

# YOUTH THEATRE JOURNAL

Published by American Alliance for Theatre and Education:  
Artists and Educators Serving Young People K-12

1991

Volume 5, Number **4**



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# Children of the World: A Multi-Cultural Drama Program in a Multi-Cultural Environment

by Carmine Tabone and Robert Albrecht

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## Abstract

*In the multi-ethnic community of Jersey City, an arts and drama program serves as a means of celebrating and exploring cultural diversity. Beginning with a dramatization of the Tower of Babel myth, the program embarks upon a seven week series of workshops that introduce children to the art, music, and traditional stories of various cultures. The program concludes with a festival of plays whereby the children dramatize stories they have learned from different parts of the globe.*

It's Monday morning at PS 17 in Jersey City. A hundred children are sitting together in a large circle on the second floor of an old brick schoolhouse on Duncan Avenue. Their faces reflect the ethnic diversity of Jersey City: Korean, Irish, Egyptian, Italian, African, Vietnamese, Colombian, Indian, Haitian, Greek, Puerto Rican, Polish, Filipino, Native American and on and on it goes. The costumes they're wearing this morning, however, reveal something totally different. One group is dressed in folk costumes from Asia and sits beside a pagoda. Another group, near a hut suggesting an African village, is wearing African hats. A third group, in front of a castle, is dressed in the costumes of medieval European knights and a fourth group, sitting by a tepee, sports feathers and face paint. The "Children of the World" pageant is about to begin.

The "Children of the World" pageant is a creation of the Educational Arts Team. The Educational Arts Team was founded in 1974 with the goal of enhancing the quality of education for the children of Jersey City by employing the natural power of the arts to engage the

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Carmine Tabone is the founder (1974) and director of the Educational Arts Team. Tabone's involvement with community arts originated with his participation as an organizer of youth theatre groups and street festivals during the 1960s in his old neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He has also served as a Regional Governor (Mid-Atlantic) of the Children's Theatre Association of America and uses drama in his work with inmates at the Orange County Jail in New York. Tabone received his Master's in Educational Theatre from New York University.

Robert Albrecht functions as the Educational Arts Team's resident musician and media specialist. His main area of interest is ethnic music and culture and he has performed with several multi-ethnic ensembles. Albrecht received his Master's from the University of Wisconsin and his Doctorate in Media Ecology from New York University. He is the author of several articles concerning the relationship of art and everyday life, and is fluent in both Spanish and Portuguese.

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whole child. Our first project had been the formation of a youth theatre group composed of adolescents gathered from the five city high schools to put on original productions. The staff, at that time, consisted of individuals with strong backgrounds in theatre who were interested in putting on plays that they had conceptualized and believed would be of benefit to young people. As the staff changed, the team began to move away from theatrical productions. What evolved was a workshop approach that could reach a larger number of young people with an increased emphasis on process rather than presentation. The Educational Arts Team has always been a culturally and ethnically diverse company and multi-cultural understanding has been a major goal of the team's work since its beginnings.

In 1978, the principal of the Martin Luther King School (PS 11) asked the Educational Arts Team to prepare a program in commemoration of the International Year of the Child. After some brainstorming, we decided to develop a program that would celebrate the multi-cultural character of our community and mirror its ethnic diversity. We were fortunate at that time to have Billy Stogden, an Apache Mexican-American, and Katy Mbanefo, a Nigerian, as company members contributing their cultural perspective to our planning and creative process. Based upon our experience as artists and educators, we believed that any program which aimed at achieving these goals would be more effective if it was interactive and involved hands-on experiences. We researched the art, music, stories, crafts, and costumes of other cultures and eventually came up with a seven week series of activities that could channel the creative energy of children and meet the multi-cultural goals we had set for our program.

We came upon the traditional stories and myths of different cultures and were struck by the timeless quality of these teachings. Here were ancient stories, fables, fairy tales, and myths that had gone through centuries of change, development, and refinement which truly reflected the human condition. The central themes and questions raised and addressed by this body of folklore seemed to us to be as relevant in 1978 as it was centuries ago and still is today: themes of love and hatred, revenge and forgiveness, selfishness and sharing, war and peace; questions of the inner journey to maturity and of the ultimate nature and meaning of creation. Our next step was to decide which of these many stories were most appropriate as dramatic presentations and would speak clearly to the multi-ethnic community of Jersey City.

