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BEYOND THE STAGE: A CASE STUDY OF PROGRAM EVALUATION

Patrick K. Freer

“What do we want to know?” That simple question guides each step of an evaluation plan, whether the focus of the evaluation is student learning, teacher effectiveness, or the audience reaction to a play. The responses to that question, properly interpreted, can guide us in our quest to build ever-stronger programs in theatre for young people. Young Audiences of New Jersey’s development of a new play provided many opportunities for evaluation, both of the play and of the evaluation process itself. This article chronicles the development of some of our evaluation tools, what we learned from them, and how they influenced the production of this new play.

Project Background

As the state’s largest provider of arts programs and services, Young Audiences of New Jersey has taken a leadership role in the arts community’s relationship with the New Jersey State Department of Education. Out of this work came the 1995 creation of “And Then They Came For Me” (Still 1999) that drew its inspiration from the curriculum materials generated for state-mandated K-12 implementation of Holocaust education. Originally commissioned by Young Audiences and George Street Playhouse, “And Then

"They Came For Me" is geared for secondary school students, employing video and audio clips of Holocaust survivors as a type of documentary that illuminates the live actions of actors on a stage.

The local and national productions of "And Then They Came For Me" generated a huge number of requests for a theatre project dealing with similar themes, but more appropriate for younger audiences. Several years ago, a book caught our eye as potential source material for a new production for elementary students. "The Christmas Menorahs: How A Town Fought Hate" (Cohn 1995) tells the true story of a Jewish family in Billings, Montana that experienced anti-Semitic hate crimes around the time of 1993's Hanukkah observance. The violence spilled over into acts and threats against the town's Jewish cemetery and synagogue, prompting the townspeople to take an active stand against prejudice and ultimately defeat those responsible. "The Christmas Menorahs" has won over a dozen national awards for children's literature. When we found that the author lived only miles from our offices, we contacted her and began to conceptualize a theatrical realization of the story.

The result was a co-commission/production of Young Audiences of New Jersey and the Catskill Puppet Theatre. Catskill's artistic staff and Dr. Cohn collaborated on a script, and made use of multiple types of puppetry to bring the story to life – including life-size puppets, shadow puppets, masks, and a complete soundtrack of original music. The resulting production, "The Town That Fought Hate," was field-tested with audiences of teachers, students, religious leaders, and theatre educators during the 2000-01 school year, and the production began extensive school programming in New Jersey in addition to a national tour in 2001-02.

Illuminating The Issues Through Evaluation

The development of “The Town That Fought Hate” was accompanied by a number of issues and concerns that arose at various points during the process. The staff at Young Audiences utilized several common evaluation methods to both guide our answers to these issues and identify others that we’ll want to explore in the future. Some of what we learned through the evaluation procedures surprised us, and the program became infinitely better because of the evaluations. Perhaps a more important lesson, however, was learned from the quality of answers we received to different types of evaluation materials.

Many teaching artists and theatre education organizations judge the reactions of teachers and other audience members through their responses to surveys and questionnaires. The construction and content of those evaluation instruments can provide opportunities for honest and unpredictable responses. On the other hand, those same types of evaluations can be formatted to encourage responses that tell us what we *want* to hear rather than what we *need* to hear.

Closed versus Open-Ended Questions

Early in 1999, Young Audiences of New Jersey consulted with several nationally recognized experts on assessment to redesign our evaluation surveys for teachers. The surveys we had been using were almost entirely open-ended, with questions like, “What

did you enjoy most about this program?” The problem was that we were not receiving thoughtful responses. Most of the replies were either blank or consisted of brief responses like “great,” or “enjoyable.” We wanted more substantive information, though we realized that most teachers responding to our educational surveys would need to complete the form in about sixty seconds.

We developed a survey form with three sections on the same side of an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper. First is a forced-choice, “yes/no” section designed to yield basic information about the program (e.g. “Were the performers ready to begin the performance on time?”). The main portion of the new evaluation form is a group of six statements rated on a semantic differential scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, etc...). To encourage teachers to more carefully consider their responses, two of these six items are stated negatively (e.g. “There was a *low* level of audience participation”). The third section of the survey is a single, open-ended prompt: “Comments and suggestions for future programming, etc.”

Lessons Learned From the Evaluation Forms

The 2000-01 school year was filled with school performance field tests of “The Town That Fought Hate.” After initial screenings for staff and invited consultants, we took the program directly into schools where we gathered both anecdotal data and specific teacher responses via the newly revised evaluation form.

The data gathered from these forms confirmed what we had been hearing during initial screenings: the program was potentially frightening to kindergarteners. At this point, the Young Audiences staff had the data to back up our request to limit the bookings to children in grades 1 through 6. When some members of the creative team objected to the age limitations, we were able to state that 13 of 15 (87%) kindergarten teachers in the field tests recommended against performances for kindergarten youngsters.

Data such as this greatly assists in efforts to promote change in a program. Helpful as our survey form was, it encouraged responses to only the information we had predetermined to be of importance. The survey form contained the question, “Was the program appropriate for the grade levels attending?” but the information that assisted us the most came from the open-ended space at the end of the form. Without that option, we might never have heard that the theatrical devices were frightening kids; otherwise, we might have assumed that these teachers felt the subject matter was too mature. This would have been incorrect. It was only through the persistence of the teachers who “wrote around the form” that we received their intended message.

