

# Using Student-Written Theatrical Adaptations of California Immigrant Literature to Increase Socioeconomic and Ethnic Diversity in a High School Theatre Training Program

Implementation Project for NEH Immigration Institute by Ellen Koivisto

## OVERVIEW

Art is about problem solving. Therefore, involving theatre students in real-world arts problem solving is good training, allows students to build resume material, and is an efficient use of available public school resources.

U.S. theatre is generally perceived as being for and by the white middle and upper classes, and mostly about the males of these classes. This perception has an impact on who feels welcome to participate in high school theatre departments and who sees the possibility of a career in theatre for themselves. This situation has produced a Catch-22 for American theatre: the roles available and the stories being told are white, middle-class and male so there is little incentive for anyone not fitting that demographic to attempt to make a living in theatre, making it less likely a theatre interested in other voices can find the resources necessary to put on shows that are not white, middle-class and male. This is a problem because a limited artistic pool limits the stories that are told. Aligned with this problem is the abundance of females interested in theatre and the dearth of female employment opportunities available.

Solutions to this problem are to increase the diversity of stories being told in theatre and to increase the pool of people doing theatre in US. This implementation plan focuses on ways to increase the pool of people training to do theatre.

## BACKGROUND

Our urban school district has a choice enrollment system, which means that in order to have ethnic, language, and socio-economic diversity our high school must be on the radar of the middle school student population. Our school is well known among the wealthier and more academically aware students and their parents but not among the poorer and less academically aware populations. One possible solution to this problem is to create targeted outreach to the specific groups in our district who are under-represented in our theatre department, and for this outreach to center on middle schools in our district.

## OBJECTIVE

Part 1 – to engage theatre students in problem-solving methods to increase recruitment of targeted underrepresented groups. Part 2 – to have students select, adapt, produce and perform plays from the immigrant literature of California to these targeted students.

## HYPOTHESIS

Firstly, that enlisting high school students in identifying and creating solutions to problems of equity and representation in American theatre will assist them in future theatre work and be applicable in future problem-solving situations. And secondly, that high school theatre participation by currently underrepresented populations will be increased by creating and touring plays that reflect the life experiences of targeted middle school student populations.

## REQUIREMENTS

### Part 1 – Brainstorming Solutions

Recommended for Advanced theatre students as some background in the discipline will be needed and experience in playwriting and new play production is vital.

Paper and pencils, or other methods of recording ideas.

A circular space or seating arrangement where all can speak and be seen by everyone participating.

### Part 2 – Creating Adaptations

Books of the California immigrant experience

Method to contact the writers of the above books

Selections of filmed stage adaptations (recommended – see list in Resources below)

Production equipment, possibly including costumes, sound, etc.

## PRE-ACTIVITY

If there is a nearby LORT or Midsize Theatre Contract house, after a show (not a student matinee) have students discuss who and what they saw in the audience and who and what they saw on stage and compare these observations to the demographics of the area in which they live and/or in which the theatre is located.

## PROCEDURE

### Part 1 – Brainstorming Solutions

1. Have students split into groups, present them with the problem (this can be done graphically, visually, numerically, demographically – usually schools have detailed socio-economic and ethnicity information readily available), and give the groups 15 minutes in which to brainstorm possible solutions. Tell them the more solutions they can present, and the more detailed those solutions are, the better.

Alternatively, if scaffolding to this activity is thought necessary, first present student groups with smaller problem-solving tasks in the same form (brainstorming, presentations, discussion) before assigning them the problem of attracting more socio-economically and ethnically diverse students into the theatre department. These preliminary scaffolding tasks can include figuring out the calendar and time of day information for *Romeo and Juliet*, presenting a rough plan for producing *Tokens* with a budget of \$30, figuring out how to make and sell to an audience a magic mirror that is both a functioning entrance/exit and that reflects, etc. The problems presented should be

real, and if they have immediate relevance to the theatre department and/or the theatre students so much the better. Then present the problem and give the groups 15 minutes to brainstorm.

2. Ask each group to present their solution/s one at a time to the whole group. The whole group is encouraged to ask questions and offer suggestions or seek clarifications to any presented solution. One person in each group should be record-keeping the details of their solution/s.

3. The solutions should then be reviewed and ranked by multiple criteria by the whole group. These criteria should include time necessary for implementation, resources needed for implementation, sources for those resources, and likely results, and may include other pertinent considerations.

4. The solutions and rankings will be collected by the teacher, collated and typed up, copied, and redelivered to the participating students the next day, and posting in a theatre room is highly recommended. This is, after all, a long-term departmental project.