We found that this research and selection process was to go on for years. Until this day, we continually replace

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the four central stories originally dramatized so that stories from additional cultures are also represented. We have also continued to strive to hire artists and consultants from the cultural and ethnic groups from which the particular stories originate. These artists help us develop the stories into performance pieces and to structure and lead the workshops. For example, co-author of this article, Bob Albrecht, did his master's and doctoral work in Brazil and his wife, Patricia Charnay-Meza, is a Chilean artist who designed costumes and masks for a South American story called "Bird of Many Colors." Kuan-Yu Fong, a Peking Opera dancer from Taiwan, assisted in developing and danced the lead in a piece called "Monkey and the White Bone Demon," an episode from a Chinese epic, *Journey to the West*. We have done a number of African stories and each time hired African-American dancers specializing in African dance to do the choreography. African-American storyteller, Ameerah Ahmed worked with the company for several seasons. It would be impossible to give credit to all these artists in this article, but their artistry and their particular cultural perspectives have enriched our work immeasurably.

The seven week series that constitutes "Children of the World" begins with an adaptation of the Tower of Babel story which we present as a theatrical piece to the children. An idyllic community becomes confrontational and non-cooperative and suddenly finds that it is unable to communicate amongst its members. The monoculture of Babel is then cast to the four corners of the earth and the beginnings of our multi-cultural world are set into motion. The children—who have been an audience up until now—are then divided into one of the four groups representing the great geographical regions of the world: Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. Each of the four classes selected for the program is then assigned a region to study. The children begin the seven week workshop series focusing on the arts and drama of the particular culture to which their class has been assigned.

Certainly there is an oversimplification in summarizing the myriad of the world's cultures into just four groups and linking cultural conflict to a mythical incident that transpired an eon ago in a land called Babel. It is also an oversimplification to select any one story to represent the many different peoples that comprise each of these groups. But, for the children, this framework serves to structure and set the stage for engaging many of the cultural misunderstandings, apprehensions, and prejudices of which they are, in all likelihood, both proponents and victims. What we really want to do is to provide children with a forum in a safe, non-threatening space where they can be proud of their own heritage whatever their ethnicity might be while, at the same time, giving them the opportunity to become aware of other cultures and to learn to see some of the beauty, excitement, and wisdom there. Moreover, the structure is such that stories, songs, and games can be easily replaced so that, over time, many different nations have been represented. The Americas, for example, have been represented by stories from Chile, Central America, and the Plains Indians of North America. Songs have come from Mexico, the black south, and Canada; games from Puerto Rico, Brazil, and Alaska have been included.

This mutual respect of cultures can be facilitated by an experiential approach. We feel it isn't enough to just rationalize or moralize to children that all cultures are

valid, for ethnic prejudice is largely an emotional response to the Babel-like confusion in which we live.

Once a week for a period of an hour and a half, students work in their classrooms with a team of two artists who lead workshops in the cultural region to which they have been assigned. Songs, games, stories, and art projects indigenous to the assigned area are introduced, some of which are incorporated in the final presentation. After much debate, it was decided that the role of the classroom teacher should be marginal. It was discovered that teachers often inhibited their class' ability to respond creatively, punished children too severely, and frequently lost sight of the project as a joyful celebration as well as an educational experience. The role of the teacher continues to be a subject of debate for, with more teacher involvement, the possibilities of extending the material across the curriculum are greatly enhanced.

By the sixth week of the seven week series, children are taken to the performance space—ideally a large open space without chairs or interruption—to rehearse their play. The main parts in the story are played by team members so that children are not pressured into learning lines to be mumbled before an audience. The emphasis, once again, is not on performance but on the symbolic gathering of the world's cultures in a celebration of sharing.

At the conclusion of the seven week series, the four groups are reunited for the first time since the Tower of Babel dramatization. None of the groups know exactly what the other groups have been working on and there is usually a burst of delighted surprise as each witnesses the other file into the space set aside for the pageant. The children are in full costumes, parts of which they made themselves. Art work created during the series is incorporated into the scenery for each story and each group sings a song to welcome the others to the circle. At this point, one by one, the groups begin to present, through drama, a story indigenous to their culture. This time, the African group has dramatized an ancient Nigerian myth, "Why the Sun and the Moon Live in the Sky." The Asian group follows with "The Statues of Jizo" from Japan. The American group then presents a Plains Indians story concerning the yearly battle of the North and South winds. The European group enacts the story of "The Princess That Couldn't Laugh."

The children are proud of their own performances and delighted by those of their friends in other classes. The dramatizations are punctuated with songs from various cultures as a festive spirit fills the space. After the last group has presented its story, the actors who dramatized the Tower of Babel story weeks earlier reappear, this time dressed as American Indians. This group then reenacts the healing ceremony of the Iroquois Federation whereby Hiawatha, the great spiritual leader, finally succeeds in bringing together the warring tribes, who vow to live in peace. The pageant closes with everyone singing "Children of the World," a song written especially for the pageant by a Team member.

