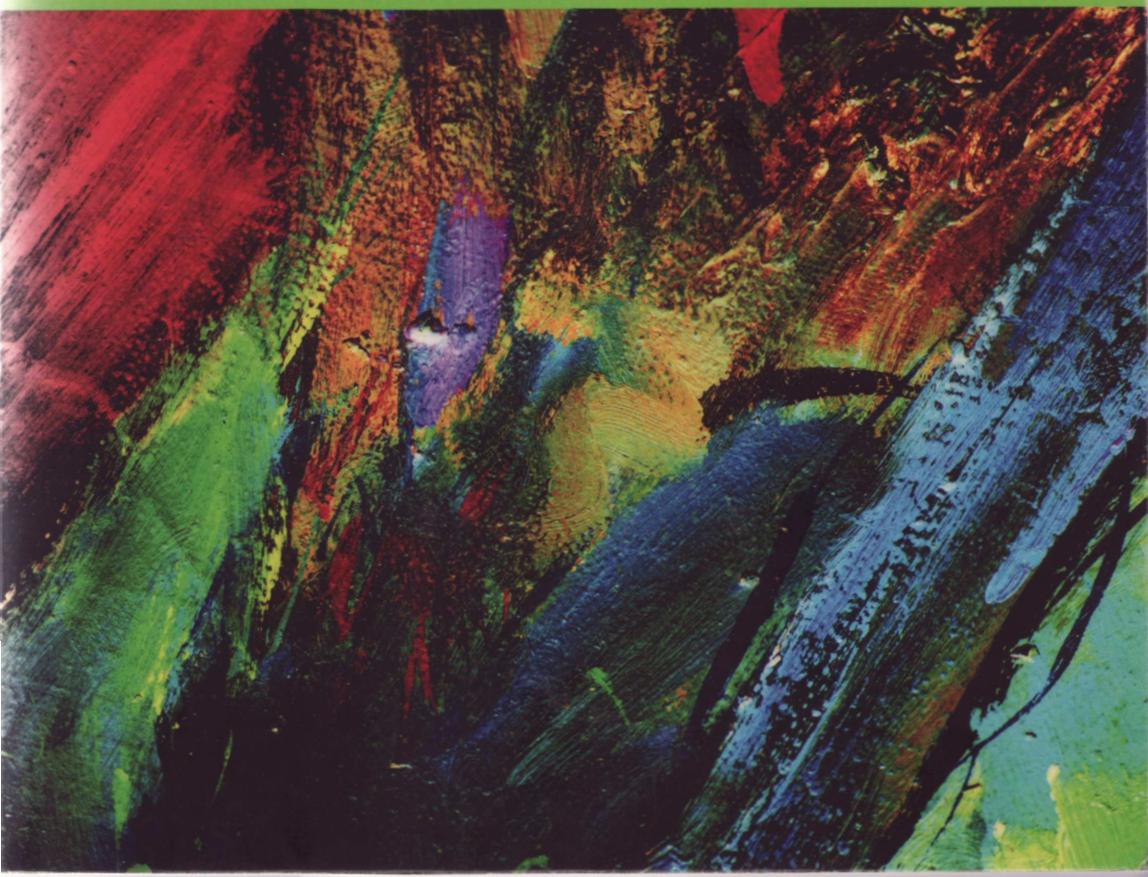


CULTURALLY RELEVANT ARTS EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

A Way Out of No Way

Edited by **Mary Stone Hanley, George W. Noblit,
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(Museo AJA de Culturas y Artes Populares para la Ciudadanía Global y Planetaria) <i>Cheryl T. Desmond and Marta Benavides</i>	36
4. Documentary Theater in Education: Empathy Building as a Tool for Social Change <i>Leyla Modirzadeh</i>	47
5. What the Music Said: Hip Hop as a Transformative Educational Tool <i>Kawachi A. Clemons and Kristal Moore Clemons</i>	58
6. The Arts and Juvenile Justice Education: Unlocking the Light through Youth Arts and Teacher Development <i>Patty Bode, Derek Fenner, and Basil El Halwagy</i>	71
7. Pushing against the Water: Artists and Sense of Place Museum Residency Program in New Orleans <i>Ann Rowson Love and Deborah Randolph</i>	83
8. Picturing Equity in City Schools: Using Photography to See What Justice Means to Urban High School Students <i>Kristien Zenkov, James Harmon, Athene Bell, and Marriam Ewaida</i>	95
9. Editing Lives: The Justice of Recognition through Documentary Film Production <i>Stephanie M. Anderson</i>	108
10. Tackling Homophobia and Heterosexual Privilege in the Media Arts Classroom: A Teacher's Account <i>Stacey S. Levin</i>	119
11. Exploring Arts-Based Inquiry for Social Justice in Graduate Education <i>Nana Osei-Kofi</i>	130
SECTION II Theorizing and Reflections	141
Section Introduction <i>Tom Barone</i>	141

