

Issues for kids

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Résumé Dans cet article, l'auteur défend l'utilisation du théâtre à des fins éducatives. Elle examine l'impact de la pièce "Feeling yes, feeling no" du théâtre Green Thumb de Vancouver sur le théâtre pour la jeunesse au pays. Elle offre un plaidoyer passionné pour un théâtre d'engagement social et politique.

In the summer of 1989 I moved from Calgary to Montreal. I had just finished a thesis on socio-political theatre for young people, which meant I had spent nearly two years researching child sexual abuse and the prevention project *Feeling yes, feeling no*, a play developed collectively in the early eighties by Green Thumb Theatre in Vancouver. "Well," I said to myself, "surely I've said and thought everything I will ever need to say or think about that depressing subject!" But try as I might to go on to other things, I continued to be interested by the idea that theatre is uniquely suited to communicate important issues to children.

One of the things I found most comforting as I tried to adjust to the culture shock and loneliness of moving to a large racially tense eastern city was to listen to Morningside on CBC. I am constantly reminded, living in Quebec, of how difficult it is to tie this country together, and am grateful for the way Peter Gzowski manages to accomplish it every week-day morning for three hours. So I guess I shouldn't be surprised that an interview on his program brought me back to a sense of the enormity of the problem of child sexual abuse in our country and the realization that I am probably not finished with the subject.

Peter Gzowski was talking on that fall morning to Elly Danica, author of *Don't*, a poetic account of her healing from an horrific case of sexual abuse. Her experience as a child in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, abused by her father, his friends and acquaintances, in episodes that can scarcely be believed, all of which remain to this day publicly unacknowledged by either the perpetrators or by Elly's mother, reminded me of the urgency to educate vulnerable groups to fight a system that allows that kind of oppression. Elly Danica survived, but she lost over ten years of her life during which time her pain couldn't be faced. She described the worst of the pain on Morningside. She has to live to this day with the guilt she feels because she was unable to tell her story when she needed to be heard. Because no one, especially her mother, would listen, and therefore she couldn't admit the pain to herself, she was unable to stop

the abuse of her younger sister, even though she knew instinctively when it started.

The next step in my re-discovery of the need to continue to address the problems of child sexual abuse in our society was a chance encounter in a Montreal bookstore with Kevin Marron's book *Ritual abuse*, the account of a custody trial in Hamilton, Ontario. The trial was scheduled for ten days in September, 1985, but for 17 months judge, jury, attorneys and selected journalists listened, often in shocked disbelief, to evidence about bizarre ritual abuse and satanism. The tragic cycle of deprivation and abuse in that family is too serious a problem to ignore. Pretending that we don't need to protect and educate our children or refusing to face the issues so that we might make the changes necessary in a society which has allowed this perversion of human values is to shut our eyes to the positive change that is possible. A system that allows, and by its silence condones, such an oppressive misuse of power must be changed. Prevention programmes using theatre to communicate the complexities of the issue are one way to bring about change by increasing awareness.

The third step in my realization that I was not finished with the subject of child sexual abuse was the sexual assault in February of two little girls in the downtown fine arts alternative school my daughters are attending in Montreal. My observations of the reaction of parents and teachers and of my daughters all helped me to appreciate how important and fine the work of Green Thumb Theatre in Vancouver, Quest Theatre in Calgary, and the National Film Board of Canada had been.

Society as a whole is still in the process of facing the horrors of child sexual abuse, but psychologists and medical personnel have probably known since Freud's time that it existed. One of the most insidious aspects of child sexual abuse is its ability to destroy the victim's sense of self: oppression of the victim by the misuse of power. In a paper presented to a conference on sexual abuse which took place in Montreal in January, 1989, Mary-Beth Levan, who coordinated a study of child sexual abuse amongst northern native people, expressed very clearly the essence of the problem which exists in all populations, but seemingly to a greater degree in the north, and probably in many native communities throughout the country. In describing the cycle of abuse there, she said:

It is a way of exercising power. They get the idea relationships are where one person is powerful and the other helpless, so that when you get old enough you turn the tables on someone else.