Perhaps it was naive, but part of the thinking behind the project was that we would touch children on an emotional and spiritual level as well as on a level that was educational and cultural. The symbolic disintegration of the family of man enacted in the Tower of Babel story comes full circle into a reintegration of wholeness as expressed in the coming together of the four corners

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of the earth during the festival pageant. The Hiawatha legend represents a ritual healing of the ethnic division and hatred that so characterize our present-day world.

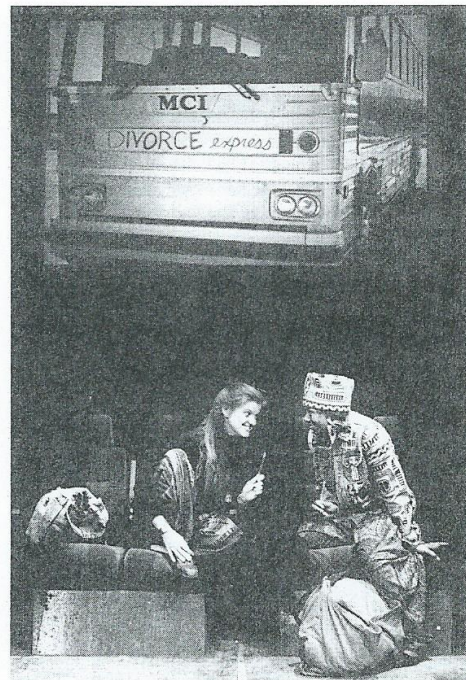
The "Children of the World" pageant has gone on to involve children in several different neighborhoods, touring schools, churches, and day camps throughout Jersey City. The program has proved enormously popular with children, teachers, parents, and the media. It is colorful, entertaining, and, to a large extent, we believe it has succeeded in its goals of introducing children to the varied traditions of the world's different cultures and symbolically healing the rifts of ethnic misunderstanding.

For the first four or five years, in one form or another, we polished and modified the program as a centerpiece for our approach to drama in multi-cultural education. It has been a concept with which we've been able to use a lot of different stories, so we've never gotten bored with it. In subsequent years, the same format has been used to present such stories as "The Gorgon's Head" and "The Kvetch" from Europe; "The Legend of Naha" and "Bird of Many Colors" from the Americas; "The Snore and the Song" and "How Spider Got a Bald Head" from Africa; and "The Old Man with a Wart" and "The Hunter and the Quails" from Asia.

Commenting on our work, the late dramatist and author Miriam Morton suggested that we build more on each child's own ethnic background so that the pageant would have an even stronger and more authentic multi-cultural basis. The children, she urged, should do some research into their own culture and share some of what they are with others, enhancing their own pride and self-esteem. Subsequently, we have encouraged children we meet in the classroom, on the street, or at our day camp to teach us songs, games, and stories from their native cultures which are frequently incorporated into our work and disseminated to a wider audience. We are also now asking parents to become more involved with multi-cultural projects by helping with costumes, arts, songs and in any other way that might present itself.

We have also found a need to process more deeply the cultural material which comes to the surface during such a project. It is essential that we really look at our personal understanding of the material shared, the group's understanding of it, and the larger dimensions and applications of it. While it's important that the kids are proud of something they have created and that they now have a context on which to hang ideas about Africa, Asia, and the rest of the world, it is equally important to start to make applications of what we learn in our everyday lives. We need to make sense of what's going on within our own neighborhoods, on our streets, within our families, and within our own personal experiences.

In order to assist in making the learning more meaningful and more profound, we have incorporated what is called "the experiential learning cycle" into the program. During the course of the workshop, the individual shares his or her own personal reactions with the group. What did they learn about themselves, what did they learn about each other? How can they apply it to their own lives? Each reaction is carefully considered and taken seriously. The workshop leader assists the children in articulating their points of view as the children are asked to evaluate the activity as a group experience. Finally, the children are asked to relate the activity to



Tracy Iwersen (l.) and Margaret Pierson-Bates in *The Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre production of The Divorce Express* by Gail Erwin, based on the book by Paula Danziger and directed by Roberta Larson, Omaha, Nebraska. Photo by James Keller.

other aspects of their lives and to their personal environment. These reactions often lead to other activities that can deepen and enhance meaning still further through the exploration of what we as educators and artists now understand of the children's preoccupations and concerns.

Another program we created in order to help our audiences apply material from drama to their own lives is a series of multi-cultural human relations workshops that use drama to deal with such situations as being a victim of an ethnic attack or that of an immigrant experiencing the cultural isolation in his new American environment. These workshops have been heavily influenced by the philosophies and methods of Gavin Bolton. With this same goal in mind, we are also developing a piece about the violence in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics. The performance will be followed by a series of drama activities to help audience members find the parallels to situations they face on the streets in their own neighborhoods where racial, rather than religious, conflicts predominate. Issues of racial prejudice and violence are very sensitive and volatile here and we feel that distance will enhance, rather than diminish, their understanding.