4

DOCUMENTARY THEATER IN EDUCATION

Empathy Building as a Tool for Social Change

Leyla Modirzadeh

1. How can documentary theater create empathy and educate its audiences around issues of racism and xenophobia while still remaining entertaining and compelling to watch?
2. Can documentary theater be a tool for social change without becoming preachy and obviously didactic—especially when performed for young audiences?

Introduction

Given the current political climate of xenophobia and paranoia as evidenced by anti-immigration sentiment and rhetoric, education with an emphasis on social justice cannot be overemphasized. Also given the current dwindling resources allocated toward the arts in education, now is the time to initiate and take charge of arts activities within our own educational spheres and create what educator Jonathan Kozol calls “islands of decency” everywhere we can (Kozol, 1991). Creating empathy ranks as one of the most powerful tools in bridging cross-cultural differences and addressing racism. Documentary theater plays a vital role in educating groups using empathy as a conduit for social change. In contrast to more didactic approaches where the learner receives information from the instructor through readings and lectures, theater builds an empathetic bond between the story and the spectator. The *Undesirable Elements* series uses the singular act of highlighting an individual as special and unique, and this has the power to create discernment and regard in the spectator. The creation of beauty through attention to details of the personal rather than the general also stands as a reminder that those details that make one human are also universal, which in turn creates

empathy in the viewer. The purpose of this chapter is to advocate an expansion of this model of empathy-building-based learning.

I became fascinated by the possibilities of theater as a way of teaching students through my experiences working with Lincoln Center Institute and with Ping Chong. As cowriter and codirector at the Lincoln Center Institute, I created two seasons of documentary theater called *Secret Histories: Journeys Abroad, Journeys Within* with Ping Chong. These plays, based on oral histories of refugees in New York, place the personal narrative in historical and global context. Clark Theater, the educational wing of Lincoln Center, invited educators to design their curriculums around this project. After extensive interviews, we chose three participants (one from Iran, one from Bosnia, one from Liberia) to tell their stories onstage using a script written from their interviews. Students saw the productions after having studied the histories, politics, and cultures of the performers' respective homelands.

The first part of this chapter describes the work of Ping Chong and the *Undesirable Elements* series (<http://www.undesirableelements.org>). The second part examines the pedagogical applications of this particular model of multicultural documentary theater, as examined through the Lincoln Center Institute productions and their accompanying curriculums (<http://www.lcinstitute.org>). The last part provides an example of the ways in which this project can educate and heal a community in the wider world.

Ping Chong and the *Undesirable Elements* Project

In 1994, I was working as a professional stage actress in Seattle, Washington. One day, I received a call inviting me to audition for a show called *Undesirable Elements* created by the acclaimed New York theater artist Ping Chong. His work mostly focused on different cultures and examinations of history, which interested me very much. I asked if I could interview with him in New York. We met at Café Gitane in Nolita. I knew this was not a typical play and that I would not be asked to read from a script or perform a monologue. After he got his coffee, he sat across from me with pad and pen and started asking me a series of pointed personal questions in his matter-of-fact New York accent. "What's your background?" I knew that part of the reason I had been called to participate in this show had to do with the fact that I am half Iranian. "Do you speak Farsi? Have you experienced any racism? What exactly happened?" I attempted to tell my life story as succinctly as possible, without wasting his time with too many details. "More details," he said, and I handed him a stack of forms that I had already filled out. The forms were for potential participants to fill out beforehand. I had filled in spaces for favorite poems and songs from my cultural heritage. As an actress, I was accustomed to creating characters in the context of fictional circumstances, so this process felt a little invasive and a lot uncomfortable. I wasn't sure what he wanted, and I certainly was having trouble relaxing and sharing my full self with him. Doubt followed me as

I got up to shake his hand and walked back out onto the street. Definitely a failed interview, I thought. As I descended into the subway that autumn day, I had no idea that Chong and I would still be working together 17 years later.

