

Educating Through Dialogue, Performance and Service in
A Multicultural Theatre Seminar

Jane Alexander, a former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, noted that “Theatre is a clear window into the mind, the soul, the heart of humankind – the study of which should be the aim of higher education. Theatre brings life to learning.” In their sophomore multicultural theatre seminar, Dominican students were invited to probe the mind, the soul, the heart of African-American, Asian-American, and Latino cultures. The clear window of theatre propelled their vital engagement with contemporary artists of color. Using the powerful tools of dialogue, improvisation and service learning, students wrestled with the complex issues and conflicts of both these artists and their cultures, complex issues such as:

1. The search for personal identity and purpose
2. The nature and causes of prejudice and discrimination
3. The impact of racial and homophobic violence
4. The creation of viable communities
5. The hunger for artistic expression.

To impart academic knowledge and cultivate understanding, however, are not enough to achieve the university mission of bringing about a just and compassionate world. Teachers and students must be moved, motivated, changed. Theatre does this. It brings life to learning, activating the emotions, engaging the heart, and prodding the will. As an illustration, a seminar student responded passionately to the injustices that she found in Cherrie Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints* (1988), a play depicting the tragic consequences of pesticide poisoning on farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley; and in Moises Kaufman’s

The Laramie Project (1998), which chronicles the reaction of over 200 Laramie, Wyoming residents following the savage beating and death of Matthew Shepard, a gay university student. The seminar student wrote:

The victims of injustice are ignored. The chain of inequality is perpetuated. How can we address this? People dying of disease, people being persecuted, overworked underfed, underpaid – how can we correct this disdain for human life?

By providing resistance to the system as Cerezita and Juan did in *Heroes and Saints* , as the Tectonic Theatre Group did in Laramie – as I and my fellow classmates did in our service learning. Together, we are saying, “NO! This will NOT do!” ...If I have learned anything from this seminar, I have learned that **I** am the “first bridge outward” into community. **I** am the link to battling inequality. It’s up to me, and those around me, to recognize the causes and effects of injustice, and to stop the vicious cycle in its tracks.

In this paper, I would like to examine the educational tools of dialogue, performance and service which sparked students’ enthusiasm and actuated their strong commitment to social responsibility. The first of these tools is dialogue. An anonymous writer once observed, “Out of dialogue comes understanding. When you understand more, you’re more sensitive. When you’re more sensitive, you’re more compassionate. When you’re more compassionate you’re more prepared to see the other side.” At Dominican University, the Liberal Arts and Sciences Seminars in the sophomore year focus on “Diversity, Culture and Community.” And these three concepts are explored by

applying three central questions to material covered in each seminar. These are the questions:

1. How does group membership affect one's identity?
2. What are the causes and effects of inequality between and within groups?
3. What does it mean to live in a diverse community?

Student seminar dialogue revolved around these guiding questions. And the result of those discussions aimed to fulfill one of the sophomore seminar objectives – to enable students to “analyze complex cultural or social phenomena from multiple perspectives.” Let me give you some examples from two of the cultural units covered in this course.

In the first unit on African-American theatre, we began with Martin Luther King's speech “Love, Law and Civil Disobedience” as a foundation for OyamO's play *I Am a Man*, a dramatization of the 1968 black sanitation workers' strike in Memphis. The play not only incorporates King's philosophy of nonviolence, but also contains references to several of his other major speeches. Because of the complex power struggle between the mayor of Memphis and the International AFSCME union, as well as leadership conflict within the union itself, OyamO introduced the famous “Drum Major Instinct” speech where King presents Christ as the model of leadership. “And the great issue of life is to harness the drum major instinct,” the instinct to be first, the instinct to give reign to pride and arrogance. Following Christ's example, “recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant....it means that everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve.” King went on to say that Jesus did not cling to divine or royal prerogatives, He simply “went about serving.”

In studying OyamO's play in conjunction with King's speeches, students were asked

to discuss the question “What are the causes and effects of inequality between and within groups? As only a partial example of their far-ranging dialogue, I will enumerate student conclusions in terms of the effects of inequality on Martin Luther King, Jr. himself.

Inequality in the treatment of African Americans caused King to act in the following ways:

1. He searched for means to resist and change inequality based on a Christian ethic.
2. He preached *Agape*: love your enemies, but not the evil that they do.
3. He created a movement of non-violent, yet active resistance.
4. He upheld a philosophy of external and internal non-injury in seeking civil rights.
5. He advocated a willingness to suffer because suffering could appeal to the potential good in others and could bring about a positive change of heart.
6. He preached civil disobedience against unjust laws.
7. He abandoned “a negative peace” and the “myth of time” as answers to resolving racial problems.
8. He struggled against “tokenism.”
9. He encouraged his people to have a deep faith and hope in the future, believing that “no lie can live forever,” the lie that one race is superior to another.

