480 attempted to ban gender-affirming care for minors (it was signed into law by the governor but was subsequently

[1] *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, "Introduction" (Randel, 2003d)

blocked by a federal injunction) (Tilley et al, 2023), and HB 1608 which effectively outs any queer students who use a chosen name in place of their given name (Bonilla Muñiz, 2023). Gustave Weltsek (2022) at Indiana University discusses in "Let's Make Theatre Illegal Again" how the aims of critical pedagogy are at odds with the policies of the state of Indiana. I found myself in front of the school board defending my choice to mount *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*. The Republican conservative right found issue with one of the characters who was gay and other instances of non-traditional presentation of gender. Instead of allowing students to have a discussion and explore these issues through the production, the immediate response was to silence the material.

As a straight, white, cisgender male, I never expected that I would be asked to play this role in this war—but I needed to stand up for those students of mine who were affected by these new policies. In this paper I describe "musicking" (Small, 1998), why I use it as a methodology for theatre making, and then share a play that I wrote as a reflection so that the reader and I can *music* together.

EXPOSITION: THE FIRST MAJOR SECTION PRESENTING THE PRINCIPAL THEMATIC MATERIAL[2]

Musicking: A Methodology for Liberation

I began my journey as an educator working in a secondary music environment; as a student, I had been a member of my school's Thespians' troupe,[3] but my main artistic pursuits were always in music. I didn't find my way to teaching theatre until I directed my first show as part of my job as a high school choir teacher. Regardless of the artistic discipline, I always felt my mission was to bring opportunities in the arts to my students. To make sure that no one was priced out of my program, I started scholarship funds for private lessons and made sure that I ran my program on a shoestring budget. What I did not understand at the time was that, at its core, this was work towards liberation. I was creating situations for aesthetic and embodied artistic

[2] *Harvard Dictionary of Music,* "Exposition" (Randel, 2003c)

[3] Thespians is a school-based drama competition run by the Educational Theatre Association (EdTA) wherein schools have teams who compete in a variety of categories, such as monologue or musical theatre scenes

experiences in order to achieve life-affirming humanization (Freire, 1970). The work of arts education is more than just creating a piece of "beauty" however defined, it is about creating an intellectual and emotional space for self-reflection and ultimately humanization. In *Poetry is not a Luxury*, Audré Lorde describes this sought-after humanization, writing:

> As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and our honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. (Lorde, 1984, p. 37)

This quote encapsulates how I strove to create artistic experiences for opening dialogue and reflective practice among young people to create a pathway towards breaking the systems of oppression which they face in their day-to-day lives. I approached this goal through "musicking" (Small, 1998).

I have long been interested in the debate of process versus product and have always felt myself drawn to the process side of the argument. In my experience as a musician, the preparation and my own learning were always more engaging to me than the actual performances which is why I have identified my educational practice with Christopher Small's concept of "musicking." Small defines musicking as: "...to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing (Small, 1998, p. 9)." Musicking is the doing, the verb form of the noun "music." Musicking centers the exploration of an event and the navigation of it in real time instead of focusing solely on the final product of performance, allowing a fluid and embodied understanding of process rooted in the simultaneous interaction of immediate social circumstances, emotions, and mind-body cognition (Richerme, 2015). In Towards a Critical Performative Pedagogy: Living Museums—*The Empires Project*, Weltsek & Elfreich (2024) meditate on how embodied practices like musicking lead to a "vibrant and dynamic emergence that is making meaning rather than re-making tropes and social inscriptions." Through musicking, the individual is actively engaged in creating meaning and in creating culture. In Why

the Arts Don't Do Anything, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) describes the rhetoric of cultural production as, "not what people are, what people have, or even what people value; culture is what people do" (p. 226). Musicking centers the process of doing in all its forms as a part of cultural production, democratizing the arts, and empowering young people to engage in "re-forming and re-defining the 'self' in the moment of doing" (Weltsek & Elfreich, 2024, p. 17).

Small suggests that the success of a performance is based in its ability to conjure a set of relationships and create an impromptu community. He writes:

> Any performance, and that includes a symphony concert, should be judged finally on its success in bringing into existence for as long as it lasts a set of relationships that those taking part feel to be ideal and in enabling those taking part to explore, affirm, and celebrate those relationships. (Small, 1998, p. 49)

This creation of communities through the enaction of cultural production facilitates resilient spaces. I do, however, disagree with how Small suggests that the audience's participation in musicking is based on the relationships between the different roles played by those who are musicking. Small goes to great lengths to explore the different contexts of audience musicking, but I believe that the audience is a much more active part in the process. Small is content to stratify the performer and the audience in different castes, discussing how performers (particularly in many popular musics) suggest to the audience that they might be welcome on stage, however bodyguards are there to enforce a separation between the musickers on stage and the musickers in the audience (Small, 1998, p. 48). This forced separation, Small suggests, betrays any sense of genuine connection or genuine participation in the musicking event. Framing this logistical separation to invalidate the relationship is flawed because the purpose of musicking is the doing, not solely the doing in relation to other people. Musicking is also a method of nonhierarchical cultural production and the audience-performer relationship, which can be a tool for the liberation of the participants (as explored below).

Small makes it clear that every present participant is active in musicking (Small, 1998). Musicking as an embodied, participatory process requires what Brecht describes as *sehen* or active

spectatorship which is a key component of his epic theatre (Bradley, 2016, p. 16). The purpose of this active participation through spectatorship is to spur the audience to take action against the portrayed alienation (Brecht, 1948). This is similar to one of the common examples of spectators musicking, the premiere of John Cage's *4' 33"* in 1952, wherein the silent composition forced the audience into listening to the ambient noises of the performance space and reacted in various—often visceral—ways to the performance of music without sound (Gann, 2010). Cage's *4' 33"* is among the most documented pieces of arts-making due to the incredibly strong audience reaction.

Musicking should also be non-hierarchical and is open to all who approach it earnestly and without creating a value judgment (Small, 1998, p. 9). If art is approached with sincerity and the desire to build up all participants, there is no wrong way *to music*, much as there is no wrong way *to drama*. Boal neatly connects musicking and theatre by claiming that music is a language of the theatre; writing in the introduction of *Theatre of the Oppressed,* Boal notes:

> People singing in open air; the theatrical performance was created by and for people, and could thus be called the dithyrambic song. It was a celebration in which all could participate freely. (1979, p. ix)

In Boal's conception, it is only the outside power structures imposed by the bourgeois class and the "coercive indoctrination" that seeks to divide the roles within the theatre. Conversely, the dithyrambic song is free for all to join like Small's opening of the performative act to every person who participates (Boal, 1979, p. 119; Small, 1998, p. 9).

DEVELOPMENT: STRUCTURAL ALTERATION OF MUSICAL MATERIAL, WHICH MAY AFFECT ANY PARAMETER OF A THEME[4]

Complications in Musicking

To music more fully, I wanted to offer my students an opportunity to

[4] *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, "Development" (Randel, 2003b)

continue their theatrical studies in the summer. My goal was to create a space where students could receive more individualized attention on their talents than I would have during a regular production and provide more students with the chance to work on full-sized roles. This also functioned to create an inclusive space for youth who might feel alienated being stuck at home.

The major issue blocking *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* from being approved was the involvement of a gay character, Noel Gruber, who at one point performs in a drag persona as “Monique Gibbeau,” a “carny with a heart of black charcoal” (Richmond & Maxwell, 2024, p. 27). The failure to understand that Noel is a moody teenager who longs to escape his boring small town is why this scene was so fiercely debated by my school board. The character of Noel presents a danger to homophobic hegemony in the presentation of his queerness not as a victim but as a person with wants and desires. Queerness is generally an unacceptable concept in school productions; it does find some acceptance as a victim narrative—a gay person being bullied or brutalized for their identity is acceptable (Simons, 2015). Noel, while the victim of a tragic roller coaster accident, is not a victim of his sexuality and leads the other characters in the show to question their own gender and sexuality. The attempt by the school board to remove the exploration of a character like Noel posed a huge blow to the education of my students while giving a huge victory to those who wish to continue to fight the human condition.

Many of my queer and queer-ally students seek refuge within the walls of my theatre, increasing the importance of gay characters in the works that are performed. This brings more acute attention to the dissonance between the experience of the students and what has been deemed acceptable by many in the local community. The existence of a gay youth character that has relatable teen struggles about his identity is such an important opportunity for the students but also for the audience who would rather not think that that is a valid identity. Part of the musicking of drama is to provide a place for the students to explore these elements of their identity. As Small says, musicking needs to be free from judgement (Small, 1998). If viewed as a “start again space” (Olsen, p. 41), these students are allowed to interrogate their lives and create new, more self-actualized identities and a place for them to be safe from the dangers often presented at home and in the community.

RETRANSITION: SETS THE STAGE FOR THE DRAMATIC RETURN OF THE ORIGINAL THEMATIC MATERIAL[5]

A Musicking

What follows is a short play I wrote as a musicking based on my experience starting the theatre camp and my advocacy for it at a school board meeting in my Southern Indiana school district. The play is structured in the sonata form utilized in the rest of this article, adding the repetition needed to complete the musical form. I created this play using mixed-methods including the creation of entirely fictional scenes, adapting emails into dialogue, as well as borrowing from the livestream of the actual school board meeting. While the school board meeting is a public record and can be found in my references, the names of all the characters have been changed and bear little resemblance to real-life people. It is a work of fiction created from the artifacts of genuine experience. The dialogue portion of the *Dramatic Sonata* has never been staged and was written as a reflective exercise.

The inclusion of the following dialogue is itself a musicking. I was musicking when I composed its text and I continued to music as I wrote the rest of this essay around it. The goal of its inclusion is to communally music here in the pages of *ArtsPraxis.*

EXPOSITION: PRIMARY THEME

The stage is bare except for a desk center stage in a soft special. It is disheveled and has way too many papers on it. Hayden is sitting at the desk looking at his computer monitor. From the darkness come Marie, Cassandra, and Zoë.

Marie: Mr. Hayden, who would you cast as Jane Doe?

Cassandra: I don't want to be Jane; I really want to be Constance.

Hayden: What makes you think that we are going to do *Ride the Cyclone*?

Zoë: We all know you're bad at keeping secrets, little man.

[5] *Harvard Dictionary of Music,* "Retransition" (Randel, 2003e)

Hayden: Well, I'm not going to say anything. I can't tell you if we're doing it and I'm not going to start dreaming of casting a show we're not doing.

Marie: But it'd be fun! Plus, we all already know the show and there is a High School Edition now. Imagine, I could play Ocean! Cassandra would be the perfect Constance! Sarah really, really wants to play Ricky.

Hayden: Isn't the bell about to ring?

Hayden turns in his chair back to face the computer monitor, a knowing smile on his face.

Cassandra: You're just trying to not answer!

Hayden: Why on earth would we do that show?

Zoë: Because it's fun, duh.

Hayden: Fun isn't a reason to do a show. What are you going to get out of doing it? We don't just do shows because they're fun; we do them because of what we can learn from them.

Cassandra: I just think the characters would be such a treat to play.

Hayden: Why is that?

Cassandra: First off, Constance's monologue—that's crazy long. That and we don't really get to do dramatic roles like that.

