

Secondary students confront issues of identity through devising and performing a new play at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, secondary students at the Poly Prep Country Day School began an eleven-month project with their acting teacher and a professional playwright that culminated in performances at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August of 2015. The goal was to premiere a new play created out of the concerns and challenges facing these young Americans as they wrestled with their national identity in an increasingly interconnected world. The students also dealt with issues of race, class, and sexual identity as they refined dialogue and characters in daily rehearsal sessions. The director's process of building Americans in Breshkistan was modeled on that used by professional companies when they workshop a new piece with a playwright. The students created choreography and stage combat, as well as nonverbal movement sequences in which they worked together as an acrobatic team. The project united and engaged thirteen students of various races, classes, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and personality types. Students were responsible for creating and realizing the lighting and sound designs and

for running the show. This project could serve as a model for schools to adopt into their regular curriculum, connecting high-level, student-created productions with performance possibilities at local professional theater venues.

In the summer of 2015 I traveled with a small group of acting and technical theater students to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, under the auspices of the American High School Theater Festival, to premiere *Americans in Breshkistan*, an original play. The Fringe is known as a venue where new theater companies and young professionals premiere original work (Fisher, 2012) and make connections with others in their profession. Therefore, in order to give the students an experience similar to that of a professional company, we took an original play we had developed ourselves. The artistic challenge of creating a new work of art that would be judged on par with professional and amateur work from around the globe set a high bar for my students. Like the members of professional theater companies, they had the experience of workshopping a new piece with a playwright. By helping to create the themes and characters of the play, they became deeply invested in the project. From their work in their class preparation and in Edinburgh, the students learned first-hand what it meant to create, revise, discard, recreate, and revise yet again. Together, we developed all the aspects of this new production, including set, props, costumes, sound and lighting design. The students participated equally with the professional adults in generating an artistic statement that belonged to all of us. This investment created a powerful commitment in each member of our company to achieve the highest possible level of artistic excellence.

The students were recruited for this project in the spring of 2014. Most had participated in the extra-curricular, after-school theater program for several years, in which they had performed as actors in both contemporary and classic plays by well-established playwrights. They had all signed up for an acting class that ran two semesters and their families had committed themselves financially to the trip the following August. We had two workshop performances scheduled for the spring and summer before we would take the play to Edinburgh, where we would make further adjustments to our work. Our group included students from a wide variety of means, from those scholarship students

who paid next to nothing for the trip, to those whose parents covered all their expenses. The school supported us financially, allowing us to use ticket revenue from our regular after-school season's shows as well as sales of donated items at school functions to cover the expenses of the students on scholarship. We also received significant donations from other parents who supported the theater department. Additionally, the headmaster of our school agreed to commission playwright Monica Flory, a former drama teacher at our school whose work had been published and premiered in theaters from Seattle to New York. Flory was willing to write something within the technical and time constraints demanded by the Fringe. She also agreed to come to New York to hold a series of workshops with our students in the fall, so she could get to know them and establish issues that were of concern to them.

The American High School Theater Festival (AHSTF) offers selected high schools from around the country the opportunity to perform a show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe four times over a ten day period at one of the established Fringe venues. In each of the Fringe venues it manages, the AHSTF maintains a staff that includes technical directors, electricians, and stage managers who are all experienced in working with high school performers and are also first class theater professionals. Tickets to our show could be purchased at the Fringe box office and we had our own spot in the thick Fringe program book. In creating our show, we had specific limits set by the Fringe administration on all Fringe productions. Each company is only allowed a two hour time slot, which must include their load in, set up, the show's running time, and the complete strike. This meant that if we had wanted to do a full-length play we would have had to severely cut it, or perform only a portion of it. We were not allowed to ship over set pieces. Anything we brought had to be packed in our suitcases or checked as luggage on the plane and carried with us from London to Edinburgh via train. Once in Edinburgh, we could have rented set pieces but this would have been costly and they might not have met our requirements. All our sound had to be pre-recorded onto computer. Therefore, it became clear early in the process that we needed a minimal set with minimal props and preferably no furniture.

Before working with secondary students, I had years of experience both as a director of professional actors in the context of Off-Broadway theater, and as a deviser of original material with middle school students in a summer program I created in 1990 at the Poly Prep School. Over a

period of twenty years, using the ideas of Spolin (1985, 1999), Book (2002), Boal (2002), Brown (2000), Close (Halpern, Close, Johnson, 2001) and others, I was quite comfortable creating original exercises to fit the particular devising task. Flory had some ideas she wanted to explore and we developed a process that began with the fall workshops. Our goal was to combine the valuable devising process that can occur in secondary school social issues theatre classes (Gonzalez, 2013) with the mature craft necessary for the production of a polished work of art. In our workshops we sought to elicit from the students issues that were important to them, develop characters they could play that would be real to them, and explore the dynamics that might exist between these characters. In collaboration, Flory and I created the series of exercises that comprised our early workshops.