If, as O'Neill and Lambert (1982, 11) maintain, drama is a way that students "can come to understand them-



selves and the real world in which they live," what kinds of understandings can programs such as "Children of the World" hope to bring about? A great advantage of working with children is that they are out there on the street constantly interacting with other children in the community. Most adults tend to be very set in their routines and unable or unwilling to give themselves completely to new experiences. In a very real and practical sense, therefore, children must be the foundation of a truly multi-cultural society. The arts stimulate and challenge children, enhancing their natural curiosity, and can lead them down roads that open the doors of perception. The global village is upon us and, yet, walls are continually being thrown up to separate one group from another. Multi-cultural education focusing on drama and the arts can be used to dissolve these walls and help children break through to new friendships, new interactions, and yes, even new understandings.

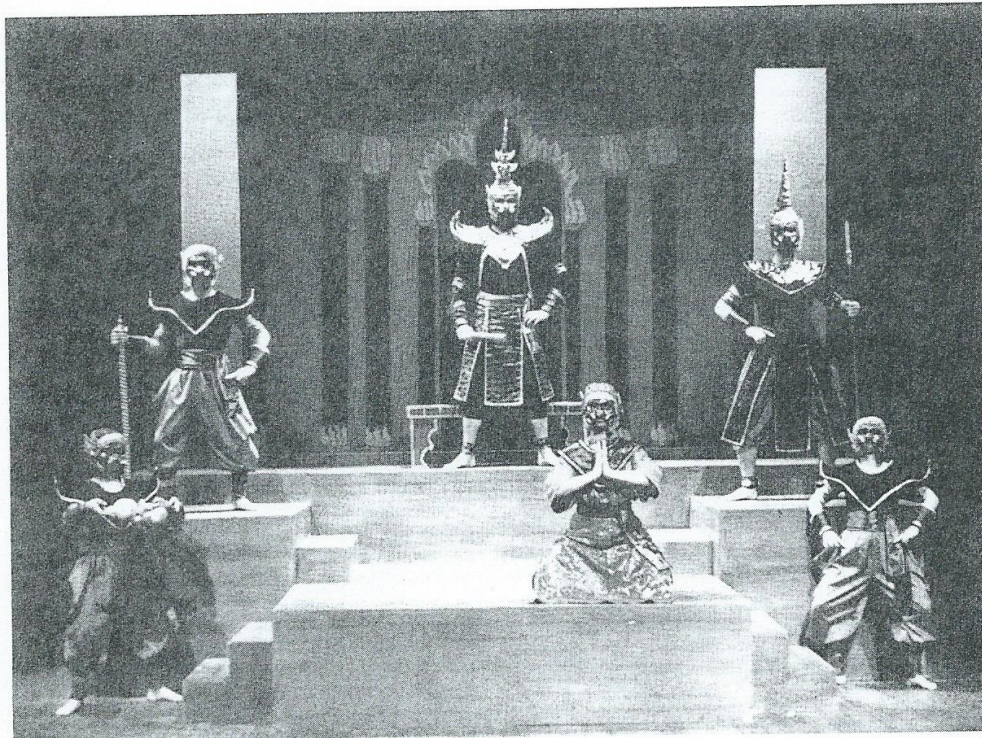
Is it too idealistic to believe that Martin Luther King's (1963) vision of "all God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics," joining hands might really come to pass through community based art and drama? We believe it is the most effective way. The arts originally existed as an integral part of community life, as a celebration of shared humanity. Art

is connection. We don't see art as the mad artist alone in his attic creating a masterpiece to be hidden away in a dusty museum. The origin of art, and the reason for art, was to bring people together: people singing together, dancing together, telling stories, and putting on rituals together. And it is still a unifying experience whether it is in the forest, on the plains, in the classroom or on the streets because it is these experiences which make us fully human. In a place like Jersey City where there are so many cultures coming together for the first time, we can either compete with and exploit each other—which is the way it is usually done—or else we can try to lay the groundwork by which people can come together, cooperate, share, and create something totally new and fascinating. After all, the promise of the United States that is printed on every coin is "E Pluribus Unum," a Latin phrase meaning "Out of many, one." Art is the vehicle that makes such an ideal a possibility.

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Arizona State University Theatre Department's production of *Ramayana*, adapted by Donna Bartz, directed by Parichat Jungwiwattanaporn, Tempe, Arizona. Photo by Lyle Beitman.

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