Marie: You always tell us to think about what the characters want, and in *Ride the Cyclone* it's always very clear what they want. We could really make a lot of progress as actors.

Hayden: You all got to do dramatic roles in *Sound of Music*. Plus, there's really only 6 characters in *Ride the Cyclone*.

Zoë: Marie got a dramatic role; I just suffered through being a chorus nun.

Marie: I was so bad in that show!

Hayden: What do you think we have to say through this show? I'm not interested in just recreating the slime tutorial. And who would play Noel?!

Cassandra: Jim, of course.

Jim enters from the dark.

Jim: The high school version is dead to me. That's not Noel!

Jim exits.

Marie: It's a chance for us to explore the catharsis through the group. We can pour ourselves into the roles and heal our real hurts.

Cassandra: It's a show about loving and growing.

Marie: We can focus on reacting and embodying our characters!

Zoë: Plus, the music frickin' slaps.

Marie: See, it's perfect!

Hayden: *(playing devil's advocate)* It's still a cast of, like, six. How am I supposed to do a show that has only six kids that nobody is going to come to? More people in the cast means more people in the seats, which means more money in the bank. Which we need.

Marie: Well, it'd still be really fun.

The school bell rings. Marie, Cassandra, and Zoë all leave. Hayden is seated at a desk and looks at his computer monitor. He types something and sits back in his chair—a smile on his face. He stands up and walks away from the desk followed by a

spotlight. The special over the desk turns off as he walks downstage.

EXPOSITION: SECONDARY THEME

Lights come up on another office, Mike, a bearded man behind it with an energy that's wanting to escape from behind the large desk at which he sits. In another chair is Tricia, a middle-aged woman who is hoping this meeting is not as boring as her previous one. Hayden enters the office.

Mike: Nice of you to drop by, Luke. What can we do for you?

Tricia: I'm very excited to hear about what you have to propose for us.

Hayden: I want to present to both of you the idea of doing a summer musical theater camp this year. Our last show was a huge success and the kids are hungry for more, and I want to be able to serve that desire.

Mike: I'm interested in anything that gives these kids something to do over the summer.

Tricia: What do you mean by more?

Hayden: I want to provide an opportunity for these students to work on their dramatic skills, to create something that doesn't need to be driven by profit, like *Legally Blonde*, but instead driven by their own creativity and feeds their exploration of the human self. I want to help develop their abilities to express themselves through dramatic techniques and grow as actualized people. We would do enrichment and learning sessions in the mornings and rehearsals in the afternoons for the camp show. We can also learn the basics of running sounds, lights, and all of those technological skills that are really needed.

Tricia: What show do you want to do?

Hayden: I want to do *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*.

Mike: I've never heard of that, what is it?

Hayden: It's a pretty straight-forward crucible type of show. Six teenagers die in a roller coaster accident and are in limbo trying to win a chance at being resurrected. Their judge is a fortune telling machine.

Mike: That sounds fine and all but why this show?

Hayden: Well, it only has one set which will keep the costs down. The small cast of 7[6] means that every kid that wants to be in this camp can be in a leading role and I can just double cast the show. This would make it a huge opportunity for the kids. Plus, it's a show they all love and would be willing to come out for. This show has been super popular online for a couple of years—kids love it.

Mike: Are there any content concerns? I know *Legally Blonde* had a few complaints about its content.

Hayden: So, this show is a High School Edition, they just finished making this version recently. I've read the scripts for both, and pretty much anything objectionable has been taken out. The original is pretty rough around the edges, but the gem of a story is still present in this version.

Hayden hands both Mike and Tricia a script which they flip through for a moment.

Mike: It looks like you've done your work, and I think this is a wonderful opportunity for the kids. I give you the go-ahead to do this.

Tricia: Since this is a new camp, we will need to submit it to the school board, but that shouldn't be a problem. You can go ahead and work on securing the rights and promoting the camp.

Black out.

[6] The 7 roles described here are the total number of characters in the show. One character, Karnak, was portrayed by a puppet and was voiced by a staff member who was a retired local radio disc jockey. Because the character was not portrayed by one of the camp participants it has been excluded from other conversations surrounding the number of young people involved."

DEVELOPMENT: TRANSITION

Lights come up on Hayden sitting at his desk. He is looking at his computer. RECEIVING EMAIL SFX. Hayden clicks through to the email. A light comes up on Mike typing at his desk.

Mike: Hello, Mr. Hayden. I received a few emails about your upcoming *Ride the Cyclone*. People are concerned about the content of the show; particularly that it includes sexual language, talk of the loss of virginity, bestiality, references to pornography, and using the Lord's name in vain. Is this true?

Hayden: (typing) Hello. I appreciate your email. While those are elements in the original show, we are producing the "High School Edition." I double-checked the script and all the elements you mentioned are not in it. If anyone has questions, they can read a perusal of the script on the license holder's website.

Mike: (*typing)* Thank you. I will pass this information along. I am satisfied with this.

Blackout

DEVELOPMENT: MODULATION

Lights up on Hayden sitting at his desk making himself busy. He gives off an air of defeat. PHONE RINGING SFX.

Hayden: Hello?

Elizabeth: Hello, is this Mr. Hayden-?

Lights up downstage left on Elizabeth, an active middle-aged woman.

Hayden: Yes?

Elizabeth: This is Elizabeth Baker; I'm calling you about last night's school board meeting. Your proposal for the theater camp was tabled

because we really want to approve this camp for you and the kids, but there is some concern about the choice of show. Now, I'm a bit of a theater person and used to be on the board of the community theater in town.

Hayden: The contract has already been signed for this show. I asked both my department chair and Mike who both gave their approval. There is already considerable artistic and financial investment into putting on this show.

Elizabeth: There is already a contract?

Hayden: Yes, it was signed almost two months ago.

Elizabeth: Well, that changes just about everything. We are going to have to fight this one out. I am the president of the board, but I know some of my colleagues are very concerned about this. When I arrived at the meeting yesterday one member made a big deal about it before the official meeting started. Could I possibly get a copy of the script to read?

Hayden: Of course. Anything that can make this happen for the kids. If anyone else wants to read it, they can too.

Elizabeth: Would you be able to come to the next school board meeting? I will do what I can behind the scenes, but I think that it would make a substantial difference for you to speak.

Hayden: It would really be the least that I could do. What are our chances for success?

Elizabeth: We only need three votes to say yes for this to go through. I think most of my colleagues think this is either a waste of time for the board or are in favor. There is one member who can try to sway the rest of the board to vote against. I am more worried about what he will say than the vote, but there are no guarantees in politics.

Black out.

DEVELOPMENT: TONICIZATION

*The lights come up on a long-raised desk with five individuals sitting behind it. Elizabeth is sitting in the middle. To her left is Prince who gives off a curmudgeonly air. Other school board members are **Scott**, **Becky**, and **Bradley**. There are witnesses scattered around the room; many interested explicitly in the result of the vote on Ride the Cyclone.*

Elizabeth: Now we move to work session agenda item number 2, approval for the high school summer theater camp.

Prince: I believe we tabled that at our last meeting.

Superintendent Yancy: It is very unusual to have to vote on a school play; I thought I removed it from the agenda last night.

Elizabeth: Yes, but due to our having tabled voting on it at our last meeting, we must vote on it now. I have invited Mr. Hayden to come and speak. I have read the script, which Mr. Prince has also decided to read, and Mr. Hayden and I have discussed some of the content of the show that can be changed. However, legally no edits can be made. When I read the script, I didn't find anything wrong with the show. This is a very tame show, all things considered. I would like to welcome Mr. Hayden to give his remarks.

Hayden: Hello, thank you all for having me here today and thank you to Dr. Baker for inviting me to come speak. I would like to talk to you about the great opportunity that I am trying to provide for my students and why *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* is the right choice for these students. This camp provides an opportunity for the students to learn more about theater, develop personal learning, engage them in critical literacies, and give them something to do this summer. This is a tuition-based extra-curricular program that students are electing to do. I believe that this camp is something that will enrich the lives of all my students, and my choice of show is a key component of that. This show was suggested to me by the students. I obviously could have never dreamed of doing the original version, but when the High School Edition was published, I knew this would be a great opportunity for them. What I really think is exceptional about this show is that every

character gets to have a complete arc. Every student would have to think about what causes their character to change, what they want out of this experience, and they get to make choices for that character. The characters are all teenagers and relate to the real experiences of our students—particularly those who would do a camp like this. Theater provides an opportunity to see the world through mirrors and windows. A student might relate to Ocean who is a try-hard but fails to connect with their friends and playing Ocean can give them a look in on themselves. A student might not be non-verbal like Ricky but by taking on that role, the student might become more aware and learn what it is like to be in that situation and how to treat their peers who might be different from them better. This is all while I can remove myself from their actions and lead them towards a student-led learning process. My job is to guide them on the path and then they take care of the rest. I believe that theater is, perhaps, a "magical" art form. The whole cycle of the show includes pre-production, rehearsal, and the performance, yes, but it also includes the response to that performance for both the students and the audience. It is irresponsible to not let students perform works that challenge them and challenge their audience. I believe this show provides a safe level of challenge for both them and for the audience. Thank you all so much for your time and I welcome any questions you may have.

Hayden relaxes for a moment after finishing his talk, knowing that the questions will be coming and could be contentions.

Prince: First off, I don't think your students are the best judges of the plays they should be doing. Now, if everyone doesn't mind, I would like to read passages from this play to show what kind of things are "appropriate" for these students… Noel, who I assume is the main hero, says "Being the only gay man in a small rural high school is like having your sweet sixteen on the moon. The decorations are amazing. The catering is sublime. But nobody shows up. It's okay. You've already run out of oxygen." Jane says "When a lioness has children, she stops making love to the lion. The lion gets jealous, sometimes so jealous that he eats the children. You'd think this would upset the lioness. Far from it, they make love again, as if the children never existed. I find that idea terrifying." Then we get to the whole finale, the most important song, sung by Noel—dressed as a woman—and here

are some of the words: “broken-heart, a life of sin tattooed with a safety pin. Racketeering, bribery, extortion, fraud and forgery; super crusty, holy terror, wild eyes and bad mascara.” Later, Mischa says, “My divine Talia, when I look into your almond eyes, I do not see the boy I am, but the man I must become to possess you… Then we shall sing and dance and drink and then I shall whisper in your ear ‘let the water run wild or let them be damned.’ My perfect Talia, I lay my masculinity at the altar of your maidenhood.” Do you really think this is appropriate for kids?

Hayden: Yes, because not every action needs to be positive. You wouldn’t have very good dramatic stakes if that were the case. Noel’s lament ends with the Monique Gibbeau persona dying from their unholy lifestyle. The whole show is about this group of characters working out their differences and negative character traits to decide who is the most fitting to return to their old life; it is about friendship and learning to love one another. I would like to comment on your last reading from the script—you skipped a couple of lines: you missed where Mischa proposes to Talia in front of a river—he is pledging his love to her in the sincerest conceivable way. There is nothing subversive about that; he is working through his rage and anger and self-actualizing. This could be an immensely powerful role for any young person but particularly a young man who is trying to figure themselves out and I wanted to clarify what that scene is actually saying.

Elizabeth: Again, it is highly unusual for the content of a school play to be up for debate by the school board.