I come from a varied background. My mother is a New Yorker from Irish Catholic and Russian Jewish heritage; my father emigrated from Tehran, Iran, in the 1950s, from a Shiite Muslim family. I went to Catholic schools. I grew up living in France, Iran, and California. My half sister is half Mexican. Being of mixed heritage made me focus even more on issues of inclusion and tolerance. The word *multicultural*, far from being just an overused buzzword to me, always felt personal and present in my life. I understand the word to mean the peaceful coexistence of multiple cultures. By *cultures* I mean ethnic cultures, religious cultures, and any sets of behaviors and customs that place one group apart from another.

Ping Chong grew up in New York City's Chinatown with Chinese immigrant parents. Much of his theater work was already exploring the subject of cultural heritage and identity even before he started *Undesirable Elements*. In July of 1992, Chong was in Holland teaching a group of international students. Everyone spoke English, but one night, when they all retired to the bar for a drink, the students reverted to their native languages. Sitting on his barstool, Chong listened to the sounds of various languages spoken all around him. The idea of making a piece with people speaking multiple languages came to him that night. He already had a commission from Artists Space in New York to create an environmental work that he titled *A Facility for the Channeling and Containment of Undesirable Elements*. Carlos Solanis of Artists Space wanted to have more than just a gallery for visual art and had asked Chong to make a performance piece using the art piece as the set. He decided to stage a simple piece using people who were not native English speakers. These nonperformers presented their stories, intermixed with their native languages, in a poetic chorale of voices.

If I had been there in 1992 at the first incarnation of *Undesirable Elements*, I would have been on one of many catwalks around the gallery looking down on yellow and black pools of liquid surrounded by white rock salt. The cast was composed of nonactors from various backgrounds: Lebanese, Filipino, Nicaraguan, Choctaw, Ukrainian, and Japanese. Seated on the rock salt, participants shared their customs, religion, race, language, and personal stories. "These were witnesses to living history," Chong said, "and they might never even have met under other circumstances" (Pratt, 2004, p. 14).

In the past 18 years, more than 40 U.S. productions have followed, as well as versions abroad. I performed in the fourth *Undesirable Elements*. I've been told that our Seattle version, with nine participants, was one of the most elaborate productions of the piece. A small viewing gallery of the participants' personal artifacts skirted the perimeter of the stage where viewers could peer through glass, as if in a museum, and see precious objects from the participants' native homelands. Since then, the form has been distilled to a very simple template, both in the writing and the visual style of the pieces. Rock salt remains an element from the original concept

but usually in the form of a half circle, straight edge to the audience, surrounded by a semicircle of equidistantly placed chairs. Each chair has a music stand to hold the script and a microphone. Each chair also has its own pool of light from above. Sometimes, when possible, projections appear behind them in the shape of countries. A circle of light also beams down in the center at alternating points.

The Model

A brief explanation of the elements of the text Ping Chong developed for the play will serve to underscore the importance of the collaboration between performer/participant and director/writer in telling these stories. The text itself, with its own formal template, developed over time. First, the potential participants fill out preliminary forms subdivided into these four categories: (a) "Background," (b) "Chronology," (c) "Names," and (d) "Poems." The category of "Background" includes the following sample questions: "*How is your cultural identity reflected in your daily life (foods, traditions, activities)? Have you struggled with issues of cultural identity? How do you currently identify yourself? Do you have memories of feeling like an outsider/other in your culture of origin and/or current community? Have you experienced direct or indirect racism or discrimination? Have you witnessed racism or discrimination within your community towards others? What are some assumptions that people make about people from your culture? What are some of the major issues that you see as currently pressing within your community?*" (Chong, 1999a, n.p.).