Mary-Beth Levan also said that the amount of sexual abuse in the north was related to other social problems including alcoholism, overcrowded housing, and high unemployment. She believes pornography also plays a part. I would venture to say that this is true of other Canadian populations too, but

I do want to caution the reader not to forget that the misuse of power is not limited to the poor, that oppression also exists in relationships which appear to be perfectly respectable and healthy. That is why prevention programs should exist for all children. We do not know which children are most vulnerable.

The belief that all children are potential victims of oppression in the form of sexual abuse, and that prevention is society's best weapon against it, is the basic premise of the *Feeling yes, feeling no* personal safety project. It uses a play, a lively, sometimes amusing and often moving series of scenes, which engage most elementary school children's interest and ultimately their emotional commitment, to introduce knowledge about and protective strategies against stranger abuse, known adult abuse, and incest.

Children first see Part One with a large group of their peers, usually kindergarten to grade 3 together, and grades four to six together, often in the school gym. Part One is an energetic, musically enhanced performance of scenes about various kinds of touches and situations where the child might have to learn to express his/her negative feelings about the encounter to someone who might be perceived as having some kind of power over the child. Part Two is also performance oriented, but supported by small group workshop-like discussions led by the actor-teachers who perform the piece. These small-group discussions are interspersed throughout the scenes. Part Two takes place in smaller rooms, usually in class groupings.

The nature and scope of the project requires the actor-teachers to be in the school for at least a week, and there is a sense of friendship and trust that develops between many of the children and the company. Disclosures of abuse happen often, and actor-teachers must be prepared to leave the situation to the social workers and police to handle. That is often hard for them to do, knowing that difficult cases take time, and an overworked social service system sometimes leaves a situation unattended for too long, but the belief that the system will eventually help a child is the central message of the programme. If a child is being oppressed by unwelcome touches or advances of a sexual nature, then he/she has the right to stop that oppression by soliciting help from any adult he/she considers trustworthy and who is willing to help. If therapy is necessary in cases of prolonged abuse, the child is encouraged to believe it exists and that he/she has every right to demand help. The pressure on the system to provide more and quicker help for abuse victims is the unstated but inherent socio-political message of the programme.

My first connection to *Feeling yes, feeling no* happened when I was working with Quest Theatre in Calgary as an actor in June 1985. Duval Lang spoke to me then of the extensive preparations necessary to produce the project. Summer students spent weeks preparing studies of the support services available in Calgary, and Brian Torpe, an original co-creator of the Green Thumb

Project, was engaged as the required link to the original project. Funding had to be arranged. Ultimately, an anonymous donor and the Kinsmen of Calgary provided all the financial support for the two tours, to a total of fifteen schools.

Having decided to make *Feeling yes, feeling no* the subject of my thesis, I was present at most of the rehearsals and several of the parent and teacher information nights which began in January, 1987. While actors and director rehearsed the show, preparation for teachers and parents through workshop-like meetings was begun. Planning sessions with the two Calgary school boards were conducted by Duval and Debra Apperley, an education coordinator with the Calgary Sexual Assault Centre. The actors and Larry Smith, who directed the show and managed the tour, took part in most of the workshop-like parent and teacher meetings, which were all directed by Apperley. Scheduling was difficult because rehearsals, meetings and Debra's work at the Assault Centre all had to be taken into consideration, and everything had to fit into the requirements of the five schools which had been chosen to take part in the pilot project.

I became more deeply connected to the project when I was asked by the Calgary Separate School Board to evaluate *Feeling Yes, feeling no* for them. The Public Board did its own evaluation, which praised the programme, but counselled against providing Board funding to continue it, because they felt it was too expensive. My evaluation was equally positive, but I made no reference to prohibitive cost, because I did not agree that it was overpriced, and I believe the excellence of the programme merited the high cost. Unfortunately, neither board chose to give financial support to allow the project to continue. Other funding was found (again the Kinsmen and an anonymous donor), and one more tour, this time to ten schools, took place in 1988.