Students cited another shattering example of the effects of inequality found on the very first page of *I Am a Man*. Because of Jim Crow laws, black sanitation workers could not share the same facilities with whites. Consequently, two black workers who had taken shelter in the compactor of an old garbage truck, were horrified when the

machinery – activated by lightning – sputtered into motion. During the raging thunderstorm, no one could hear them screaming for help as they were “slowly crushed to death.”

Moving further into the play, the class encountered the powerful final speech that King gave in Memphis the night before he was assassinated. In addition to reading and discussing the play, students also saw an exceptional documentary, *At the River I Stand*, which captured the multiple perspectives on the strike, and the tragic role that King played in the city’s upheaval. Seeing and hearing King speak at that momentous time in American history, brought shock and tears to many in the class. This is what King said:

Well I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to that mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

After uttering that last triumphant sentence, King tottered and fell backward on the podium into the arms of his friends. One of the old sanitation workers, years later, was asked how he had felt listening to King that night. He replied, “It was like hearing

Jesus.”

Well grounded in the facts of the Memphis battle, students came to the documentary prepared to respond – mind, heart and soul. One student remarked, “many of the images from the film will stay burned in my consciousness.” Another commented on King’s rhetorical power to “reach and galvanize so many disparate people.” Others said they had never heard King speak, and now they understood why his leadership had been so charismatic. Most felt a “deep sadness” at the loss of a great leader who had foreseen his own untimely death. Perhaps most compelling for the class was the dramatic irony of his words, “I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man” – and the next day he was brutally murdered.

“What does it mean to live in a diverse community?” And “how does group membership affect one’s identity?” The solo performance piece *Secrets of the Samurai Centerfielder* (1989) by Dan Kwong, opened another window, allowing students to enter the unfamiliar world of a Chinese-Japanese-American boy in a racist environment. Kwong admits that not only did he “know how stupid white racism was...[he] was in a good position to see how equally stupid racism was...between fellow victims,” his Chinese- American and Japanese-American peers.

Seminar students saw the eventual disillusionment of a boy who at age six believed he could do anything because he had caught his daddy’s “towering fly ball.” But as he grows older, he finds he doesn’t fit in anywhere. Pearl Harbor had destroyed his Christian grandfather’s “American dream.” “Papa lost everything,” and was sent to a

concentration camp for “highly dangerous enemy aliens.” The boy has painful dreams of “not belonging, not being welcome, something to do with my race.” Introducing his Chinese side, Kwong includes the horrific episode of May 23, 1989, in Tiananmen Square, where tens of thousands of Beijing students would not submit, would not abandon their hunger strike in spite of government threats. In a moment of pride in his Chinese heritage, Kwong feels hope when the Peoples’ Army defies the “hard-liners” saying they “will not shoot the people.” But that hope quickly fades, and the bloody massacre floods the enormous square in front of the “Forbidden City.”

The class strongly identified with Kwong’s description of the protective defenses we build to cover our hurts. For many, this passage was climactic:

I’ve got this crust of despair wrapped around my heart. And it’s made of layers and layers of disappointment and discouragement. From every time I ever tried to stand up and make a difference – and failed....For every time I was ever humiliated for feeling pain. And with no place to go where tears and rage could wash away that pain, the crust grew thicker and harder.

Does *Secrets of the Samurai Centerfielder* end on this depressive note? Surprisingly not. Students felt emotionally recharged, when Kwong did an about-face asking his audience if they wanted a positive ending:

You get to choose for yourself....Did they all die for nothing? Did that crust of despair around your heart grow another layer? ...Did you fall another ten steps deeper into powerlessness? Then, yes – they died for nothing.

But if the Chinese students at any time reminded you of how much hope, courage and power are still alive somewhere in your heart, too – then they’ve done something no tank can crush. No bullets can destroy.

Moving now to the second educational tool, I will examine briefly two facets of performance employed in the seminar. First, students enjoyed both taped and live performances: A DVD of John Leguizamo’s *Mambo Mouth*, and an off-campus production, usually at the Goodman, or Steppenwolf, or the Court Theatre at the University of Chicago. In spring 2007, the seminar attended Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West* at the Court, which dramatized the exodus of freed African Americans who sought land through the 1862 Homestead Act. Second, students engaged in improvisational exercises based on Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. These provided excellent closure for the course, allowing students – on a volunteer basis – to apply creatively what they had learned.