Since this is an ongoing theater project, the process usually follows this standardized format. From these forms, Chong chooses people for initial interviews. Finally, a group of participants (usually around six) comprise the final performing group. After extensive interviews with the final group, Chong edits the stories into succinct entries. These entries follow a chronology punctuated by historic national or worldwide events, making the personal and the public both equally important. A group hand clap separates the entries, clearing the air much in the same way the sound of Chinese New Year firecrackers clear the air for the new year to come. The participants do not choose how their entries will be written. Chong integrates their stories and writes the show through his own unifying voice. The participants then read from the scripts that sit on the music stands. An entry in the script looks something like this:

(ALL CLAP)

TIFFANY: 1937

TIFFANY/DALIA: 1937

ALL: 1937

TIFFANY: Baltimore, Maryland

SAGNO: In the American South a Black person . . .

TIFFANY: . . . cannot try clothes on in a store . . .

DALIA: . . . cannot drink from the same water fountains as Whites . . .

TIFFANY: . . . cannot sit in the front of the bus because it is reserved for Whites . . .

DALIA: . . . cannot get a good job, even if he or she is educated, because Blacks are not allowed to rise in the South.

TIFFANY: Abraham Moses, after much suffering in the segregated South, follows many Black Americans before him. He leaves everything he has known and moves to Liberia. He will become a very rich man, owning coffee and cocoa plantations.

SAGNO: He will become my grandfather.

(ALL CLAP) (Chong & Modirzadeh, 2004, p. 8)

In addition to the name game, personal and historic entries, and the “What do you think of?” section, the show also incorporates a section where everyone sings a song in their native tongue and a section where everyone speaks a poem. The show begins with the participants saying their birth date and birthplace in their language and an anecdote about the day they were born. The show ends with each participant saying the same entry as the beginning but this time in English. There are also some lines that have endured through every production and now are regular inclusions in almost every script. This line, encapsulating one of my favorite sentiments, appears in every show: “You can choose anything in the world you want, my child, but you can never choose your heritage.”

The Lincoln Center Institute Productions

Ping Chong’s *Undesirable Elements/Secret History* project eventually became an ongoing series of works exploring the effects of history and identity on the lives of people in a particular community. The simple act of naming oneself in public proved to be so powerful that communities around the world and all over the United States wanted to have their own version of the project. As Chong puts it, the “people onstage are having a communion with the audience. And a communion with a group of people is a very powerful act” (Moyers, 2003). This communion also caught the attention of educators. If documentary theater could entertain, inspire, and ultimately bring diverse groups of people together in communion, then the educational possibilities of this project could be limitless.

In the winter of 2004, I got a call from Chong’s office asking if I wanted to collaborate on creating an *Undesirable Elements* for a group of educators at Lincoln Center Institute (the educational wing of Lincoln Center). The show needed to be 45 minutes long, and they had requested that we focus on young refugees living in New York City. We also had to keep in mind that they were orienting their show to students from kindergarten to high school and maybe

some college groups. The show would premier in July for a group of young teachers who were attending Lincoln Center Institute's summer session. These artists planned to create curriculums around our show to bring to their schools. Students would then come in to the Clark Theater (a 130-seat theater at Lincoln Center Institute) to see the show and further discuss it in their classrooms afterward. Lincoln Center Institute also had scheduled a week of touring within the school system.

I accepted the challenge, even though I had only performed in the productions before and had never written one myself. Sara Zatz, with whom I collaborated closely, had worked on many of these shows as a production manager and knew the process well. Length, subject matter, and audience age range comprised the main differences between the usual piece and this production. We usually have the participants tell their own story, but since we only had 45 rather than the usual 90 minutes, we agreed that no more than three stories could be told. Three people look a little lonely onstage, though, so we decided that we would have two narrators to help tell the three main stories. The bigger question for us was how to make our show appropriate for school groups. Finding younger participants made sense since they would be closer in age to the audience members. We eventually realized that this was actually difficult because young people are either in school during the day or in college during rehearsal times and not readily available. We ended up with a group of three who were in their midtwenties. We thought the younger audiences would be able to relate more to the younger participants' stories. Within the context of the scripting, we had to consider how to present certain issues to younger audiences and how much history we would have to explain. Usually the scripts have a lot of historical information, but we were very limited with our time constraint. Did young students know about the Iran-Iraq war and what happened in Bosnia? We had to figure out how to present that material in a distilled way to school audiences. These were some of the challenges of presenting the show for young people. The benefits outweigh the challenges though since the topics introduced in the show make for more interesting discussions back in the classroom. In this way, too, the production lends itself to educating students about world events and the importance of social justice through an eyewitness account from a person closer to them in age. The creation of empathy would best be accomplished through young performers telling their own stories juxtaposed against dramatic yet accessible historical narratives.