5. Likely possible solutions will include outreach performances of relevant plays by high school students to middle schools. Touring shows can be done with little to nothing in terms of props, costumes, sound, lights, and set, and transportation to middle schools can often be accomplished fairly easily using district resources. A bigger barrier is a lack of relevant plays, and budget constraints for rights to the few plays out there that are spot on. These barriers lead directly to Part 2.

#### Part 2 – Creating Adaptations

1. Students should already have had some practice in playwriting and in working with scripts written by others, both from a performance perspective and in terms of structural analysis (i.e. does this scene forward the action, does this character have an arc, is the diction character specific, are the mechanics of getting actors on and off the stage adequately considered, etc.)

2. The teacher and students need to be very specific about the assignment. The goal is to produce plays that speak of the lives and experiences of the targeted underrepresented middle school students; they need to be able to in some way recognize themselves in the plays. To achieve this goal, a number of practical questions need to be answered, either by the teacher or by the teacher and students: play length, play language or languages, play audience (age considerations), cast size and cast gender breakdown, costume limitations, and technical limitations. There may be more specific issues that must be predetermined depending on the department.

3. Have individual students or groups do research into plays that have tried to solve parts of this problem and present back to the writing group what seems to work and what doesn't. *Lupe and the F-Train Monster*, for example, does a good job of putting the story of the less often seen New York City Puerto Rican community on stage, but it is clearly not about life on the west coast. El Teatro Campesino had different goals, focusing on

workers rights and social justice, but targeted some of the same demographic groups. Participatory theatre comes in many different flavors, such as *Here Lies Love*, *Gospel at Colonus*, the Living Theatre, *Sleep No More*, and Antenna Theater; looking at what these groups did and how they accomplished it can be very informative if getting middle school students actively involved in the pieces is desired.

4. Then students, either in small writing groups (2-3 students per group) or as individuals, do a search of the literature available on the lives of the targeted group/s. There is a list of some possible story sources in the RESOURCES section below.

5. The student-written pieces go through the established play development process at the school (multiple readings and rewrites, staged readings, invited audience for a workshop production, etc.) Sometime early in this process, the student adapters should try to contact the authors of the source materials to ask permission and tell the authors what they are doing. It is never too early to begin teaching about copyright issues.

6. While the scripts are being developed, the students, teacher, and administration do outreach to targeted middle schools, offering to tour free shows to the targeted schools within a limited timeframe (it's probably best to offer dates in a two-week spread, during the school day, keeping testing and holiday schedules in mind).

7. The students and the teacher construct online and printed materials giving background both for the pieces traveling to the schools and about the high school and theatre program.

8. A calendar of performance dates is constructed, field trip permission slips go out and are collected, performance materials are secured and set up for transport, printed information about the school and theatre department should be created and copied and taken to performances, transportation is obtained, the authors (where relevant) are invited to the shows, parent chaperones are solicited, and the tour goes out to the targeted middle schools.

9. Students and the teacher follow-up after the pieces are toured. Follow-up should include providing contact information to any interested middle school students and their parents, contacting the teachers and administrators at the middle schools to ask what worked and to ask for suggestions for next year, contacting the middle school counselor to provide information about admissions to the high school theatre program, and debriefing the ensemble in detail about impressions and suggestions.

## RESOURCES

Possible story sources include:

Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston

The Circuit by Francisco Jimenez

The Arrival by Shaun Tan

Perfume Dreams by Andrew Lam  
Working Cotton by Sherley Anne Williams and Carole Byard  
Shanghai Girls by Lisa See  
The Dragon's Child by Laurence Yep  
Children of the Great Depression by Russell Freedman  
Children of the Wild West by Russell Freedman  
Esperanza Rising by Pam Munoz Ryan  
Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell  
Becoming Naomi Leon by Pam Munoz Ryan  
Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart by Vera B. Williams  
One Crazy Summer by Rita Williams-Garcia  
Grandfather's Journey by Allen Say  
Charlotte's Rose by A.E. Cannon  
Desirable Daughters by Bharati Mukherjee  
An American Brat by Bapsi Sidhwa  
Through Harsh Winters by Akemi Kikumura  
The Human Comedy by William Saroyan  
Two Years Before the Mast by Richard Henry Dana Jr.  
Citizen 13660 by Mine Okubo

Some pre-existing play resources include:

*Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez

*The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance* by Diane Glancy

*Lupe and the F-Train Monster* by Marco Ramirez

*Bocon* by Lisa Loomer,

*49* by Hanay Geiogamah

*Letters to a Student Revolutionary* by Elizabeth Wong

### ASSESSMENT

Ultimately, the success or failure of this activity will be seen in the long-term demographic numbers for the theatre program as well as for the audience. Shorter term assessments can be done by looking at participation, richness of ideas, follow-through, college or professional or community theatre placements, new theatre companies formed by participants in the activity, and scripts developed in this process being professionally done.