Scott: My daughter reads Shakespeare in her English classes and that has suicide and witches and all sorts of dark elements-

Prince: I would hesitate to put this on the level of Shakespeare.

Scott: Regardless, Mr. Prince, I have no interest in this school board micromanaging the content of classes or school plays. Now maybe Mr. Hayden should stick to more family-friendly shows in the future, but this went through the right channels and is not the responsibility of the school board.

Becky: I'm a sports person, but I always hear about your shows from my neighbors. Are you sure this is the right show for the community?

Hayden: Yes. This is also a much smaller show and with that it is a much smaller advertising budget. I'm not going and buying radio ads for this. We have not even started advertising. Nobody really knows about *Ride the Cyclone* except theater people. That is why the camp is tuition-based—it is more about learning than it is about the success of the show.

Prince: I don't care if this is right for the community; I don't think this is right for the kids.

Elizabeth: There is a signed contract, and all the right channels were followed. Not everything can be a Disney show.

Hayden: I would like to point out that two of the musicals I have done were *High School Musical* and *The Sound of Music*. I am not trying to be controversial and I have no problem playing it safe—I just really believe this is the right show and that I have the right students to really make this show work. They deserve to be challenged.

Elizabeth: Any last comments? Can I have a motion to hold a roll call vote?

Bradley: Aye.

Elizabeth: Second?

Scott: Aye.

Elizabeth: Mr. Bradley, we will start with you.

Bradley: Aye.

Prince: I just don't think this is right for our community or for our kids. Nay.

Becky: Aye.

Scott: Aye.

Elizabeth: Aye. The motion passed for the summer camp and *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition.*

In true dramatic fashion, there is celebration on one side of the room and panic and dismay on the other.

Blackout

RECAPITULATION

Lights up on Hayden and a group of 6 students. The students are all dressed in private school uniforms getting ready to perform Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition. It is opening night.

Alyssa: Have you seen my water bottle?

Tyler: No, I haven't seen your water bottle!

Marie: Hey, it's really not the time to be worrying about that. We go on in 5 minutes!

Hayden: Everyone, have a seat, we don't have a lot of time.

All of the students sit down looking at Hayden.

Hayden: I want to say that I am super proud of all of you. You worked super hard to put this show together. We all spent every minute of every day for the last two weeks putting this together. I hope you are proud of yourselves and the work that you have put in. I have loved seeing you all grow and become friends. This camp was about this show, but it was also about helping you learn and grow as people. I am so proud of you all and the work that you have put in. There was a serious campaign that didn't want this show, this camp to happen. I think this is the show that you needed and the show that they need. I want you to go out there tonight and create something so beautiful that anyone who might not want you to succeed can't help but be moved. I have loved leading you and now it is your turn to be in charge.

Everyone put your hands in. Break on “needs.” Okay? What the world…

All: Needs!

Blackout.

End of Play.

CODA: CONCLUDING PASSAGE OCCURING AFTER THE STRUCTURAL CONCLUSION AND SEVES AS A FORMAL CLOSING GESTURE[7]

What Has Happened Since

I initially wrote *A Dramatic Sonata*, in the summer and early fall of 2024. Since that time things in Indiana have only continued to deteriorate. Faye Gleisser’s *On Indiana: A Disorientation Guide* (2025) is a harrowing read discussing just how deep Indiana’s anti-humanization policy runs. A new diploma was passed into law that forces young children to make a choice that could affect all future career options and academic endeavors for the sake of corporations getting free labor in the form of internships (Appleton, 2024; Indiana State School Music Association, 2024). The Eyes on Education portal is collecting reports of educators who do not comply with the state’s demand for banking education and threatening to revoke their teaching licenses (Charron, 2025; Smith, 2025).

I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge that I did not win this fight to program *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* alone and I also want to note that while many of the new school board members are, in fact, conservative, I would not want to suggest that they are all reactionary ideologues; rather, they are doing what they believe is best for the school district and often their own children. However, with recent legislation making school board elections partisan, it is increasingly likely that in many school districts in Indiana people outside of the hegemonic ideology will not be able to be a part of determining educational policy due to having an R (Republican) or a D

[7] *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, “Coda” (Randel, 2003a)

(Democrat) next to their name on the election ballot (Carloni, 2025).

I think the reasoning for the pushback against the camp, *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition*, and the critical and embodied pedagogical practices that I was suggesting are rooted in the desire to stop young people from engaging with material that might suggest a way of being other than what has been deemed appropriate by those in power. Ultimately, they want to prevent students from musicking—to silence the dithyrambic song.

The good news of this story is that *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* was approved and the kids did get their camp. This was not just my victory; I received a lot of help from Dr. Wendy Miller who read the script of *Ride the Cyclone: High School Edition* and helped organize support and to prepare me for the school board meeting that is featured in my dramatic sonata. While one small play in a small town doesn't feel world changing, it really was for my students and for myself.

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Classroom as the 'Third Theatre': Engaging with Badal Sircar's Theory and Praxis of Drama

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the theory and practice of Badal Sircar, one of the pioneers of theatre practice in postcolonial India. It contends that Sircar's 'third theatre' or 'intimate theatre'—characterised by its abandonment of traditional theatre conventions and its strong political resonance for Indian audiences—provides a compelling model for transforming literature classrooms into participatory spaces. Drawing inspiration from Sircar's group Satabdi and their innovative, mobile, and non-commercial performances in everyday spaces, the paper argues that replicating the principles of third theatre in classroom settings can radically shift drama reading into a collaborative, purposeful, and socially engaged practice. By modifying spatial arrangements and fostering collective action, the classroom itself can become a site of social resistance and emancipation. This paper outlines three specific ways Sircar's experimentation offers a model for vibrant and democratic drama pedagogy, in which the class can work

as a community, thinking, speaking, and acting together to bring about social action.

> The playwright, therefore, has to think of the final event, the performance, right from the beginning. He has to deal with two art forms simultaneously: literature and theatre. His language has to be a special language, different from that in other branches of literature, for it must be translatable into audio-visual scenes which a group of performers can project to a group of spectators. (Sircar, 1982, p. 15)

INTRODUCTION

Theatre refers to the complex and dynamic interaction, through verbal and non-verbal communication, between the stage performers and the audience. Etymologically, the term theatre originates from the Greek word 'theatron', which means 'a place of seeing'. The meaning produced and communicated in a play depends on the performative rhetoric, style of production, and, more importantly, the space (amphitheatre, opera house, auditorium, street) in which the play is performed. Teaching a dramatic text can be challenging because it is difficult to approximate and recreate the theatrical visual experience in a classroom. Scholars and educators often resort to screening videos and films of dramatic performances to elucidate the performative rhetoric and spatial dynamics of the stage, but the approach has its limitations. A series of questions may arise: Can the visual language of a staged play be translated into the verbal medium of the dramatic text and still retain its revolutionary potential? Can a play be performed successfully without the theatrical paraphernalia and appendages of costume, stage designs, props and a curtained stage? Can such a play be considered an aesthetic art form?

Badal Sircar (1925-2011), one of the pioneers of post-Independence Indian theatre, definitely made it possible to move beyond the proscenium stage and perform without theatrical accoutrements. He was influenced by the avant-garde European playwrights like Jerzy Grotowski, Richard Schechner, Julian Beck and

Judith Malina.[1] Sircar, however, believed that the city theatre was imported from the West, while rural theatre was in touch with its indigenous folk culture. Like his Marxist contemporary, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar felt that rural theatre was more vibrant and popular.[2] Sircar, however, went a step forward to propose a third kind of theatre, a 'theatre of synthesis', where he 'wanted to break down the barriers and come closer to the spectators' and share with audience 'a joint human action' (Sircar, 1982, p. 56). He admitted that the third theatre was roughly modelled on the folk art form of Bengal' Jatra'[3] which communicated a social 'message' to the audience in the "clearest, strongest terms possible, so that the viewer may undergo a change of consciousness or arrive at some stage of action" (Sircar, 2022, p. 291). The third theatre was, at the same time, influenced by the Russian dramatist Grotowski's concept of the 'Poor Theatre'. Sircar proposed the idea of a third theatre where performances would take place among the spectators, with simple mobile sets. His theatre group Satabdi, based in Calcutta in the 1970s, abandoned the proscenium stage, advocated free shows and reduced the use of sets, props, and costumes. His non-commercial theatre was performed in an 'Anganmanch' (courtyard stage) or 'Muktomanch' (open-air theatre), an intimate, flexible theatre, where the distance between performers and spectators was removed. Sircar explained that due to its suppleness and flexibility, "it may be transported and accessed… it may be staged in villages and marketplaces, in slums, schools and gardens" (Sircar, 2022, p. 298). The third theatre was similar to the already prevalent Marxist street theatre of protest, except that Sircar never imposed his views on his audience but appealed to their judgements (Sarkar, 2010, pp. xxxv—xxxvi). The "transition from the director-formulated rehearsal method to a workshop-based trial-and-error rehearsal model" (Debnath, 2023) was a crucial development towards the Third Theatre. Through games, mental mapping, sound and movement mirroring and

[1] Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) was a Polish theatre director and theorist who wrote ‘Towards a Poor Theatre’ which rejected spectacle driven theatre; Richard Schechner is known as a theorist of performance studies who popularised Environmental Theatre; Julian Beck and Judith Malina were American actors and an avant garde theatre directors who revolutionised theatre in 1950s and 1960s.

[2] Tanvir, Habib. Theatre is in the Villages, 1974.

[3] Jatra was a rural form of open air theatre focusing on music, dance and melodrama during festivals in Bengal and Orissa. Jatra with its absence of scenery, use of live music and high pitched dramatisation influenced Sircar.

other activities, the workshop participants experienced and embodied various emotions. He continued to experiment with "language, mode of presentation, prop, venue, technical innovation and theatrical skill" over the years (Khanna, 2011, p. 26). Sircar's Third Theatre offered a place for collective experience and articulation of social resistance.

This paper advances the argument that Sircar's third theatre model offers a transformative approach to drama education when adapted to the classroom. A classroom is a space without props, lighting, or costumes, often with an elevated stage; yet a play reading (not an enactment) with active student participation is conceivable. By adopting a workshop model that connects teachers and students as co-learners, the classroom can bridge the gap between the teacher and students, between the stage and the page, and between theatre and drama. This pedagogical stance does not undermine the value of theatrical performance, but enables teachers to utilise the radical and collective spirit of third theatre in everyday education. The teacher-centric reading of the text in a classroom may be replaced by a workshop model in which all students actively engage with a dramatic text, editing it, experiencing it, challenging it, and inculcating a collective desire for social change. Free-flowing communication, without the teacher-student hierarchy, is a key to radicalising the classroom. Drawing inspiration from Sircar's group Satabdi and their innovative, mobile, and non-commercial performances in everyday spaces, the paper argues that replicating the principles of third theatre in classroom settings can radically shift drama reading into a collaborative, purposeful, and socially engaged practice.