Recruitment now became the big challenge. In the past, the host organization would find the participants for Chong to interview. This time, we had to recruit locally without a partner organization. We launched a broad recruiting effort to find young refugees in New York by contacting organizations such as the International Rescue Committee and even Bellevue Hospital, which has

the Center for Victims of Torture. We interviewed a good number of people until finally we decided on Sanaz Mozfarian from Iran, Bekim Chela from Bosnia, and Sagno Alseny from Liberia. Besides looking for a compelling personal story, we wanted people who would engage the interest of young people and with whom they could empathize. Empathy, as in all of these shows, stands as the main ingredient to breaking down stereotypes and creating real cross-cultural understanding. In the end, the young audiences related most to Sagno, a former prisoner of war who drove a cab in New York. Sara Zatz had this to say about the impact of Sagno's story and the importance of presenting in a theater setting.

Sara Zatz: That first year of 2004 was very significant. Since then, we've done school-sized presentations with Sagno. They invited Sagno to come into one of the schools and talk to the class. I really saw the impact that his story had on the students. [Sagno told of] his own experiences as a refugee from Liberia going through the civil war and seeing his father killed in front of him. And, at that time in 2004, the real discussion about the "conflict diamonds" was coming out in [the movie] *Blood Diamonds*. He talked about working in the diamond mines. I actually saw the kids really relate to that. In a lot of ways they related to Sagno, not so much because they had had similar experiences in the war, but a lot of them were missing their fathers in some way. I think they really responded to his loss of his father; I think that really hit home for them.

Leyla Modirzadeh: Do you think there is a difference when students come to the theater as opposed to seeing it in their own school?

Sara Zatz: We always try to do a formal professional theatre production of whatever the show is that we are doing. We hope that we'll tour in the communities too. There is a formality to being in the theater space that gives authority and prominence to the show that the audience is seeing. That's really important, particularly when you see [stories that have been marginalized in the past] on stage in this professional setting. It has an authority that people recognize as being important. The second part is to provide a theatrical experience for communities that maybe don't go to the theater, don't feel welcome at the theater, or can't afford the theater. Bringing it into the communities then gives people access to it where otherwise they wouldn't get to see it.

Aesthetic Education

Lincoln Center Institute uses "aesthetic education" as its model, and our show fit well with their philosophy of "engaging the learner's imagination to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Samson, 2005, p. 70). By using works of art as points of entry into learning about traditional subjects such as history or

social sciences, educators using aesthetic education principles hope that students will discover their own thinking in a more creative and integrated way. As Maxine Green says, “A work of [art], when fully perceived and carefully attended to, makes a demand upon beholders—a demand that they change, look with new eyes, hear with new ears, become something they have not been before” (2001, p. 44). After the initial show for the educators in July 2004, they created classroom curriculums based on the production. Andrea Masters, of Lincoln Center Institute, put together a wonderful text called *Windows on the Work* that includes relevant articles about immigration, displacement and loss, and the process of making *Journeys Abroad, Journeys Within*, which was the title of the *Undesirable Elements* at Lincoln Center Institute. This text also served to document student responses to the piece. It stands as supplemental background material for student study and also as enrichment to educators wishing to build classes around the histories of particular cultures relevant to the play and themes of inclusion and diversity.

In *Windows on the Work*, the teachers respond to seeing the show before beginning to teach their classes. Some teachers mentioned that their immigrant students and students who feel like outsiders might feel a sense of relief and understanding after seeing the piece. Another educator had this to say:

NILDA: In [my classes], there are primarily white students from affluent backgrounds. When I teach them about struggle and injustice, I see a barrier. They don't want to believe me, because if they do . . . they have to admit, “I've had privileges. I've had an easy life and I haven't experienced the struggle that other people have.” So I know that if I took them to see *Undesirable Elements*, they would immediately say “How can this be true? I thought that if you worked hard you could have the same things as others. How come the man from Liberia, Black himself, is afraid to talk to Black people in America? And what about the Muslim woman—why isn't she wearing a veil?” The students would come to the show with so many different assumptions, and all these different stereotypes would be challenged. For my students, these stories would put a face on injustice, make it real. (Dickstein, 2005, p. 38)

Here is a sampling of responses from public school students in fall 2008 after their participation with the *Undesirable Elements* Education Program:

I learned to express my feelings, have voice for words and show emotions.