Let’s look at these types of performance more closely. Not unexpectedly, John Leguizamo’s seven macho Latino portraits were among the most popular items on the syllabus. The *New York Law Journal* observed, “As exciting as Mardi Gras and the Fourth of July rolled into one exploding talent...[Leguizamo] is a writer of enormous depth, sensitivity and detail that makes his characters at once familiar and stunningly original.” And the *New York Daily News* commented, “This is savage stuff, but also very funny and exceptionally performed.” In his fiercely unsentimental portraits, Leguizamo admitted that “adversity was his inspiration.” When accused of perpetuating

stereotypes, he quipped, “I’m not going to defend my work because it’s not my job – it’s my mother’s.” Student opinion was divided on whether he had succeeded in empowering the Latin community by making fun of it. However, the class did agree with his belief that you have to be strong in order to laugh at yourself. While watching the characterizations of Loco Louie, Manny the Fanny and Tito Testosterones, students were choking with laughter, proving Leguizamo’s point that “Latinos can be funny and strong,” that they “may be victimized, but they are not victims.”

In following the western road to freedom in 1879, blacks were escaping escalating mob violence in the South. Land was available for an \$18 filing fee, and small groups of single women took their chances in Nicodemus, Kansas, braving “extremely harsh conditions.” In spite of starvation and disease on an open prairie, they persevered. This was the story of *Flyin’ West*.

Students were asked to write a short theatre review of the Court production. One reviewer observed, “There’s free land for all in Nicodemus, Kansas – the first free all-black town out West....a story of three sisters...Minnie, Fannie and Sophie [who] treasure the land they now own themselves.” A second student found a very personal connection to the play:

There was something so wonderful about the harmonies of the different voices...especially during the [sisters’] ritual. It was a symphony then. It was an ode to joy, an expression of freedom....The comment about Sophie’s laughter struck a chord. It was just too free to be let out in the city, where a colored woman’s life wasn’t worth two cents on the dollar. I can’t relate to the hardships

she faced, but I can relate to the freedom she felt. Even living here...[in Chicago] is a struggle sometimes because I'm used to cornfields in every direction.

Regarding Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, students had the opportunity to respond physically to the conflicts in the plays they had read. We used two of Boal's categories – Image Theatre and Forum Theatre. The first deals with the silent creation of images with one's body, images that convey the “lives, feelings, experiences, oppressions of designated persons. Students applied this theatre technique to Cherrie Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*.

Boal explains that “images can be closer to our true feelings” than language can, and “images work across language and cultural barriers.” In this exercise, students were asked to spontaneously produce images that captured the grief, frustration, anger, despair and resolution of the Chicano families who had lost their children as a result of toxic fields and poisoned water. Individual students would then combine their bodies into a new group image for greater visual impact. The play ends with machine-gun fire from a helicopter passing over a funeral procession of another child victim. The people explode with anger, shouting, “Burn the fields! *Asesinos! Asesinos!*” Convulsively, they all rush into the vineyards setting fire to the polluted land. I find it impossible to describe the emotional power of the group image my students created. But I can say that I saw the rage and the desperate intention to stop the senseless waste of life.

Forum Theatre, according to Boal, is “a theatrical game” in which an audience witnesses a conflict, and then is “invited to suggest and enact solutions.” Students applied this technique to Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden*, a harrowing

depiction of the long-term effects of torture and rape on a young woman, Paulina Escobar, and her shocking attempt at revenge. Students were asked to volunteer in dramatizing key passages from the text which highlighted Paulina's problem. We then discussed her circumstances and how we might resolve her conflicts. The following questions preceded the group's enactment of possible solutions: 1. How can those who torture and those who are tortured coexist? 2. How do we forgive those who have hurt us irreparably? 3. Would we change the way Paulina pursued revenge? Is "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" a philosophy any of us agree with?

Ariel Dorfman, a Chilean citizen, lived in exile during the abusive, seventeen year dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. In 1990, when Chile became a fragile democracy, Dorfman saw the dilemma of hundreds of thousands of victims who had survived – some wanted "past terror totally buried," and some "wanted it totally revealed." Out of this ferment came his drama about a single victim grappling with her hidden tragedy, while her victimizer attempts to conceal his criminal past.

Dealing with personal trauma is a very sensitive issue, and students were divided in their response. Some felt strongly that evil should be punished and that Paulina should seek some retribution for the wasted years of her life. Others believed that revenge and unforgiveness only intensify the victim's injury. The most stirring enactment came when two students, assuming the roles of Paulina and her abuser, Dr. Miranda, produced a cascade of shifting emotions. Each character worked through his or her own painful issues. Miranda ended sincerely repenting and asking for forgiveness. Paulina, venting years of pent-up anger and hatred, slowly moved from wanting a violent reprisal to

making peace with herself after confronting her torturer. She could not fully forgive him, but she wants to let go of her pain and get on with her life. In discussing the “enactment” afterwards, the class acknowledged the profound difficulty of implementing King’s (Christ’s) non-violent approach, that radical invitation to love your enemy. In the face of “irreparable” damage, it would seem that only God’s grace can generate the super-human resolve to forgive.