Educators across the globe have discovered that dramatic activities are powerful teaching and learning mediums for fostering critical thinking and communication among students.[4] Recent scholars have underlined the need of incorporating drama in teaching and learning to enhance cognitive and affective faculties (Belliveau, 2007). Integrating short skits or improvisation in school education is , however, different from critically engaging with classic dramas in literature classrooms of college and university students. Educators and teachers have focused on the primacy of cognition rather than the expression of feelings while teaching drama in a classroom. Drama, however, is a unique literary genre because it is mediated by theatre,

[4] Bowell & Heap, 2013; Sharma, 2015

with its narrative interspersed with stage directions. If theatre can transform its audience, purge emotions (catharsis) and bring about social reform, then can a dramatic text inspire activism in its readers as well? One is confronted with the problem of whether to treat drama as an aesthetic category or a political tool of social reform. Sircar enquired:

> What is theatre, for that matter? How does one communicate through theatre? How much of the theatre is entertainment, how much is aesthetics, and how much is a means of communicating messages? (1982, p. 14)

Badal Sircar's plays raised social issues of exploitation, unemployment and injustice. However, does that take away the aesthetic appeal of his theatre by making it simply a tool of social reform? Besides provoking thought and cognition, this kind of theatre also appealed to the audience's emotions and sentiments.

POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN THEATRE AND BADAL SIRCAR

Major theatrical practitioners writing in regional Indian languages since the 1960s, namely Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar, Habib Tanvir, and a few others, have produced political and experimental drama to shock the audience's sensibilities and bring about social reform. The emergence of modern Indian theatre in metropolitan cities in the late 1970s and 1980s carried the essence of intercultural interaction. There were two parallel though contradictory trends evident in the plays of modern Indian playwrights, firstly, an intercultural exchange, that was, the influence of avant-garde theatre of Europe and secondly, an intercultural mediation by discovering and appropriating myriad folk traditions of India.[5] These theatrical practitioners in postcolonial India did not simply borrow Western cultural tropes or adapt European plays; they simultaneously resisted Western cultural dominance in Indian theatre. Intercultural theatre was popularised in the West around the same time by Ariane

[5] Refer to Ralph Yarrow, *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom* (2001); Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (2008).

Mnouchkine, Jerzy Grotowski, and Peter Brook, introducing elements or styles of Asian drama into Western performance scripts.[6]

Badal Sircar was a Western-educated, middle-class Bengali playwright who was influenced by Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre', which used minimal props and non-traditional performance spaces. Sircar, however, admitted that while Grotowski's theatre worked with full-time, skilled, and trained actors, he did not have the money to pay his group members, who worked only in their free time. Manujendra Kundu in So Near Yet So Far posits that Sircar did not directly admit, but his theatre was strikingly similar to the 'Environmental Theatre' of Schechner or Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' rather than the rural art forms like Jatra, Tamasha, Bhawai, Nautanki, Kathakali, Chhou, and Manipuri dances (Kundu, 2016, p. 180). Critics have often found Sircar's third theatre synonymous with the street theatre led by IPTA in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Sircar explained that street theatre was a short performance of topical value; so all street theatre may be third theatre but not vice versa (Sircar, 1993, p. 64) It is true that Sircar's plays assimilated and interacted with other cultures, art forms, techniques and artists but he never lost his individuality and his belief in bringing about a social change through theatre. He was a theatre practitioner, and his plays were a concerted effort to bring actors and audience onto the same platform, building a community that could think and act together to lead social reform. Rustom Bharucha described Sircar's third theatre as the 'most rigorously non-commercial political theatre in India' (Bharucha, 1983, p. 127).

Badal Sircar began his dramatic career with a few comedies, including S*olution X, Boropishima, Sanibar, Ballavpurer Rupkatha*, and others. He then went to Nigeria in 1964, where he began writing serious plays such as *Evam Indrajit* (1962), *Baki Itihas* (That Other History, 1964), *Trinsho Satabdi* (30th Century, 1966), and *Pagla Ghora* (Mad Horse, 1967). These plays, performed on the proscenium stage, highlighted the political, social and existential crises of a commoner. He met a few avant-garde playwrights, such as Richard Schechner and Julian Beck, during his visit to the USA, who greatly influenced

[6] Ariane Mnouchkine was an avantgarde theatre director of Theatre du Soleil in Paris. Her Greek tetralogy *Les Atrides* (1990-1993) was an intercultural performance. Peter Brook's first major intercultural work has been *The Mahabharata.* Grotowski was a Polish director of the 1960s who travelled and worked with different performance cultures. He produced classical Western plays with non-Western theatre conventions. His best experimental play has been *Akropolis*.

him. His theatre group, Satabdi, founded in 1967, made a radical departure from conventional theatre. In his Bengali essay 'Theatre er Bhasha'[7] (Sircar, 1983, p. 25), he argued that naturalistic theatre, using a proscenium stage, sought to create an illusion of reality on stage for the audience, a goal that succeeded until the advent of motion pictures (cinema). Drama could not compete with films in depicting an illusion of life (Sircar, 1983, p. 40). The strength of drama, however, lay in direct communication. Sircar explained how the idea of a play germinated and took shape. He cited a hypothetical instance in which an actor, a city dweller with limited knowledge of rural poverty and exploitation, gained knowledge by reading or discussing the dismal condition of landless labourers and felt guilty about his ignorance. He decided that "only further questioning will give him the answers he sought". He realised that we were aware of everything—hunger, injustice, oppression, war, killing and atomic destruction—but "we have awareness without empathy" (Critical Discourse, 293). Thus, his play *Bhoma* was designed to spread the message and elicit responses from the audience. Badal Sircar did not limit his plays to middle-class intelligentsia but brought them closer to the rustic, uneducated working-class audience, too. Sircar's main aim was to present a flexible, portable and inexpensive theatre. The Third Theatre was free in three ways: first, it offered uninhibited communication; second, it was free of the paraphernalia of proscenium theatre; and third, it offered the audience free shows without entry tickets (Mitra, 2004, p. 65).

Spartacus, though a play about a Roman slave revolt, was not focused on ancient Roman history. For Sircar, the play conveyed a clarion call against any exploitation. It was performed for the first time in an *Anganmanch*, where the audience surrounded the actors in a circle and became active participants in the play. This radical move was influenced by a production which he witnessed in Paris. His landmark play in the third theatre format was *Michiil* (*Procession*, 1972). He performed this play outdoors in a rural setting in West Bengal. His other non-proscenium plays include *Bhoma*, *Basi Khobor (Stale News), Scandal in Fairy Land and Beyond the Land of Hattamal*a. Engaged in a continuous dialogue with his audience about

[7] Sircar's 'Theatre er Bhasha' was published in Bengali in 1983. It was delivered as a lecture at a conference at the University of Calcutta in 1981.

social issues like social injustice, poverty, dehumanisation of man and the effect of atom bombs, his plays were no less than social activism. His interest in carrying on a conversation with the rural people instigated his annual village tours, for three days in a row, to interact with the villagers. However, as an urban, Western-educated man, he was more prone to romanticising the countryside. Scholars have also criticised him for taking middle-class subjects like unemployment, processions, existential crisis, and ennui to the rural populace. His priority, however, remained direct communication with the audience, influenced in part by the Bengali rural form, the Jatra. He was fascinated by the spontaneity and palpability of human bodies on stage (a common trope in his plays was a human chain).

SIRCAR'S THEATRE WORKSHOPS

For Sircar, communication was the key to theatre, whether communication with the fellow members of his theatre group or with the audience. Sircar observed how his theatre group confronted the script, tried it, tested it, accepted it, enriched it, and rejected it, gradually building a structure that was much more than the written script. Through the process, the group was transformed into a workshop in the true sense of the term.... The whole process was necessarily slow; the group was not just rehearsing a play set down in definite terms by the playwright but confronting a script to create live theatre out of it (Sircar, 2009, pp. 24- 25).

All his plays were thus a product of long, arduous workshops and rehearsals with his fellow artists, who devoted their free time to theatre. His long journey as a theatre practitioner led him to conduct other workshops to engage people. In the 1970s, he travelled across the country, conducting workshops, performing plays and communicating with other regional theatre practitioners. He conducted workshops with the Kannada left-wing theatre group Samudaya, run by Prasanna and in Manipur in collaboration with H. Kanhailal. Jo Trowsdale recounts Sircar's week-long theatre workshop with undergraduate and postgraduate students and teachers at the University of Warwick in 1992. Trowsdale observes that 'both in rehearsal and workshop, Badal described his role as that of a catalyst agent; the work was generated by the performers/participants themselves' (1997, p. 53). Badal Sircar did not expect his performers to be professional artists but participants

in a workshop who were learning and communicating together. The workshop mode allowed performers to become aware of their consciousness, feelings and inhibitions. The training was to unveil the facades people put on to live in society and to expose their feelings and thoughts to their fellow team members. For the dramatist, the spectators were equal participants in the action of the play. He posited:

> This is intimate theatre. The performers can see the spectator clearly, can approach him individually, can whisper in his ears, and can even touch him if he wants. (Sircar, 1982, p. 25)

According to Trowsdale, the training session began with participants sitting in a circle, holding hands and passing on nonverbal cues, such as a gentle squeeze of the hand from one to the other. The training fostered team spirit, equality, intimacy, and a sense of community. Some other playful experiments focused on the concept of space, in which all participants were asked to move or dance in slow motion with their eyes closed within the given space. These psychophysical exercises, borrowed in part from Grotowski, helped the participants build awareness of themselves and the surrounding noises. Such activities were imperative for building coordination between the body and the mind.

DRAMA, SCRIPT, THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

Drama, theatre and performance are often used synonymously in literature classrooms, though there is only a symbiotic relationship between them. Drama is a printed text, while theatre is an embodied performance. With the increased literacy rate and the introduction of written drama into the school and university curricula, the playwright's text, with its elaborate stage directions, was given primacy.[8] In the twentieth century, avant-garde theatre directors in the West redirected their attention beyond the script to theatre and performance. Schechner, the American theorist, explained the difference between drama, script, theatre and performance with concentric overlapping circles where drama, the well-structured narrative form, is represented in the innermost circle, followed by script and theatre. Performance is

[8] Javed Malik, *Diverse Pursuits,* p 210.

relegated to the outermost big circle since it is the most ill-defined and takes the maximum time/space. For him, while theatre is the event enacted by the performers in response to the drama or script, performance is:

> the whole constellation of events…that takes place in both performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance…to the time the last spectator leaves. (Schechner, 1973, p. 8)

Badal Sircar defined a play as the written text; dramatisation as the enactment of the play, while theatre was "a sum total of the written play, its dramatic form, its dramatic enactment and its performance" (2022, p. 289). He was more invested in the performance than the dramatic text. 'I prefer doing theatre to writing theatre' (Dutta, 2009, p. 2).[9] The partially unscripted and improvised performance of the Satabdi group was its forte. There was a palpable human energy and communication in his group's performances, as they did not follow a fixed, text-based approach. Sircar and his group sought the audience's active participation as they performed among them. Active participation does not mean the audience is expected to act or speak; rather, it heightens the audience's emotional response to the actions unfolding before their eyes.