One of the first exercises we created together was a nonverbal improvisation involving all the actors. After writing on a card a description of the person they thought their parents wanted them to become, they entered the stage one by one, embodying these ideal personas. They could interact with each other, but without using language. The goal was to discover how it *felt* to become their parents' ideal rather than get distracted by storytelling. Immediately after, we asked them to describe the person that would be their parents' worst nightmare of who they might become. This was also followed by an embodied improvisation. Afterwards, one of the actors said she didn't like the "nightmare" persona she had embodied, but that playing the role had made her feel very free. After discussing the choices the students had made, we continued to explore different ways of knowing each other. Everyone sang a solo song, even if it was only "Happy Birthday." In duos and trios, sharing their weight, everyone participated in creating creatures that crossed the stage using new forms of locomotion. This prepared the students for later exercises where they would be required to physically support each other in a variety of ways.

Working with video she had taken of our workshop, Flory was ready with the first working draft of *Americans in Breshkistan* by January 2015, when my acting students and I began our work on the script. The script was initially written with twelve actors in mind, evenly divided by gender. Unfortunately, two students had to withdraw from the trip within the first few weeks of January. This gave our cast their first experience in revising a script. Two characters had to be written out of the play and the show had to be recast. Throughout the rest of the creative process,

Flory would submit pages, and I would bring them to the actors. In read-throughs, the actors sometimes discovered lines that sounded awkward to them and insisted that their characters would never say such things. During scene work, actors would provide critiques of character development, identifying actions that did not ring true to them, or relationships that they felt needed to be developed further. These critiques would then be conveyed to the playwright to negotiate a change. Flory welcomed their input, and in the eleven months of our work together the collaboration between students and playwright resulted in many changes to the original script as the students took greater ownership of their characters and of the play as a whole. By the time we took the play to Edinburgh, we had gone through nine versions of the script.

Due to the demographics of our student body, our cast consisted of a very diverse company: two African-American females, four Caucasian females, one Hispanic male, one Chinese-American male, one Italian-American male who held dual citizenship, and one Caucasian male. Our production crew consisted of three male Caucasian students, who served as stage manager, lighting designer, and sound board operator, and two adults, myself as director and Carlos Aguilar, our set and costume designer. The students who served as our tech crew were very different personality types from the actors. They were not as outgoing, or physically self-confident. However, throughout the process of developing and performing our show, the more socially adept performers accepted them as valued members of our group.

Ten of the students in our company had strong ties to countries outside the U.S., with either one or both parents having emigrated from another country, and some students spoke English as a second language. Many of these students identified first as New Yorkers, then as global citizens, and finally as Americans. As New Yorkers, the students were very aware of the issue of global terrorism. Through our school's annual "Community and Diversity Day" programming: a series of workshops, speakers, and open-forum sessions created to increase sensitivity and diffuse racial tensions inherent in living in a diverse school, our students had developed language with which to engage these issues. They were also dealing with typical adolescent identity issues such as establishing their own sexual identity and sexual orientation and experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Indeed, one of their classmates had died from an overdose only a few months before,

and the loss was felt throughout the school. These issues formed the themes of the play that we developed through those initial workshops and our subsequent work on the script together. The show's premise was summarized in the publicity description we created for the Fringe website:

Ten American teenagers, strangers to each other, have all been traveling abroad and suddenly wake up to find themselves captives in a small, windowless room. Have they been kidnapped by terrorists? Are they in some strange reality T.V. scenario? Or are they part of a reeducation program in which their parents have enrolled them, without their knowledge or consent? As they attempt to escape through drug-induced hallucinations, they explore the landscape of the American body, the dream of claiming one's identity, and the hope of finding a promised land.