The cost of the bringing *Feeling yes, feeling no* to a school is approximately five thousand dollars. This is indeed a lot of money, but not as much as a room full of computers, or as the ultimate cost to society of, say, a 17-month custody trial. There are other prevention programmes which are cheaper, but their continued funding seems always to be in question too. Decisions about how society spends its money will always be difficult, but the eradication of oppressive sexual abuse is going to cost money to accomplish.

Feeling yes, feeling no reached some children in British Columbia and a few more in Alberta because Catalyst Theatre in Edmonton also produced several successful tours. It has not yet been produced in Saskatchewan, but I understand Actors' Showcase in Winnipeg is continuing to produce it in Manitoba schools. Metro Toronto has a prevention programme using theatre which works throughout the school year. Although the subject of sexuality and sexual abuse has been treated by Quebec theatre companies who perform for young people, the only prevention programme I know about operating at this moment in Montreal is CAP (Child Abuse Prevention) ESPACE, whose work I

will discuss later in the article.* Mulgrave Road produced *Feeling yes, feeling no* in Nova Scotia in 1988 to five Guysborough County schools and, in an innovative spirit, returned to the same schools a year later with refresher performances.

Probably the most widespread influence on sexual abuse prevention that *Feeling yes, feeling no* has had in this country was thanks to the decision that was made after the pilot project finished in Vancouver to allow the National Film Board to film Green Thumb's second tour. The co-creators had a difficult time accepting that their theatre project might not lose all its value in the translation to film. While I agree that seeing the film is not as rich an experience as taking part in the project, I believe that the format the NFB chose, which includes a film for adults and another for children, has great potential to raise the consciousness about sexual abuse prevention. An excellent piece of work, it is readily available to any interested parties though the NFB. Viewing and discussing *Feeling yes, feeling no* the film were part of the training and development of the workers in the CAP ESPACE programme in Montreal. Although CAP ESPACE chose to use a prevention programme from Ohio which is more flexible and addresses other oppressive behaviors along with sexual abuse, the *Feeling yes, feeling no* personal safety project is an important part of the foundation work in sexual abuse prevention in Canada. Only a few days ago, a friend's seven-year old who attends school in Snowdon (part of greater Montreal) came home singing: "My body's nobody's body but mine. You run your own body, let me run mine!" She is taking part in a prevention project at her school which is using the NFB film, and her favourite part is the theme song. It's one of my favourite parts too.

So what of the future for theatre in communicating with kids about issues important to them? While problems of didacticism and using theatre to propagandize are important, and I would be the last one to want art compromised because theatre is being used as a pedagogical tool, I can't help being excited when children are touched on an emotional level when watching a play. That is being accomplished by young people's companies across this country and around the world. You can attend one of the exciting children's festivals in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton or Toronto for proof. I see no reason, then, why the touching and communicating shouldn't accomplish educational goals. Socio-political theatre can stimulate discussion and promote openness about serious social problems which concern young people. Delicate, difficult to face issues are more easily confronted in a theatrical environment where the situation seems real, but the threat ends when the play does. The more serious, controversial, and complex the issue, the more difficult and expensive a

* *Ed. Note:* Mention should be made of the work of Montreal's Théâtre de Carton which toured the Francophone regions of Canada with "Oui ou non", written by Marie-Francine Hébert, and was modelled after the Green Thumb Theatre project. Between 1986 and 1988, "Oui ou non" was seen by thousands of children in French Canada.

thorough treatment of the subject will undoubtedly be, but I have seen it accomplished in *Feeling yes, feeling no* and believe it to be equally possible in dealing with other issues important to kids.

Much of my evaluative data comes from my own children who have shared with me many kinds of theatrical events. Although they were not fortunate enough to have attended one of the schools which hosted the *Feeling yes, feeling no* tours in Calgary, they did come to the NFB to see the film. They also took part in the CAP ESPACE presentation at their Montreal school after the assaults in February. The discouraging fact that the prevention project was not booked into the school until after the assault happened didn't escape their comment or notice. When the assault happened, they assured me that *Feeling yes, feeling no* had prepared them so that their reaction to the situation in which the victims found themselves would have been more appropriate than it would have been had they not seen and discussed the film with me. They thought, as I did, that the hysterical reaction of the parents at their school which resulted in the hiring of security guards and installation of an expensive security system was too much too late. It seemed a shame that CAP ESPACE were not brought into the school until after an incident had occurred.