In his 1981 letter to Schechner, he explained his motivation for freeing theatre from its moorings. Sircar discussed how he realised, while performing Bashi Khobor (Stale News), a play about the Santhal tribal revolt during the colonial period, that the atrocities and exploitation of the subalterns continued to the present day. So the play was not about the historical Santhal revolt per se, but about a contemporary man reading about such incidents of brutality and responding to them. For Sircar:

> It is not a theatre one can perform by "enacting". It can only be performed by "state of being". The performer acts out his feelings, his own concerns and questions and contradictions and guilt. Through the play, our protagonist changed a little, we changed a

[9] Peter Szondi in *Theory of Modern Drama* argued for metamorphosis of drama as epicization; Andrzej Wirth posits that a theatre is a speaking stage where the dramatist can freely share his/her concerns with the audience.

> little, and we hoped that our spectators, some of them, would change a little. (Sircar, 1982, p. 55)

CLASSROOM AS THE THIRD THEATRE

Sircar's performance-based approach to drama can guide teachers in teaching literary drama in the classroom. The classroom can resemble a third theatre workshop where students have to be active participants. Given the limited timeframe of the teaching semester and the strict examination pattern, it is not possible to dramatise the play in the classroom or to spend time on role playing. My submission is to develop a pedagogical strategy that emphasises communication. In a conventional literature classroom, teachers usually approach a drama as literary critics: engaging in close reading and using the text to advance scholarly discourses such as Marxism, Cultural Materialism, Post-colonialism, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis. This approach or practice, though very beneficial, limits drama to a literary text, excluding its performative and emotional aspects. There is often no difference between a close contextual reading of a novel and that of a drama. Moreover, political and deconstructive discourses often fail to address the democratic potential of an aesthetic category like drama.

On the other hand, some new pedagogical methodologies have been explored by educators as part of the project of ‘Drama in Education’. Dorothy Heathcote’s ‘Mantle of the Expert ’(Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) promoted the concept of a ‘teacher-in-role ’to divest the teacher of her authority, while Augusto Boal’s radical approach of ‘SpectActor’, in which the actor and spectator may come together to act, spectate, or communicate, also aimed to challenge traditional educational roles. Boal worked with the Brazilian peasant community and his techniques of Forum Theatre were highly influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), which advocates a community-based education. Their classroom activities encouraged ‘thought tracking’, ‘freeze frames’ and ‘sharing stories’, building up egalitarian classroom spaces and emphasising collective engagement and social action. However, most of these educators worked on spontaneous improvisations, rather than a fixed curriculum. Most often, their pedagogy did not include any particular dramatic script or text in the classroom and avoided discussion of the drama’s history.

My attempt to examine Sircar’s third theatre as a model for

teaching drama in class is to examine both the process and the product. I understand that simply raising critical questions in the text isn't sufficient; it's equally important to engage the feelings and emotions of the students. We want our students to connect deeply and reflect on their own thoughts and experiences as they engage with the work. This paper argues that the teacher or educator must approach the dramatic text as a 'radical aesthete' (to use Isobel Armstrong's term)[10] to conjoin theory and praxis, thinking with affect.

There are three ways in which Badal Sircar's experimentation might be a model for teaching drama in a lively way, especially in a public funded university classroom in India, where students belong to diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Sircar, like many of his radical contemporaries, was practising intercultural drama where he adapted plots (*Gondi* was an adaptation of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle)*, themes (Spartacus was borrowed from Howard Fast's novel), methods (both Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre' and Schechner's 'Environmental theatre') and styles (Jatra from Bengal) and yet was able to make it socially relevant in the Indian postcolonial context. Firstly, teachers and students, confronted with plays from different social and historical settings in their syllabi, need not only to contextualise/ historicise the plays, but also to find their relevance in their contemporary world. An example will be helpful. The play *Bashi Khobor* is a collage of various news items related to the exploitation of the indigenous tribal groups by the British Raj, poor bonded labourers in liberated India and the general apathy of the Indian government towards the marginalised. It highlights how urban middle-class individuals, bombarded with a barrage of information, past and present, react to it and whether, and how, their lives are affected by it. It is a play where "spectators and actors intermingle, and the entire space of the room becomes a swirling mass of humanity. It is one of those moments in the theatre when one becomes acutely aware of the possibilities of life and the essential brotherhood of man' (Dass, 1988, p. 24). So Sircar, through his collage, illustrated how to move beyond a singular historical situation and understand how the themes resurface repeatedly in different spatio-temporal settings.

[10] Isobel Armstrong in *The Radical Aesthetic* responds to the Marxists, cultural materialists and poststructuralists, who are skeptical of the category of aesthetics. She argues that aesthetics is emancipatory and can lead to change. Art has to evoke both thought and feeling.

Secondly, for Badal Sircar, no text is the final product. Like the actors of Satabdi, students can confront a dramatic text, edit it, accept it, reject it and move beyond it. A play is meant to be interactive, setting up a dialectic between knowledge and activity. Students may be able to learn and communicate together (as in Sircar's workshop), and analyse their fears, insecurities, inhibitions, and aspirations. In other words, drama as a literary genre, sharing a dyadic relationship with theatre and performance, having access to different cultures and productions, is emancipatory. Finally, theatre has always been a tool for social reform. The reading of a play ought to transform our thoughts and beliefs. It can build a community of students and teachers to think and act together to bring about social change, in whatever little way possible.

As teachers of literature, how can we incorporate Sircar's ideas and methodology into our diverse classrooms? The classroom space can resemble a theatre stage. Teaching a play requires performative rhetoric—such as modulation of voice, tone, gestures, eye contact, and pregnant pauses—to convey the text's dynamism and vibrancy. This approach, however, tends to be limited because it is teacher-centric and unidimensional; it does not allow students to freely express their emotions, feelings, or thoughts while engaging with the text alongside the teacher.

The "third theatre" concept removes the barrier between the performer and the audience. One practical exercise is to rearrange classroom benches so that the teacher is among the students, rather than positioned on a podium above them. This new spatial arrangement fosters equality and allows for greater freedom of expression. It also raises students' awareness about the power dynamics and disparities related to caste, class, gender, and race in society. By sitting in a circle, students are no longer mere recipients of information from the teacher. The goal is to "nurture imaginative and affective selves" (Debnath, 'Internal Workshop'). This approach serves as a first step towards emancipating young minds and inviting them to explore and embody unexpressed emotions, ultimately creating a transformative experience for both the teacher and the students. Theatre, according to Badal Sircar, cannot be 'enacted' but performed by 'state of being'.

After a group reading of the play, the following exercise can involve opening the play for editing, revision, comparison, and rejection

in light of contemporary ethical and aesthetic concerns. For example, Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) rewrites Thomas Killigrew's play *Thomaso, or The Wanderer* (1664) through a gendered lens. Behn critiques the misogynistic and rakish cavalier hero's bawdy humour and sexual profligacy. However, contemporary postcolonial readers may also criticise or reject Behn's women-centric play for its racist language. As a result, students can learn to adapt, revise, enrich, and rewrite the play. The polyphonic quality of a play encourages a free flow of ideas and emotions, making the dramatic text a site of both resistance and emancipation.

In conclusion, this methodology is not intended to undermine traditional literary analysis; rather, it supplements contextual and historical paradigms of literary criticism. Badal Sircar played a pivotal role in transforming Bengali theatre, and modern Indian theatre from mere illusionistic stage entertainment into what is referred to as 'postdramatic theatre' (Lehmann's term),[11] serving as a community-building exercise to combat social evils. This paper argues that some of Sircar's radical methodologies can be valuable in building a discourse on action in the classroom.

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[11] Lehmann explains that postdramatic theatre does not mean ‘beyond’ drama. It challenges mimetic production and has the potential to dismantle and deconstruct drama itself.

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An Unlikely Sanctuary: Examining the Impact of Church-Based Youth Arts Programs in the Current Educational Theatre Landscape

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ABSTRACT

When school leaders opened the doors to greet students at the start of the 2025-26 academic year, they also encountered a new set of circumstances impacting public education. Stakeholders across the country are engaging in conversations about the potential ramifications of decreasing student enrollment due to population decline, the end of COVID-era relief funds, and shifts in governmental policies that could deeply impact school funding.

For many arts educators, however, these conversations debating school budget cuts, as well their potential implications for arts programs, are all too familiar. Yet even in these times of uncertainty for arts education, some students are finding opportunities to take the stage in an unlikely place—the evangelical Christian church.

In this essay, I examine the way some evangelical churches provide spaces for children and teens to engage in the arts, especially focusing on large-scale Christmas spectaculars and innovative arts festivals. These faith-based performance opportunities hold the potential to shape how young people think about the nature, scope, and purpose of theatre in ways that could impact these future artists and theatregoers.

In 1995, Hollywood Pictures first released *Mr. Holland's Opus*, a film about a composer-turned-public school music teacher who faces an untimely end to his teaching career as budget cuts forced the elimination of the school's music and theatre programs.[1] The film was a box office success, grossing approximately $106 million in ticket sales and garnering a Best Actor Oscar Nomination for Richard Dreyfuss, who portrayed the titular character (*Mr. Holland's Opus,* 2025). It also sparked the founding of the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation, an organization that continues to support underfunded music programs around the country and brought attention to the state of arts education in the U.S. Yet, even as the film celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, the same struggles still exist in many U.S. schools. In spring and summer of 2025, U.S. news headlines rang out with warnings about the current financial state of public education.[2] Given the longstanding history of these budgetary shortfalls, some educators, especially those within the arts, might dismiss these headlines as another ubiquitous part of the educational conversation.

[1] The film opened in limited release on December 29, 1995 with wide release in the U.S. beginning on January 19, 1996. *Mr. Holland's Opus* was produced by Hollywood Pictures, Interscope Communications, and Polygram Filmed Entertainment and distributed by Buena Vista Pictures (*Mr. Holland's Opus,* 2025).

[2] Some examples of these reports include "U.S. Public Schools Brace for 'Fiscal Cliff' After Surge in Hiring Meets Budget Shortfalls" (2025, April 22) from CNBC and "School Districts Face Uncertainty Following Budget Cuts, But Some Welcome Re-evaluation of Funds" (2025, July 23) from ABC News.

ENROLLMENT CLIFF

However, some of the causes behind this recent wave of anxiety depart from the typical reasons given for financial struggles in U.S. public education. Schools nationwide are bracing for an “enrollment cliff” due to declining birthrates in the United States. According to data from the CDC, the number of births in the United States declined 16% from 2007-2023, and the general fertility rate dropped 22% from 2007-2024 (Martin et al., 2025). Furthermore, a 2025 report from the Brookings Institute claims this birthrate decline, coupled by an increase in families opting for homeschooling and private schools in the post-COVID era, has led to growing concern for public schools. Because most state and federal aid is dispersed on a per-pupil basis, declining enrollment directly impacts the amount of money schools receive to fund their buildings, staffing, and programming (Council et al., 2025).

END OF EMERGENCY FUNDING

The end of COVID-era emergency relief funds for education also heightens the impact of declining student enrollment. According to a 2023 report by the National Association for Music Education, when Congress approved $193.2 billion for the Elementary and Secondary Education Relief (ESSER) fund in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were able to use those funds to support all aspects of a well-rounded education—including arts programs. Now that relief funding has ended, schools are experiencing budget gaps. Furthermore, according to a recent webinar from Georgetown University’s Edunomics Lab, the ESSER fund allowed for additional school hiring in various positions, increasing the amount spent on payroll. As this emergency funding ends, school districts are faced with unfavorable decisions, weighing the choice of closing smaller schools amid declining enrollment or shouldering budget cuts by other means—including “tradeoffs” such as cuts to electives, athletics, or school specialists (Edunomics Lab, 2025).