As we did our work in acting class on the backstories of the characters, my students' own struggles and experiences deeply influenced the script. One of the characters, Dylan, came from a wealthy family, had problems with drugs and hid his despair under a brash and joking exterior. Phillip, a middle class character, despised Dylan for his freedom to get "trust fund wasted" every weekend. Dylan had been banished from his home by his mother because of his addiction. The student who played Dylan struggled to find a positive take on the character and finally came to me, deeply upset because he felt that, "No one pays a price for anything." The playwright responded to this feedback by changing the ending so that Dylan shed his surface bravado and revealed his desperate need for his parents to allow him to come home again. The character Sophie had a highly sexual affect, but wanted to be seen as a full person rather than as a "hot" item. Yet at the same time, she couldn't help reveling in her knowledge of her own physical beauty. Conflict between characters stemming from racial and economic tensions played out in the script as well. The characters were often cruel to one another, even to the point of physical violence. However, our actors, who came from a variety of races, ethnicities, classes, and sexual orientations themselves, were able to play out these conflicts onstage and yet remain united offstage. They respected each other and formed a caring and supportive community.

The African-American character Emily was strong and outspoken

like the actress who played her. She was impatient with Sophie's attitude, but also with Phillip, who wanted to enlist in the army to fight terrorism, and was full of unconscious racism. The students pushed Flory to develop the conflict between Emily and Phillip but also to find a way for the two characters to reach an understanding. Another of the characters discovered and accepted her homosexuality over the course of the play, an issue that several members of the cast and crew were in the process of exploring themselves.

Americans in Breshkistan was set in a stark, prison-like room with no doors or windows and only a few old blankets on the floor. A single, overhead lighting fixture served as the hiding place for a mysterious bottle labeled "eat me" that contained four pills. As four of the characters decided in turns to each swallow one of the pills, the play morphed into a sequence of surrealistic dream scenes during which the characters attempted to learn something about their situation through their hallucinations. These scenarios revealed both personal and larger truths to the dreamers, bringing moments of transcendence to some of the characters, but also generating even greater anxiety and tension within others. The structure gave our actors the opportunity to play a variety of larger-than-life dream character roles in addition to their named characters that were still trapped in the room. The dream characters' qualities spilled over into the realistic sequences, giving each actor's persona an added resonance and complexity.

My acting pedagogy is based on physical theater training. I studied Asian physical theatre under Leonard Pronko (1967), along with Grotowski (1969) technique at Pomona College. I admire Jacques Lecoq's work (2001) and have used his exercises. I was delighted that the hallucination sequences and our limited set gave us an opportunity to explore staging and choreography that relied on the actors' bodies to create dream landscapes. Students with experience in dance and acrobatics took leadership roles in helping to create the staging. In rehearsal, I used a number of exercises including Boal's Greek Exercise (2002, p. 64) in which actors are physically supported while they move through space. In addition, the script called for sections of chanting and for a lullaby during the character Abe's dream that needed to be sung in Mandarin because the character is a recent immigrant from China. I researched and found a Chinese lullaby (Ong, 2016) and members of the cast rehearsed and developed it on their own. Abe's dream became a way for him to transcend the cacophony of a high school of English

speaking students who had little understanding or sympathy for someone still struggling with their language. Abe climbed a stairway of actors during the lullaby and lifted by them, he soared above the conflict arriving at a place of self-acceptance and comfort.

Because they were all trapped and were afraid of the possibility that terrorists had kidnapped them, the characters were confronted with the possibility of imminent death. As we developed the play, we decided that some of the characters would begin spontaneously bleeding, as if Ebola had suddenly been introduced into the sealed room. This heightened the fear of the immediate possibility of death. The character Sophie began bleeding first, and as the blood flowed down her leg it evoked the powerful image of menstrual blood. After her, each actor who began bleeding had to decide where it would come from. One actor decided to begin bleeding from her palms, referencing stigmata. The possibility of contamination further divided the captives as Phillip tried to keep himself separate from those who seemed to be infected. Other characters decided instead to reach out and clasp hands with those who were bleeding, in solidarity with them.

In a desperate attempt at some sort of legacy, each of the characters placed a bloody handprint on the “wall” of their prison as they made a final statement. The play was open ended, leaving audiences with the intriguing possibility that there was no single explanation for what had happened to the trapped young people. Rather, the experience had meant something different to each one of them.

Our larger soundscape consisted of both live music, musical sequences created by one of the students using the Garage Band program, and sound effects created live by the actors and recorded by our technical crew. Our student composer began work in March, but continued to revise his soundscapes right up until our July performance. It was the first time he had done such work and the process was arduous, fraught with both technical and musical difficulties. The end result included some very haunting sequences that opened and closed the show and set the emotional tone for what was to follow.