We specifically incorporated several ideas from teachers. For instance, one special education teacher in a primary school wrote, “How about introducing the puppets and puppeteers *before* the play rather than after it is over? This would help alleviate anxiety in smaller children.” Whereas we had been demonstrating the theatrical/puppetry devices following each performance, we decided to move the explanation to the beginning of the program. As testimony to the importance of listening to teachers, we

have received no complaints about age-appropriateness in subsequent performances where we were able to fully implement the teacher suggestions.

Field-testing and the gathering of evaluations are always necessary to tighten a program's delivery, content, and educational message. Our experience is also a reminder that teachers can be our greatest sources of ideas and our strongest advocates when we include them in the development process for a new educational venture.

Thinking Big: A Conference Organized Around Evaluation

Our evaluation forms were not providing all of the information we needed to make this program fully effective. We needed to link this theatrical production to the mandated K-12 classroom curricula on Holocaust and genocide. While the evaluation forms told us much about what "The Town That Fought Hate" *was*, they told us little about what *could be*.

As news of the puppet play spread, we were asked to formulate a daylong conference about how the arts can be vehicles for approaching Holocaust education with young people. The conference for teachers and school support personnel was held in the fall of 2002 at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey through the sponsorship of The Julius and Dorothy Koppelman Holocaust/Genocide Resource Center. We decided to present "The Town That Fought Hate" along with various lecture and discussion opportunities – recognizing that we had a golden opportunity to tap the resources of nearly 100 educators, all of who were responding to the play.

Before the conference began, we spent several staff meetings mulling ideas about the educational thrust of the day. We finally determined that we wanted teachers to feel comfortable using existing materials in their own schools as support materials for both the play and the larger issue of Holocaust education. This fit nicely with our need to produce printed study guides to accompany performances of “The Town That Fought Hate.” We also thought it important to give teachers the opportunity to view the reactions of students to the content of the play. The plan for the day, then, included several levels of evaluation: teacher evaluation of student reactions; teacher and student evaluation of the performance; teacher self-evaluation of their efforts toward Holocaust education; and Young Audiences’ evaluation of teacher’s reactions to the play.

The day began with various presentations from leaders in Holocaust education, including the author of the book that inspired the play’s creation. Students from several Trenton elementary schools were bused to campus for the performance, and teachers were encouraged to watch the student reactions throughout the production. Teachers also observed the closing Q&A session between students and puppeteers about the play’s content and theatrical devices.

Teachers were then grouped according to grade levels and subject matter. All teachers began by considering the following questions, which served as a guide for work within the small groups and the whole-group discussion that closed the conference (NOTE: the stated purposes were not included on the teacher forms):

1. Purpose: Teacher Self-Evaluation

Q: What aspects related to Holocaust education are you most/least comfortable with addressing in your present classroom situation?

2. *Purpose: Young Audiences Evaluation (program content)*

Q: What would you anticipate to be the most easily comprehended lesson of “The Town That Fought Hate” if it were to be performed for your current students?

3. *Purpose: Establishing the Need for Teachers to Address the Issues*

Q: What aspect of the play would your students have the most difficulty comprehending (assuming that they saw the play without any pre- or post-performance instruction from you)?

4. *Purpose: Young Audiences Evaluation (workshop/discussion content)*

Q: What aspect of the play do you think could be greatly enhanced by pre- or post-performance instruction?

5. *Purpose: Teacher Sharing/Development of Teaching Strategies;
Development of Content for Study Guide Materials*

Q: Please take a few moments to brainstorm about an age-appropriate activity or learning sequence for your children; this “plan” should address the issue raised in #4.

6. *Purpose: Reinforcing the Ability of Teachers to Address the Issues*

Q: How could you address the major objectives of your lesson (Question 5) if your students were unable to see the play?

7. *Purpose: Raising Awareness of the Arts as a Partner in Holocaust Education*

Q: How might you use puppetry, theatre, or other art forms to “open the door” to instruction about the Holocaust or other tolerance issues?

Looking Ahead: A Question of Balance

What did we learn about evaluation through this process? A simple (and completely true) answer is that a carefully planned, systematic employment of evaluative methods and materials is far better than the haphazard distribution of surveys and questionnaires. But, we also learned a much larger lesson: we need to look more carefully at the balance between social/values education and arts education in this production.

“The Town That Fought Hate” and the subject matter it confronts place this project squarely in the field of interdisciplinary education. By almost any definition of interdisciplinary education, the theatre arts have perhaps the most to contribute because of the weaving of varied subject material with elements of music, visual art, dance and drama.

This balance between artistry, historical content and values education has been a constant theme through the development of “The Town That Fought Hate.” A look at our evaluation materials shows that the difficult subject matter confronted in the play overwhelms the opportunities for theatre education inherent in the advanced puppetry work. Of the hundreds of responses generated by our conference attendees, only a small number even referred to the artistry of the performance. There is a huge opportunity, however: the responses to the question, “How might you use puppetry, theatre, or other art forms to ‘open the door’ to instruction...” provide a large number of ideas for approaching the artistic content of this play with young children.

Our next step, then, is the development of study materials that are more evenly balanced between social education and arts education. Our evaluations tell us that we will have no trouble communicating the historical/social aspects of this play, but we will need to carefully consider our approach to the artistic elements of the production.

Were it not for our reliance on multiple methods and sources of evaluation data, we might have lost sight of the primary reason for arts education: it is through the arts that we become fully human, fully aware of our past, and fully aware of our potential. The evaluation process reminds us that, for all of the social value in “The Town That Fought Hate,” the topics become approachable for youngsters through the power of theatre. It is our responsibility to teach our history, but it is also important for us to teach about our art forms and how they continue to shape our world.

Works Cited:

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