NEA FUNDING CUTS

Compounding these factors, the recent shift in political power after the 2024 election has led to changing budgetary priorities in the federal

government. In July 2025, the House Appropriations Subcommittee proposed a $75 million cut to the National Endowment of the Arts, which equates to a 35% budget cut from the previous year (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, 2025). This proposed cut holds the potential to impact educational theatre programs, as the NEA's arts education program provides pivotal funding for school and community arts programs (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.).

UNEVEN ACCESS TO THEATRE EDUCATION

These shifting dynamics in U.S. public schools come at a time when curricular theatre programs have already been considered expendable in some school districts for decades. In 2012, the National Center for Education Statistics found that the percentage of elementary schools that offered theatre classes dropped from 20% in the 1999-2000 school year to only 4% in 2009-2010. Secondary schools experienced a 3% drop in the same 10-year period. (Parsed et al., 2012). Today, although curricular theatre programs exist in 69% of public high schools, access does not extend to all schools and all grade levels (Educational Theatre Association, 2024). In its 2024 State of Theatre Education Report, the Educational Theatre Association states that although "the Every Student Succeeds Act mandates arts as part of a well-rounded education … only 35% of schools offer curricular theatre," and they subsequently issued a formal recommendation asking school districts to expand access to theatre classes during the school day (Educational Theatre Association, 2024, p. 11). This recommendation highlights that theatre education opportunities continue to be unevenly accessible across the educational landscape.

AN UNLIKELY SANCTUARY

But even as U.S. schools experience this time of precarity, some students are finding opportunities to engage with the arts in unlikely places—U.S. evangelical churches. These churches provide arts training through spectacle-laden productions, youth drama teams, and church-based performing arts academies, sometimes in state-of-the-art auditoriums filled with the latest theatrical technology. But why might

evangelical churches be considered an unlikely haven for theatre education? First, a long-standing historical chasm has often existed between the worlds of Christianity and theatre. And when Christians do engage in the performing arts, these faith-based performances and films are often derided as subpar, even by those within the evangelical Christian community. For example, as early as 1949, George Eastman (1950), an advocate of the transformational potential of church drama, delivered a speech that was later published in the *Educational Theatre Journal.* In his address, Eastman said:

> Anyone familiar with the use of drama in churches today knows that much of it is still on the level of mediocrity and that its religious effectiveness suffers accordingly. The reason for this mediocrity lies in poor selection of plays, inadequate discipline of directors and players, wretched equipment, low standards of dramatic art, and confused thinking about the purpose of drama in the church. (p. 123)

This reputation has frequently persisted into the 21st century, sometimes attributed to the perceived utilitarian or moralizing nature of some Christian theatrical work.[3]

In addition, the conservatism often attributed to U.S. evangelicals can seem at odds with the theatrical world. For example, some prominent U.S. evangelical leaders espouse the same conservative political ideology that embraces cuts to public arts funding. But many of the students who engage in these church-based arts programs are also enrolled in embattled public schools. By working to understand the divide between secular and faith-based theatre for youth, arts educators can gain a broader perspective of the way some young people are engaging in theatre during these turbulent times, as well as the potential implications of the way these young artists conceptualize the performing arts.

This essay originated as a larger dissertation project called “Mini-Actors, Mega-Stages: Examining the Use of Theatre Among Children and Youth in U.S. Evangelical Megachurches” (Lahey, 2019). Through

[3] For examples of 21st century discussion regarding the reputation of Christian theatre and film productions, see Celia Wren’s (2000) “Pilgrims’ Progress” in *American Theatre* magazine and Emily’s Brown’s (2025) “The Christian Film Boom is Finally Here” in *Relevant* magazine.

this study, I explored several key questions:

1. In what specific ways are twenty-first century churches employing theatre in their ministry to children and teenagers?
2. How do churches aim to shape the burgeoning faith of young churchgoers through these performances?
3. Conversely, in what theoretical ways might these early evangelical performance experiences shape the way a child views the purpose and conventions of theatre?
4. How are church-based youth theatre programs extending beyond the church walls into schools and other public spaces?
5. What role might these church-based arts entities play in the future of the arts and arts education?

I began my research by visiting church-based theatrical performances for or by young people, including large-scale theatrical spectacles, youth drama teams, and performing arts academies created by some of the largest congregations in the U.S. Through these observations, I documented and analyzed the various ways theatre serves as a ministry tool within these church settings, empowering young people in a form of Theatre for Change while also equipping them with the tools of an artist. I argue that these formative church-based theatrical experiences for youth are valuable for arts educators to recognize, especially in these unsettled times, because these theatrical entry points may hold important implications about the way some youth come to understand the nature, purposes, and scope of the performing arts.

SPECTACULAR SPIRITUALITY: WHEN BROADWAY GLITZ GOES TO CHURCH

I still remember the awestruck feeling I experienced the first time I walked into Prestonwood Baptist Church in the Dallas suburb of Plano, Texas. It was December 10, 2016, and I was ready to experience my first taste of *The Gift of Christmas,* the church's annual holiday production. The building had many of the hallmarks of a traditional church—a large belltower with chimes that welcomed people into the space and long pews stretching from wall to wall in the large auditorium. But once a red-jacketed usher led me to my seat, all

comparisons with a traditional church service ended.

Leading up to both the 2016 version of *The Gift of Christmas* that I attended, as well as the upcoming 2025 iteration, the production's website claimed that audiences will experience a performance complete with "elaborate staging and lighting, state-of-the-art, high resolution technology with a massive LED screen, live 50-piece orchestra and nearly 1,000 member cast and choir, brilliant musical scoring [and] flying angels, live animals, the Living Nativity and much more!" This experience began immediately upon entering the performance space. The stage featured 16 floor-to-ceiling projection panels prominently announcing the production's title. The performance I attended unfolded in three acts. The first act featured a secular theme; highlights included Rockette-style dancers, an army of soldiers rappelling from the ceiling, live horses prancing across the stage, snow falling from above, and Santa flying over the heads of the audience in his sleigh. From a theatre technology standpoint, the first act felt on par with some professional Broadway productions in a way that almost made me forget I was in church.

It was also within this first act that children became a central facet of the show. According to a profile in *Church Production* magazine, the million-dollar production involved approximately 600 children in multiple choirs (CP Staff, 2014). In "Christmas on the Polar Express," many of the children arrived from the house, singing and dancing in the aisles dressed like giant cups of hot chocolate. The song "When Christmas Comes to Town" from *The Polar Express* featured a trio of children. It served as a unique moment in the show because the three children were alone in front of the large projection screens, instead of appearing on the full stage backed by the adult choir like they had in the production's previous musical numbers. This pared-down moment and sweet, nostalgic song allowed for a brief tonal shift in the arc of the show. That break came to an end with the finale of the kids' section of the performance. The song "Rockin' on Top of the World" included Santa playing guitar with a small group of children in a scene that felt reminiscent of the Broadway show *School of Rock.*

The performance segues into a more worshipful mode in Act II, guided by a narrator in a series of professionally produced video segments. Entitled "The Worship of Christmas," this section served as a transitional phase between the secular first act and the live nativity of the final act. In this section, a narrator projected on the giant screens

explained not just the Christmas story itself, but its significance to the world (and the audience). After an energetic version of "The Little Drummer Boy" complete with glowing drummers suspended with their instruments above the heads of the audience, this section took a worshipful turn, featuring a trio of men singing "O Holy Night/Silent Night." Overall, this segment offered an introduction to the meaning and spiritual implications of the first Christmas for Christian believers.

The final act serves as the pièce de résistance of the performance, featuring the "Living Nativity" with elaborate costumes, flying angels, and a menagerie of live animals. A different narrator provided the gospel account of the Christmas story as actors representing the shepherds walked across the stage with their live sheep, and three wise men came one-by-one through the house, accompanied by a host of live animals, including camels and zebras. During the scene with the birth of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus were placed upstage center at an elevated level. At this point, scores of people in biblical-era robes began walking through the aisles of the church as they made their way toward the baby, ultimately creating one of the most beautiful stage pictures in the show.

So how are these high-flying, spectacle-laden theatrical feats with over 1,000 performers even possible in a church space? Although some churches have long incorporated theatrical elements within the service, the theatrical bent within Protestant Evangelicalism escalated during the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of the megachurch during the church growth movement in the United States.[4] According to Jeanne Halgren Kilde (2002) in her book *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*, one trademark of these megachurch spaces is the inclusion of theatrical elements, incorporating large video screens, moveable scenery, props, projections, and theatrical lighting to enhance elements of the service. In some megachurches, leaders strive to create "seeker sensitive" environments by creating an atmosphere that would be less intimidating and more familiar to people who had never been to church, as these services often resembled rock

[4] According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, citing sociologist Scott Thumma, a megachurch is defined as "as a congregation with at least 2,000 people attending each weekend. These churches tend to have a charismatic senior minister and an active array of social and outreach ministries seven days a week." (*Fast Facts about American Religion,* 2024*).*

concerts and other popular performance spaces, as detailed in books like Kimon Howland Sargeant's *Seeker Churches* and Thumma and Travis's *Beyond Megachurch Myths*. Because many megachurches already used advanced theatrical technology in worship services on a regular basis, they already have the basic groundwork in place for staging these large-scale spectacles.

As a person interested in Theatre for Young Audiences, I considered the show from the perspective of the youngest on-stage participants and audience members. This viewpoint provides a unique lens from which to reflect on the performance, particularly in terms of its potential impact on young performers' horizon of expectations, access to performance, and views on the purposes of theatre. From a performance perspective, young actors who participate in these productions perform on stages far larger than the stage at the average public school with far greater technical capability. If these Christmas pageants serve as a child's first introduction to theatrical performance, how does this experience impact their horizon of expectations of theatre in typical school venues? Does singing and acting in a megachurch show generate excitement about finding additional performance opportunities and attending more productions, thereby benefiting local school programs by introducing students to theatrical arts? Or does the experience make participating in other shows—without the pyrotechnics and flying soldiers—somehow pale in comparison?

From an audience perspective, since the show was billed as holiday family entertainment, many children attended the performance as audience members. I suggest these shows could provide a valuable entry point to creating a long-term relationship with theatre for these young attendees. During the 2019 Theatre Communications Group National Conference in Miami, Lindsey Buller Maliekel, director of education/public engagement at New York City's New Victory Theatre, revealed preliminary results from a not-yet-published five-year study about the impact of theatre experiences on young people. The research provides quantitative data showing that theatre attendance helps students with processing and expressing emotion, empathizing with others, and maintaining an optimistic outlook on life (Considine & Halpern, 2019). According to conference attendee and *American Theatre* columnist Emma Halpern, the study revealed "if you haven't seen a show by the time you turn 8, your interest in theatre, or your

belief that theatre could be 'for you,' starts to go down, and that can affect whether or not you'll ever want to go to the theatre as an adult" (Considine & Halpern, 2019). I argue that church performances geared toward young audiences, often overlooked by theatre researchers, can serve as that needed early entry point to engage students in the arts.