Service learning was the third and final tool used in this multicultural theatre seminar. Margaret Mead expressed it well, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Eighteen sophomores, responsible for a mere twelve hours of community service, found themselves transformed by the experience. What had they learned about diversity? What had they done about creating or being part of a viable community? How had they made a difference in the lives of those of other cultures? I will let my students’ eloquence speak for itself.

One courageous volunteer wrote in her service-learning evaluation:

“If you are concerned about the men, women and children who end up behind bars in Illinois for months, years or a lifetime, you share our concerns.” And that was me to a “T.” In the Cook County Jail, there are so many people who are oppressed, ignored, needing salvation, help – a light in the darkness. And I do feel that in a way I have been able to bring some light, however briefly, to many people’s lives.

Another student found that the inmates she had worked with were “taken aback that someone really cared enough to come to the prison and ask ‘How are you doing?’ She

went on to say, “There may be someone sitting in a corner who desperately needs positive human contact....Never before have I felt able to so effectively utilize my interpersonal communication and discussion skills.”

The majority of my students worked with African American and Latino children at Blessed Sacrament Youth Center in Chicago. One student remarked, “what better way to give compassionate service, and participate in the creation of a just and humane world, than by preparing children for their future?” Several theatre and English majors decided to coach black children in memorizing and performing excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech “I Have a Dream.” One sophomore observed, “My memorization group was my community. We worked so hard to memorize those lines and we even put a little interpretive dance into the speech to make it unique and fun....I helped those kids create skills they can use in their lives; I helped the Center with their mission....The difference I made in that small group expanded to everyone who attended the performance that last Thursday. So many kids thought that what we had done was cool” and the directors plan to use these techniques for future projects.

An initially reluctant student admitted that he had never done service learning for any previous class. He was resistant to mandatory “volunteer” work. However, the experience revolutionized his thinking. He relished the challenge “of pushing his comfort zone, venturing off to an unknown part of the city....Helping with homework or flash cards or playing basketball....I felt the joy of serving my extended community. I felt great.” Another sophomore concluded, “Service learning did not seem like an unfortunate obligation. Although I was a white dude in an all-black community, I felt

like I belonged. I felt like one of the guys competing to win whatever game we were playing....It was a wonderful experience.”

Two graphic design majors were assigned to paint the Chicago Bulls logo on new backboards at the Center. As one artist worked on the project, several sixth graders surrounded him, wanting to help. He suddenly realized, “this hoop isn’t for me....I didn’t want this to be some outsider’s project; I wanted this to be a community effort, so the kids could claim ownership in the work. So I stepped aside and let them finish the backboard.” Students also used their ingenuity in motivating reluctant and frustrated learners. Novel incentives drew the children in. For example, after creating a visual aid to teach multiplication, one sophomore boy devised a “complicated handshake” that they would do “only if he got the answer right.” The youngster worked very hard at his flash cards so they “could do the cool handshake.” On the last day, “he came up, gave me a big hug, and asked hopefully if I would be back next week. It broke my heart because I knew I would not be returning.”

I will conclude with this final example of a student who found his stint at service an experience in a foreign land:

Service learning made me realize how small my world is – only forty minutes from Dominican, and I can barely understand the speech. The gray, concrete world of patched and broken sidewalks shocked me; but the language skills, or lack thereof, were more shocking....Reading and books and language are dear to me, but these children skipped over anything they did not know. When I used the word *plural*, they thought I was speaking a foreign language...What is going on here?

This experience at Blessed Sacrament was tough. I am angry and sad, and I feel drained and helpless....These kids are almost expected to fail. I hate that. It is not fair and it is not right....The shifting of my sight through service learning has given me the impetus to fight for them. These children deserve more care, concern and respect.

In concluding this paper, I must admit that after seven years of teaching this seminar, the material, the tools, the students have never failed to energize and excite me. Given the impact of theatre, and the dynamics of dialogue, performance and service, students connect on multiple levels with “Diversity, Culture and Community.” I find that most are eager to engage and serve in the real world with compassion and competence.

In paraphrasing one of King’s last speeches, I express my hope for my students:

I’d like somebody to mention that they tried to give their lives serving others. I’d like somebody to say they tried to love somebody, that they did try to feed the hungry; they did try to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say that they tried to love and serve humanity.