

Using Theatre to Heal Culture Wars in the United States

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Topic 1: The social environment of children and young people in the United States
by Dr. Jeanne Klein, University of Kansas

I am not proud of my country. So first, I must publically apologize for all of the inhumane disasters the Bush administration has wrought in many countries over the last seven years. I think it is safe to say that most US citizens do not approve of this administration's foreign and domestic policies, but our electoral system is severely damaged and Congress has done little to change voter apathy and other urgent problems.

Over the past three decades, the United States has been engaged in vicious "culture wars" of opposing values between religious-right conservatives and humanitarian-left liberals. These political debates are most evident in the appalling failure of the US to ratify the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (or CRC), which includes children's rights to self-expression. In 2001, the shameful Bush administration reiterated its opposition by claiming that the CRC "goes too far when it asserts entitlements based on economic, social and cultural rights."¹ Specifically, power-wielding conservatives believe the CRC erodes and undermines parental authority and their own "entitlements" to control and punish any child who disobeys their restrictive codes of conduct or who fails to meet their punishing education law, erroneously labeled "No Child Left Behind." Yet countless studies prove that corporal punishment and autocratic parenting beget aggression, violence, and delinquency in children; and children's rights to artistic expression have been left behind because teachers are forced to spend more time preparing students for reading and math tests than teaching other curricular areas.²

Like 193 other countries, the US needs to ratify the CRC, not only to show the world that it values its children, but to improve children's living conditions. Although the US is perceived as a wealthy and healthy nation, the truth is that US children, of all races in every region, face the

highest rates of poverty, infant mortality, adolescent deaths, and unemployed parenthood among industrialized nations. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of all US children from birth to age 18 live in low-income and impoverished homes, even though the majority of their parents work in full- or part-time jobs that pay far less than a living wage to support their families' basic needs.³ Most of these parents pay 30% or more of their meager incomes in housing costs alone.⁴ These economic conditions place an enormous emotional strain on families that can lead to child abuse and neglect. In response, their impoverished children "act out" the symptoms of economic diseases through gun violence, suicide, drug abuse, and other harmful behaviors. About 10% or over 1.5 million teenagers drop out of school after age 15, leading to unemployment, criminal arrests, and, for some, prison terms in juvenile as well as adult facilities.⁵ Rather than blame young victims for these social problems, federal and state governments need to take responsibility for changing the economic conditions that force families into untenable situations.

But most US citizens rarely see or hear about the working poor and their children because we live in a consumer-driven, capitalistic culture focused on materialism, in which all forms of mass media are owned and controlled by only six multinational corporations that distribute these materialistic messages around the world today. Four of these media giants—Disney, Time-Warner, Viacom, and News Corporation—are the sole producers and distributors of all children's entertainment and licensed merchandising through their respective television, film, internet, and publishing companies.⁶ Each year young people see over 60,000 advertisements, mostly for junk food and toys, both directly and indirectly in their homes and schools. Upper- and middle-class children influence \$190 billion in family spending by nagging their parents to purchase the latest products, leading to parent-child conflicts and ever-increasing materialism.⁷ Sensation-seeking

juveniles have easy access to mass media that depicts sex, violence, alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs with few references to risky consequences.⁸ Ongoing studies continue to show the harmful effects of these cultivated messages on the physical, mental, and social health of children and young people.⁹ Yet 12% or 9 million children lack basic health insurance to address these needs.

Despite these gloomy facts, the good news is that a US campaign to ratify the CRC staged a national summit last year in Washington, D.C. to mobilize citizens into spreading the truth about these cultural environments. And the Children's Theatre Company of Minneapolis was there to perform two short plays about why adults need to take responsibility in overcoming cultural differences.¹⁰ Like them, approximately 100 professional theatre companies for young audiences are doing what they can to teach tolerance, respect, and empathy through their comprehensive educational programs. We can only hope that these human conditions change in 2009 with the next presidential election.

Topic 2: A concrete example of one US TYA play: *Lily Plants a Garden*
by Dr. Jeanne Klein, University of Kansas (presented after Robert Colby's paper)

As a concrete example, I would like to discuss one extraordinary play that I directed at my university last February, and how we extended its themes in classrooms during post-performance drama workshops. *Lily Plants a Garden*, by José Cruz González, dramatizes the plight of a child struggling to survive a civil war between two cultures in what could be any country.¹¹ (photo 1) The play opens with the sounds of exploding bombs and flashing lights, as a young frightened girl runs into a war-torn building clutching her teddy bear. (photo 2) She finds an old doll, and to comfort herself, she narrates a story about her life by imagining Lily, an orphaned Zobeing adopted by Mama and Papa Wuluman—(photo 3) two cultures of human beings enacted by actors:

Long ago, Wulumen (animal people with soil) and Zobeings (plant people with seeds) used to grow gardens together, but they got into an argument which led to the Great Endless Unforgotten War. (photo 4) When the Wulumen neighbors attack their home to get rid of Lily, Mama and Papa argue over what to do, making Lily cry. Lily rips off her seed necklace, buries it in the soil, and her tears cause the seed to grow. (photo 5) As the attacks increase, Papa drinks too much “wulujuice,” turns into a balloon and floats away, forcing Mama and Lily to flee as refugees to the Land of Rubble. (photo 6) Amidst this destruction, Lily plants a garden of hope by watering her seedling with her tears in a little wagon with the help of a ladybug and a rose—two puppets left by a mysterious Shadow, a Zobeing soldier in search of his lost soul. (photo 7) Mama starves herself by giving her food to Lily and shrinks into a teddy bear, forcing Lily to care for her; but when another bomb explodes, Mama’s lifeless body gets covered in the

rubble. (photo 8) Distraught, Lily flees to the moon where she meets the Young Girl herself who is also waiting for her mother to come back. (photo 9) They find Papa balloon, and Shadow finds Mama's lost soul and his own lost shadow. (photo 10) The Young Girl ends her story by imagining a more hopeful world with bigger gardens where lost souls are found through broken toys. She now knows that "the little girl who 'would never be normal, who would never fit in' did" (43). Through drama, she has nourished her own lost soul by creating a story with broken toys; for as her mother once told her, "Everything has a soul," and if you shape something with your loving hands, then it becomes a part of your soul, too (37). We produced this play for children ages six to eight.

(photo 3) After performances, children wanted to know why the fighting started, because the Young Girl said that "no one remembers why [the war] started" (11). Yet they heard the Wuluman neighbors yelling at Mama and Papa to get rid of Lily because she's a "cursed" Zobeing, and they saw Mama and Papa arguing over what to do about these prejudiced attacks against their adopted daughter. (As an aside, the playwright told me that he got the idea for the exploding "kabooms" from witnessing a child crying in the middle of an awful parental fight. He thought to himself, "That home just went kaboom.") Yet even though children witnessed these and other harsh arguments over prejudice and discrimination, they didn't connect these fights with reasons for starting a war. Or perhaps they didn't perceive cultural discrimination as "good" reasons for fighting because students are taught to get along with everyone regardless of personal differences.

Therefore, during drama workshops in local classrooms, we decided to focus on why people argue and how children can stop or resolve fights among their peers. After reviewing the

play's story, we asked young students to think of reasons for why people around them fight. Children most often mentioned fights with their siblings, and one child recalled his mother's alcoholic boyfriend. (photo 11) We then replayed the argument between the puppets where the jealous ladybug demeans the rose because she can't dance like a "real" ballerina as she claims. Like other scenes in the play, this scene is a literal microcosm of intolerance that leads to warring factions. We asked children to think of ways they could make them stop fighting and to try out their ideas. Gradually, students began to remember what stopped the fight—the ladybug found delicious aphids to eat off of the rose to make her itching stop. (photo 3) We then asked volunteers to wear either Wuluman or Zobeing wigs, gloves, slippers, or seed necklaces and to find ways that they could use their physical differences to help one another achieve a common goal. For example, students found that they could use their larger hands to reach for imaginary fruit in tall trees, or their furry slippers could clean the floors better than bare feet. Obviously, cultural differences cannot be solved in a matter of minutes, but at least students were able to experience possible solutions by role-playing these metaphors in more literal ways. Teachers valued these drama experiences because "social difficulties" among young students can be "pretty strong or intense" and the opportunity "to think of solutions was *so* beneficial."

The metaphoric images of this play also enlightened college students who attended this play. As one woman noted (photo 1),

. . . the image of a young girl cowering from bombs and an attack on her home is painful to see. It stirs up memories we all have of seeing pictures of war-torn countries or images of impoverished children from foreign countries on TV . . . It's natural for a person to ignore or turn away from these images as if it makes the problem 'disappear,' but when

it's presented on stage in a theatre, the audience has nowhere else to look. . . . Watching the young girl create something beautiful out of virtual nothingness made me wonder if I would have the same strength if I were in her position.

Indeed, this play forces adults to confront the cultural problems that children face the world over, even though the United States is not embroiled in a bloody civil war. Other college students imagined immigrant children leaving Mexico or refugees fleeing Iraq and Palestine, as well as hurricane and tsunami disasters. When adults abandon children, even for perfectly justifiable reasons such as death and dying as this play shows, leaving them to their own devices, what else is left but the power of their imaginations? (photo 10) By dramatizing the healing effects of dramatic play through theatre, we may encourage adults to recognize children's rights to self-expression and together imagine a more peaceful world for all human beings.

Topic 3: Discussion points for prospective visions and international partnerships:

* In the United States:

- * Support the US Campaign to ratify the CRC <<http://childrightscampaign.org>>
- * Encourage US TYA companies to take childhood seriously and to produce more original plays about children's problems caused by adults
- * Support a new national program to Bring Young Audiences to Live Theatre through Theatre Communications Group (TCG), a national organization of regional, non-profit theatre companies <www.tcg.org/membersproject>

* Participate through ASSITEJ International:

- * Join the new International TYA Research Network (ITYARN) through its listserv in Norway: <<http://hia-lists.hia.no/mailman/listinfo/ityarn-nc>>
- * Present a paper or attend the ITYARN Research Forum in conjunction with the XVIth ASSITEJ World Congress in Adelaide, Australia, May 2008.

Notes

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5. Children's Defense Fund. *State of America's Children 2005*. Table B6-1. "Youth at Risk." 201. <http://www childrensdefense org/site/DocServer/Greenbook_2005 pdf>
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10. Campaign for the US Ratification of the CRC. “2006 Summit for the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Mobilizing Communities for Ratification.” 18-20 May 2006. Wash., D.C.: American University. Accessed 2 July 2007 <<http://childrightscampaign.org/crcsummit.htm>>.
11. González, José Cruz. *Lily Plants a Garden*. Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2004. www.dramaticpublishing.com.