But the most significant impact these performances may have on the next generation of theatre-makers lies in the way they encourage students to think about the purpose of performance. Despite the special effects and large production budgets, the primary goal of these performances is not entertainment, but eternity. In many respects, leaders at churches like Prestonwood demonstrate a belief in the transformative power of theatre that rivals that of some theatre practitioners. The production leaders and cast members of these church-based shows deeply believe in the power of their performance to actually "do" something—in this case, to spark genuine life change in the hearts of audience members (with the prompting and involvement of the Holy Spirit).

I suggest these performances can create the type of utopian performative discussed by Jill Dolan, albeit from an opposing ideological perspective. In *Utopia in Performance*, Dolan (2005) explains that "utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotional voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (p. 5). Specifically, Dolan examines progressive-oriented work with the hope that "seeing, through performance, more effective models of more radical democracy might reinvigorate a dissipated Left" (p. 21). But church-based productions might perform a similar function for evangelicals.

Citing the work of J.L. Austin, which details the way performative acts have the power to actually "do" something, Dolan states that "utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable the affective vision of how the world might be better" (p. 6). A recurring feature of the Christmas performances I visited involved some version of an evangelical "altar call" or "invitation" at the end. Since most evangelical denominations place emphasis on a definitive conversion experience, the traditional "altar call" is an invitation for unconverted congregants to formally convert to the Christian faith and receive the Holy Spirit into

their lives, which—from the evangelical perspective—would enable spectators to carry the feelings of peace, hope, and Christian community they experienced within the performance into their everyday lives. In this way, "the experience of performance, the pleasure of the utopian performative, even if it doesn't change the world, certainly changes the people who feel it" (Dolan, 2005, p. 19). This was evident in the Prestonwood performance I attended, for example, when numerous people walked down the aisle at the end of the show, expressing a desire for a life-changing conversion experience. When young people are active on-stage participants in these productions, they witness these individuals coming down an aisle in direct response to the performance in which they played a direct role. In doing so, they may leave the production not only entertained, but also understanding the potential power of performance to make an impact on people in their world.

"DISCOVER, DEVELOP, DEPLOY:" ASSEMBLIES OF GOD YOUTH DRAMA TEAMS

Like *The Gift of Christmas* at Prestonwood Baptist Church, the youth drama teams that participate in the Assemblies of God performing arts program demonstrate a strong belief in theatre's innate potential to generate life change. But unlike the multi-generational involvement in the megachurch performances, the participants in the National Fine Arts Festival are all under the age of 18.

The Assemblies of God denomination originated toward the beginning of the Pentecostal movement in the early 20th century, making it a relatively new denomination in the historical scope of Christianity (Senapatiratne, 2011). For more than 60 years, Assemblies of God Youth Ministries has sponsored the Fine Arts Festival for the purpose of developing the ministry gifts of young people in the church. Originally known as "Teen Talent," the first competition featured only four categories—vocal solo, vocal ensemble, instrumental solo, and instrumental ensemble (Segrist, 2013). Today, over 65,000 students showcase their creative talents each year through participation in 80+ categories broken into seven broad divisions: Art, Communication, Dance, Drama, Instrumental, Vocal, and Writing (Hedlun, 2022). Some Fine Arts festival alumni have gone on to pursue careers in the arts, including Christian recording artists

and Grammy nominees Francesca Battestelli, Natalie Grant, and Matthew West, as well as the pop group The Jonas Brothers (Segrest, 2013).

The motto of the Fine Arts Festival is “Discover. Develop. Deploy.” In a letter featured in the opening pages of the 2025 National Fine Arts Festival Rulebook, Coordinator Ashton Peters states that the festival’s mission is “to be a movement of student artists who are more in love with Jesus, more creative, more innovative, and committed to spreading the gospel through any means necessary.” The program provides opportunities for students to discover their God-given talent, develop their gifts through participation in church-based arts activities, and deploy their gifts in ministry to others in their communities and around the world. Further emphasizing the goal of using the arts to serve and impact others, the Fine Arts Festival published a guide called “99 Ways to Deploy.” Inside, the guide provides students with ideas for using their creative talents outside of the competitive festival arena, with suggestions ranging from performing at children’s hospitals to entering student films they create for the Fine Arts Festival into local community film festivals (Assemblies of God Youth Ministries, n.d.-a). In this way, church leaders in the Assemblies of God denomination reinforce the idea that creative arts, including theatre, exist not only as a form of entertainment but also as a way to serve and evangelize within their communities.

Despite its outward mission, there is also a competitive element to the Assemblies of God Fine Arts program through the annual Fine Arts Festival. In many ways, the structure of the festival strongly resembles its secular counterparts, such as EdTA’s International Thespian Festival. Most Fine Arts Festival participants start at the district level, where they enter specific event categories, such as musical theatre ensemble or drama solo. According to page 12 of the official 2025 Fine Arts Rulebook, presentations are scored by evaluators, and based on the number of accumulated points, participants are given a rating: Fair (Up to 25 points), Good (26-30 points), Excellent (31-35 points), or Superior (36-40 points). Presentations receiving a “Superior with Invitation” at the district level can advance to the National Fine Art Festival, which is hosted by a different city each year in late summer. Through the program, students have the potential to earn more than just a rating; they are also eligible for national awards and college scholarships from participating Assemblies of God colleges,

universities, and church programs across the country (Assemblies of God Youth Ministries, 2025, pp. 12-15).

While many festival categories, such as Drama Solo or Drama Ensemble, are also standard events recognized by those familiar with theatre festivals like International Thespians, there are other events that are unique to National Fine Arts. One of the most notable is "Human Video," a theatrical performance form found mainly within the evangelical Christian subculture. A product of the 1980s MTV phenomenon, the origins of human videos are often traced back to Randy Philips, a "fine arts fanatic" who used the music video craze to create a new form of performance (Chace, 2011). Human video performances often combine elements of mime, drama, dance, and lip sync to tell a story set to music.

I first experienced this event at the April 2018 Peninsular Florida Fine Arts Festival held at Faith Assembly of God, a megachurch in Orlando, Florida. While many festival events took place in smaller classroom spaces around the church building, Friday morning's Human Video Large Ensemble event took place in the middle of the church atrium—a large open area of the three-story building complete with a baptistry and stage area in the center. Chairs were set up for the audience (I estimated around 200). Audience members would come and go between group performances, but the area stayed relatively full throughout the day. In addition, the atrium area functioned like the center court of a large shopping mall, open to the building's multiple levels so that people could watch the action from the balconies above.

"Believer," a human video presented by Glad Tidings Assembly of God, provided my introduction to the event. The performance, like most of the human videos I watched throughout the day, combined the traditional elements of mime, dance, and lip sync (with a few cheerleading-style lifts added in). Many of the performances I observed featured careful audio splicing of songs, sermons, or news clips to present an evangelical message. Some common themes quickly emerged as I watched multiple groups perform. Some human videos retold Biblical narratives like the Genesis account of Adam and Eve or the Gospel story of Jesus's birth. One of the most recurring scenes featured dramatic battles between good and evil with students taking on the roles of Jesus and demonic forces. In most human videos, students used creative lifts to portray Jesus's crucifixion and victory over evil—whether that be victory over literal demons or human sin.

But many other human videos tackled social issues in “ripped from the headlines” fashion. One human video ensemble known as “Essence,” for example, spliced multiple audio clips into their musical selection that spoke of school shootings, ISIS, and same sex marriage, including a speech from former President Barack Obama. It ended with a sermon clip while the group continued their interpretive dance and aerial lifts. Observing from a theatre education perspective, I found that these human video performances seem to align with the curricular goals set out in the National Core Arts Standards in Theatre (2014) developed by members of the Educational Theatre Association and American Alliance for Theatre and Education, particularly in the artistic process of “Connecting.” For example, when middle and high school students create performances about contemporary social issues that are significant to them, they actively “use different forms of drama/theatre work to examine contemporary social, cultural, or global issues” (Standard TH:Cn11.1.8.a) or “choose and interpret a drama/theatre work to reflect or question personal beliefs” (High School Accomplished Standard TH:Cn10.1.II.a.). In this way, even students who are not enrolled in curricular theatre programs have the opportunity to develop the key theatre competencies set out by the creators of the national standards.

But I also suggest the process of creating human videos, such as the one portrayed by “Essence,” provides an intriguing, designated space where issues of politics, culture, and faith can collide for young evangelicals. Many Fine Arts participants likely find themselves existing in a liminal space between the conservative Christian faith taught at church and their generation’s increasingly liberal beliefs. The Barna Group (2018) published the results of a 2016-2017 study of Generation Z that pointed to a huge discrepancy between engaged Christian teens and their non-religious peers, especially on moral issues. Compared to teens of no faith affiliation, engaged teens were four times more likely to think lying is wrong (77% vs 20%), and over fifteen times more likely to think sex before marriage and homosexuality are morally wrong (76% vs 5% and 77% vs 4%, respectively). Politically, young conservatives also can find themselves isolated from their Republican elders; in 2018, less than 60% of Republican-leading Gen Zers approved of Donald Trump in the survey, compared to 85% of Baby Boomer and 90% of Silent Generation Republicans. This is largely attributed to shifting generational attitudes

on factors like social issues and ideal levels of government involvement in society (Parker et al., 2019). By splicing together clips from both mainstream media and evangelical sermons, the soundtrack of some human videos becomes an intense dialogue between the two voices regularly encountered by students both inside and outside of the church walls.

On one hand, some might believe that human videos and similar evangelical performances merely propagate conservative views within the Church in a didactic, uncritical way. Yet, I argue the human video creative process holds the potential to be a valuable space to discuss critical social issues in an evangelical setting, much like the way that sociologist Sally Gallagher (2007) argues some mainline denominations use youth programs to encourage teens to "construct their own opinions and beliefs" (p. 178). Assemblies of God youth leaders acknowledge this potential in one of the festival guides, noting that Fine Arts should be a place where students "wrestle" with questions regarding the way their faith interacts with culture (Assemblies of God Youth Ministries, n.d.-b). Theoretically, the creative process of putting together the human video could serve as a viable, valuable avenue for students to ask valid questions and search for answers as they attempt to navigate the tension between their conservative faith and liberal culture.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE SANCTUARY AND THE STAGE

Despite the perceived dichotomy between the theatre world and the evangelical church, there are examples of partnerships between the two that hold promise for making arts education more accessible for students. Some schools lacking adequate on-site performance spaces are partnering with churches to provide a venue for school productions, making use of the theatrical technology found in many church worship spaces. In addition, the inclusion of the arts in church services and special events, like large-scale Christmas spectacles, often means a demand for performing arts training. In response, some churches are using their campuses as performing arts training centers for youth, employing skilled artists to teach students and often preparing these emerging artists for opportunities to perform for the congregation. While often music-centered, some church-based performing arts

academies have created spaces for theatre training as well.

Significantly, these church-based performing arts academies often offer music, dance, and theatre classes at a rate that makes the training more financially accessible to students who might not be able to afford classes in a traditional community theatre setting. These opportunities often offer online registration that is open to all students—both church members and the unchurched community. Some other faith-based training centers are reaching out into the community and forming partnerships with local schools, especially schools that lack any formal theatre education programming. For example, Christian Youth Theatre (CYT), based in San Diego, California, is one of the largest after-school theatre programs in the U.S. with 22 licensed branches in cities across the country (CYT Branches, n.d.). The organization offers a "CYT@School" program, which provides afterschool theatre opportunities and in-school artist residencies, partly in response to school budget cuts for the arts (CYT@School, n,d,).