The play presented a formidable acting challenge because each of the ten actors was onstage for the entire seventy minutes of the play. At no time could they break out of character, and this made their own personal relationships even more demanding. Probably due to the exhausting nature of the show we had one emotional breakdown in Edinburgh. One actor slipped out of the final rehearsal before our

opening, went to her room and refused to come out. Several students took it in turns helping her through it. Everyone recognized that we were only as strong as our weakest member. Every member of the team had embraced the discipline of a rigorous schedule of rehearsals and shows. Each member of our company was integral to the team. If someone was careless and didn't support their fellow actor in a physical scene, it could result in injury. When one actor was late and missed the bus to the theatre for a show it affected us all. There was no replacement and we just had to hope that she would get there by herself, which she did.

My fellow chaperone was our professional set and costume designer and he asked each of the actors to help choose what their characters would wear. One of our students designed the lights and our team had to solve many technical problems together, including the realization that we would not be able to use any solid walls to create our prison space. We decided to define the "walls" of our playing area with light, but we had no exact knowledge of the number and quality of lighting instruments we would be able to access in Edinburgh. When we arrived in Edinburgh, we had just two hours for our technical rehearsal in the Church Hill Theatre. All of us were assigned different tasks, and I had to let go of any directorial control and just trust the students to do their jobs. Our student lighting designer immediately went to work with the theatre's resident electrician and recreated our new lighting design. The actors learned the backstage parameters from the resident stage manager and established where we could store our few props. Because there were no scene changes and no actors were ever off stage, our student stage manager was free to run the follow spot, and our sound operator adjusted our computer adaptors to U.K. electric outlets.

We used quite a few blood packs in the show, and everyone had to learn how to work with stage blood. It was our designer's recipe and he carefully prepared the packs for each show, but their placement and the subsequent cleaning of the used blood from the stage floor had to be meticulously done for each performance. We were required to leave the stage bare, clean, and dry for the next show's load in, which began immediately after we vacated the space. So everyone was involved in cleaning up the stage floor, and collecting the props and costumes. Throughout the process of working on this show, the responsibility and initiative had to come from the students, just as it would have with any adult company bringing a new piece to the Fringe.

The students were also required to publicize our show, and actively

engage in recruiting an audience, just like the professional performers at the Fringe. We had a performance time slot on one of the open stages on the Royal Mile. From there we advertised our show to the crowds of people that passed by. The students went out in groups of three or four, busking through the streets, handing out publicity cards, engaging with the masses of tourists from all over the world, and putting up posters around the city. One of our students took responsibility for creating a Facebook page and Twitter feeds for the show, and she “followed” certain Fringe publications so that our show would develop a profile within the larger Fringe conversation. She also created our show logo after incorporating suggestions from all of us, and we used her design for our poster and program.

Any professional theater experience includes reviews, and we were very lucky to have our performance reviewed by *BroadwayBaby.com*, one of the major Fringe publications (Hobbs). We received a four star rating out of a five star maximum. The review affirmed that not only had the process been a valuable learning experience for the students, the product we created together was exceptional. For the students, the review served as a validation of their work as serious artists in the world of adult professional theater.

Our experience could provide an alternative, collaborative model for students to work with professional theater artists on pieces that express students’ concerns about their world to the larger community while learning high-level design, production, and presentation skills. For example, during the summer before Scotland was to vote on whether to leave the United Kingdom, a Scottish youth theater group performed an original piece at the Fringe expressing their opinions on the issue. Their show was deemed important enough to be reviewed by *The New York Times* (McElroy, 2014). Productions in professional spaces validate students’ experiences in the larger, adult world and provide an outlet for them to communicate their concerns to the wider community outside their school. The in-school residencies that many professional theaters have developed are based on the arts integration model, in which the art form is the subject of study and is engaged with as another way to connect to previously established curriculum content. Theater artists lead students in research, workshops, writing exercises, and performance of short scenes taken from content chosen by adults. Surveying the in-school residency programs from the websites of the Alley Theatre in Houston, the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, the Walnut

Street Theatre in Philadelphia, the Inside Broadway Company and Roundabout Theatre in New York, and the Chicago theaters with which Senn High School collaborates, it is clear these programs do not engage students in actually creating and producing plays as a part of their *in-school* curriculum. There is a difference between theater as an art form and theater as a learning tool. The artistic space is “a space of risk, uncertainty, chaos, and questioning.” (Falconi, 2015, p. 161) The educational space is often more concerned with limits, and safe structures. Our experience with *Americans in Breshkistan* suggests that students are more than capable of entering the artistic space and collaborating with adult artists to create their own content, form their own company, and realize a theatrical production at a mature, professional level. A theater class designed to create and perform original work in a professional context teaches students discipline and offers authentic assessments built into every stage of the experience as students and teachers hold themselves accountable to adult standards of artistic excellence.

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