I am now better at sharing what I feel with people that I don't really know.

What I learned . . . is that everyone has [his or her] own perspective. Another thing I learned was that when other people tell you what happened to them, it sometimes reminds you of a moment that happen[ed] to you. (Ping Chong and Company, 2008, p. 1)

Impact on Community

The *Undesirable Elements* model can also educate within a community. My own experience creating a piece for a small town in Mississippi can attest to this. I took the model outside the classroom and into the wider community, initially as an experiment in social activism. The community was Oxford, Mississippi: birthplace of William Faulkner, home of the first Southern university to be desegregated, historically entrenched in racial inequality and divisiveness. I thought if I could find people marginalized by the dominant White Southern culture, then maybe I could tell their stories respectfully and give voice to those voices that have historically been silenced. The William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation cosponsored my project. After many calls for participants and not many responses, I finally found four people willing to get onstage and tell their stories about what it has been like for them to live in that community having their particular identity. My participants were a gay man who identified as half Mexican; an albino African American girl from the Delta; a young woman who was a Japanese immigrant; and an African American woman who was the functionally illiterate daughter of sharecroppers, 1 of 14 children raised in the segregated poverty of rural Mississippi. The performances were groundbreaking. Over 200 people came and laughed and wept together in an incredible catharsis of shared history and healing. In the darkness of the theater, an open dialogue could begin about topics commonly avoided. Two older White women came out of the theater crying and rushed up to clutch my hands. They thanked me and said that they had lived through segregation and witnessed terrible things in their community over the years. This was, they said, the single most healing event they could remember in their town. As they left, one of them told me, "I will cry all the way home." A number of people wrote me from the show, and here is one of the many responses:

I had the privilege of seeing "Secret Histories: Oxford" last Sunday. While feeling intimately connected as part of the human family, I thought: if this could be performed in every high school and middle school in this country, surely the bullying problem within our society should reduce somewhat. Maybe the "Secret Histories" should be a mandatory play for all incoming college students too. Even the most thoughtful of us [who] try "to imagine a walk in the shoes of another," are, by our very nature, abandoned to a level of basic instincts of fear . . . fear of the unknown. So we must be constantly schooled and educated. Thank you to so many of you who make poetic attempts at trying to help us all understand and respect one another.

Conclusion

Beauty matters and beauty depends on the specific and the particular. Generalities beget misunderstandings, and composite banalities lead to gross stereotypes.

The *Undesirable Elements* series uses the singular act of highlighting an individual as special and unique, and this has the power to create discernment and regard in the spectator. The creation of beauty through attention to details of the personal rather than the general also stands as a reminder that those details that make one human are also universal, which in turn creates empathy in the viewer. As Elaine Scarry (1999) asserts:

Beauty . . . actually assists us in the work of addressing injustice, not only by requiring of us constant perceptual acuity . . . but by more direct forms of instruction . . . What happens when we move from the sphere of aesthetics to the sphere of justice? Here symmetry remains key, particularly in accounts of distributive justice and fairness “as a symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another.” (p. 13)

It is this symmetry of relation that destroys the hierarchical dominant structure and creates an empathic lateral relation to others, even others with perceived differences. The possibility for social change from the *Undesirable Elements* project lies in its power to create empathy across type. The show’s deceptively simple format of oral history storytelling, as if gathered around a primal campfire, also supports the idea of “distributive justice and fairness as a symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another.” Symmetry suggests spatial relation, and the show begins and ends with the time, date, and place of each participant’s birth. Particularity of origin and geography, here, becomes less a justification to separate from each other, and more an invitation to realize our common original source. Theater here celebrates the differences between people without polarizing the people themselves. Social change happens when ideas change, and ideas change when education prepares the ground for new ideas to take root. Documentary theater of this kind proves that art can educate toward that end.

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