These partnerships between secular and religious arts organizations, as well as the proliferation of theatrical performance opportunities for youth within Christian churches, make this an area filled with potential questions for further research by theatre educators and scholars. For example, how might a child's participation in church-based productions impact their later involvement in school-based theatre programs, either positively or negatively? How might early faith-based theatrical experiences shape children's likelihood to engage in the greater theatre community as an artist or audience member? How do performances in state-of-the-art church auditorium spaces influence students' expectations about what theatre looks like, as well as its purposes in the world? These are just a few of the questions that invite further inquiry into the impact of student involvement in faith-based performance.

And there is an important postscript: I completed this initial study at the end of 2019—just before the COVID-19 pandemic shook just about every aspect of our daily lives. As I have begun revisiting some of the performances and programs I initially studied, some—like *The Gift of Christmas* at Prestonwood Baptist Church, the Assemblies of God Fine Arts Festival, and Christian Youth Theatre—have continued their strong theatrical programming post-COVID. Yet other arts education programs and performances I initially visited, like the $1.3

million dollar production at First Baptist, Fort Lauderdale featured on ABC News—the production that was such a mainstay that they designed their sanctuary to accommodate the production—is no longer a part of the yearly calendar. This invites the question: Were these changes in arts programming made as a direct result of COVID, or are there other factors causing a shift in megachurch culture resulting in the end of these long-standing programs?

Still, I argue the enduring post-pandemic presence of faith-based theatre for children and teens within some U.S. evangelical churches warrants the attention of theatre educators and scholars because of the potential it holds to shape the experiences and expectations of students in our arts classrooms. In this time of inconsistent access to theatre education in public schools, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, the church may serve as the first point-of-contact many young people have with the performing arts, potentially functioning as an untraditional means of creating a new generation of artists and audience members. Because these performances are not solely intended as entertainment, but as a catalyst for evangelism and life change, they can also shape the way young Christian artists understand the purpose and potential of theatre. By examining theatre opportunities provided in these sacred spaces, theatre educators and scholars can generate a deeper knowledge of the way some members of the next generation understand the nature and scope of theatrical performance, making these faith-based performances worthy of consideration by theatre scholars and educators who could be welcoming these students into our classrooms and professional stages in the years to come.

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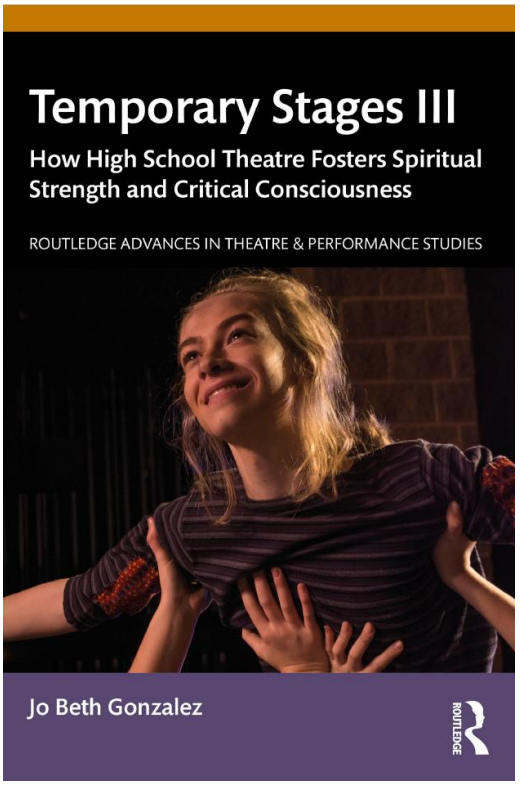
Book Review: *Temporary Stages III: How High School Theatre Fosters Spiritual Strength and Critical Consciousness* by Jo Beth Gonzalez



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LAUREN GORELOV

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Jo Beth Gonzalez's *Temporary Stages III* arrives as both a continuation and an expansion of the inquiries that have defined her decades-long career as a thoughtful and reflective voice in secondary theatre education. In this third volume, Gonzalez deepens her exploration of the high school drama classroom as a site where artistry, ethics, and community intersect. Drawing from nearly four decades of teaching, she situates theatre pedagogy within what she names a "critical spiritual framework" that unites students' inner development with their growing awareness of social structures and inequities. The result is a book that is practical, theoretical, and deeply human.

From the opening pages, Gonzalez reaffirms that "teaching theatre is much more than a job" (p. 2). For her, it is a vocation grounded in artistic integrity, ethical purpose, and sustained reflection. What distinguishes *Temporary Stages III* from its predecessors is its explicit intertwining of spirituality and critical consciousness as mutually reinforcing foundations of practice. Gonzalez begins with a guiding question: "What does it mean to lead a critically and spiritually conscious theatre education program?" (p. 2). She argues that when adolescents create theatre, they engage not only their imaginations but also their moral and spiritual centers.

Drawing rich parallels between religion, spirituality, and drama, Gonzalez observes that each invites participants to wrestle with existential questions such as "Why am I here?" This connection feels especially resonant to me, as I, too, understand drama education as a space that centers purposeful engagement. Like religious or spiritual practice, drama offers students a grounding force at a time when their lives may feel uncertain or fragmented. Gonzalez defines spirituality broadly, not as formal religion but as the human impulse toward connection and meaning-making. Critical consciousness, meanwhile,

emerges through recognizing privilege, power, and structural inequity. When these two energies meet, Gonzalez suggests, theatre education becomes transformative in its fullest sense, creating learning environments where students can both imagine and enact more just, connected ways of being.

The book is organized into three parts. In the first section, *Ways Spirituality Manifests in a High School Theatre Program*, Gonzalez begins autobiographically, tracing her own upbringing in a church community, and her later experiences leading a drama team at Peace Lutheran Church. Her reflections on guiding teens to reinterpret biblical parables through devised performance are striking. What could have been a conventional Sunday-school exercise instead becomes a microcosm of critical pedagogy: young people wrestling with temptation, privilege, forgiveness, and community through theatrical metaphor. Gonzalez uses this faith-based work not to promote doctrine, but to illuminate how the processes of questioning, empathizing, and creating meaning mirror the best of secular drama pedagogy. She also dedicates several pages to understanding how spiritual theatre pedagogy can guide teachers through specific examples of grief, trauma, and the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to theatre work. As a theatre educator, I found the section about using the theatre space as a form of self-actualization for students particularly resonant; it affirmed my belief that the rehearsal room can indeed be a sanctuary for inquiry and connection, and as Gonzales puts it, “strengthens the inner core” (p. 37).

Section II, *Ways Critical Consciousness Manifests in a High School Theatre Program*, opens with a compelling assertion: “Leading a critical-conscious pedagogy must begin with a critically oriented teacher” (p. 107). Gonzalez models this stance through sustained self-interrogation, particularly around how her identity as a white, cisgender, able-bodied, highly educated, and economically stable woman shapes her ability to connect with students whose lived experiences differ markedly from her own. She frames this not as a barrier but as an ethical obligation to learn from her students, to build genuine relationships, and, importantly, to “model for her dominant culture students how to do the same” (p. 107).

Throughout this section, Gonzalez gathers and amplifies the voices of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ educators, and students who negotiate layered identities of race, gender, sexuality, and faith within the theatre

classroom. These chapters stand among the book's most meaningful contributions to the field. They could be readily assigned in higher-education courses on
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy or incorporated into teacher-preparation programs to illuminate the importance of honoring marginalized student voices. What distinguishes Gonzalez's approach is that she does not speak for these educators; instead, she curates their narratives and invites readers into a polyvocal conversation. Through these conversations, she exposes both the systemic barriers that persist in educational theatre and the strategies teachers employ to cultivate inclusivity. Her discussion of casting dilemmas surrounding *The Crucible's* Tituba, for example, offers a nuanced look at representation and interpretation in school productions. Gonzalez's candor in analyzing her own choices as a white educator working with students of color models the kind of reflective vulnerability that true critical practice requires.

The book's third section, *The Reciprocal Nature of Spiritual Strength and Critical Consciousness*, centers on Gonzalez's long-term project, *Free to Fly*, a collaboratively devised one-act play that addresses the sex trafficking of minors. Here, Gonzalez's theory meets praxis most vividly. Across eight years, she and her students researched, devised, and performed material that demanded both artistic rigor and profound empathy. The project exemplifies her conviction that theatre can serve as a vessel for ethical awareness as students confront injustice not abstractly, but through embodied storytelling. She states:

> Creating and performing socially conscious theatre as a teenager can lead teens to act on behalf of social change later in life. This is because the act of exploring injustice is intricately linked to the enhancement of one's spirit. When recognizing oppressive situations through theatre, a teen can feel compassion, frustration, disgust, resolve, and helpfulness along with an array of other emotions that arise when understanding conditions of powerless. (p. 184)

Gonzalez documents how devising *Free to Fly* prompted adolescents to grapple with despair, compassion, and agency, and how the process itself became a vehicle for spiritual growth. Her analysis of breath and

embodiment in the final chapter elegantly links the physiological act of respiration to the sustaining "breath" of social consciousness.

Throughout *Temporary Stages III*, Gonzalez writes with a scholar-practitioner's precision and a teacher's heart. Her language is scholarly yet personal, drawing on theorists such as Paulo Freire, Kevin Kumashiro, and Brené Brown without ever losing sight of the classroom realities from which her insights emerge. She extends the discourse of critical pedagogy by insisting that spirituality, often marginalized in academic conversations, is not antithetical to critical thought but essential to it.

As a reader and theatre educator, I was especially moved by Gonzalez's willingness to interrogate her own assumptions. She acknowledges moments of doubt, failure, and moral complexity, including a powerful passage in which she questions her actions during an active-shooter drill. These confessions remind us that teaching is itself a spiritual practice, one defined by continual self-examination. In this way, *Temporary Stages III* stands as both a pedagogical text and a memoir of professional conscience.

For those of us who teach theatre in schools, Gonzalez's work offers both guidance and challenge. She asks us to consider how our classrooms might become spaces where students not only learn to act, design, or direct, but also learn to connect, to reflect, and to act justly. She invites us to expand our understanding of learning outcomes to include compassion, courage, and grace. And even if you don't identify as religious, she reminds us that the theatre classroom, with its rituals of collaboration and its cycles of failure and renewal, may be one of the few remaining spaces in education where spiritual and critical awakening can occur side by side.

In the current moment when teachers and students alike confront fatigue, polarization, and fear, *Temporary Stages III* feels both timely and necessary. Gonzalez's vision of "critical-spiritual pedagogy" reframes theatre education as a practice of wholeness: art-making that attends to body, mind, and spirit, and activism that begins with empathy. This book extends Gonzalez's lifelong inquiry into what it means to teach, while offering a profound argument for why the work of high-school theatre still matters. I finished the book renewed in my conviction that theatre teaches us not only the craft of performance, but the very practice of how to be human.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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