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

by Carmine Tabone and Robert Albrecht

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 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, and the 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...
the four central stories originally dramatized so that sto-
ries from additional cultures are also represented. We
have also continued to strive to hire artists and consult-
ants from the cultural and ethnic groups from which
the particular stories originate. These artists help us de-
velop the stories into performable 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 Chi-
lean artist who designed costumes and masks for a South
American story called "Birds 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 has been dramatized
by African-American dancers specializing in African
dance to do the choreography. African-American storyteller, Ameera
Ahmed worked with the company for several seasons.
It would be impossible to give credit to all those in
this article, but their artistry and their particular cul-
tural perspectives have enriched our work immeasurably.

The seven week series that constitutes "Children of the
World" begins with an adaptation of the story of the Tower of
Babel. Several stories are set in this part of the
children. An idyllic community becomes confrontational
and non-cooperative and suddenly finds that it is unable
to communicate amongst its members. The monochrome
of Babel is then cast to the four corners of the earth and the
beginnings of the multicultural world are set into
motion. The children—who have been an audience up
untill now—are then divided into one of the four groups
representing the four corners of the world: Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. Each of the four
groups meets 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 summariz-
ing the myriad of the world's cultures into just four
groups and linking cultural conflict to a mythical incident
that transpired on a land called Babel. It is also an oversimplification to select any one story to re-

present 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 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, 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 sto-

dies, 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 In-
dians 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 re-
sponse to the Babel-like confusion in which we live.

Once a week for a period of an hour and a half, stu-
dents work in their classrooms with a team of two
artists who lead workshops in the cultural region
they have been assigned. Songs, stories, games, 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
continued as 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—the 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
tasks to be learned by as if before an audience. The emphasis,
once again, is not on performance but on the symbolic
aspect of the world's cultures in a celebration of shar-
ing.

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 what
the other groups have been working on and there
is usually a burst of delight as each witnesses the
other's contribution. The children are in full costume, parts of which they
made themselves. Art work created during the series is
incorporated into the set as 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 Nig-
erian 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 Indian 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 cultures as diverse
as the songs fill the space. After the last group has presented its story, the actors who dramatized
the Tower of Babel stories earlier reappear, this
time dressed as American Indians. This group then reen-
acts the healing ceremony of the Iroquois Federation
whereby Hiawatha, the great spiritual leader, finally suc-
ceds 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 Teacher member.

Perhaps it was naive, but part of the thinking behind
the project was that we would teach children on an
emotional and spiritual level as well as on a level that
was educational and cultural. The symbolic disintegra-
tion 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 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 worked with 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 argued, 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 our classroom, on the streets, or at children's 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 by the group's experiences 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 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

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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 on surprising journeys 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 yet, 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.

REFERENCES


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