The CAP ESPACE message is that every child has the right to be strong, safe, and free. They provide coping strategies to any group which considers itself at risk of suffering from oppressive power. Through role-playing, a primary pedagogical tool, they rehearse and thereby prepare students to use their strategies. They also offer workshops for teens and adults as well as courses in crisis intervention, all related to the prevention of assault. Sadly, even their less expensive program is in jeopardy and they may not have the funds to continue their excellent work next year.

Two powerful theatrical events took place in 1989 which helped to solidify my thinking about the power of theatre to communicate complicated issues to children. Both dealt with the themes of oppression. I preferred one and my girls the other. Both shows could loosely be described as Broadway musicals, not a genre that normally offers the kind of powerful socio-political message we nevertheless experienced. But the images were strong and theatrical and the music is still being played and sung in our house.

The girls' choice was *Les Misérables*. I had already seen the show when I was in England for the Standing Conference on Young People's Theatre in 1987, and found it melodramatic and sentimental but nevertheless I enjoyed watching the New York production through my daughters' eyes. What was most interesting was their reaction to the oppression, and their desire to understand the political situation which brought it about. Many of the finer points escaped them, but the music and emotionally charged theatricality sustained their interest. The images of oppression were clearly understood.

My choice was *Sarafina*. This was the most exciting, devastating, exhilarating and shattering thing that I have ever experienced in a theatre. What hap-

pened on the stage at the Cort Theatre in New York on the last afternoon of 1988 was for me more real than any television coverage from South Africa showing arrests, funerals, or bodies on the street. I met a wonderful group of school children and their teacher from the townships. I listened to them sing, watched them dance, delighted in their stories and personalities and their faith that apartheid and the oppression they are suffering would end. I believed them when they sang "Freedom is coming tomorrow". Then I watched in horror as they told the story of Victoria Mxenge, a lawyer who acted on behalf of blacks charged with political crimes. Her husband Griffiths, also a lawyer, was the victim of a death squad murder in 1981. Four years later she was shot and hacked to death outside her Durban home while her three children watched. I laughed as they made fun of Bantu education and defied efforts by the South African education system to keep them down, and then I cried as they were forced to endure unendurable pain, to be tortured, imprisoned, and murdered themselves. Then, scarcely able to breathe, I rejoiced with them again, confident as they were that their human spirit would not be destroyed, and that oppression would not end their history as a proud people.

Sarafina was first presented by the Committed Artists and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in June, 1987. Mbongeni Ngema was responsible for the conception, the writing, and the direction. He also wrote the music and lyrics, with help on the arrangements and additional songs by Hugh Masekela. Their celebration of Mbaqanga music and of the children of the townships is a triumphant example of the power of theatre to communicate a reality in a way no other art form can.

The story of South African Theatre in the townships and its recent rise to international acclaim is another lesson in the power of art to express the essential nature and hope of a people. White South-African audiences were familiar with theatre from the townships from the early seventies, but it wasn't until Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa created *Woza Albert* that audiences in the townships and around the world started to enjoy black theatre. Ngema and Mtwa were able to gain the support of Barney Simon of the Market Theatre, South Africa's first multi-racial theatre, already the focus of much international attention. Their *Born in the RSA* was the hit of the 1987 Edmonton Fringe Festival and has toured western Canada. Simon directed *Woza Albert*, a two-man piece which explores the question of what might happen if Christ were to visit South Africa today. During a world-tour of that play, Ngema met Louis Valdez' El Teatro Camesino and was inspired to start his own company in the townships. *Asinamali* was the first work of the Committed Artists, and its international success (it played in both Quebec City and Montreal) helped Ngema to get the financial backing necessary to create *Sarafina* and bring it to the Lincoln Center in New York.

I am not suggesting that theatre companies here have the structure or time to spend eight months in rehearsal, as did the Committed Artists for *Sarafina*,

but it is food for thought, that eleven girls and nine boys, all in their teens, might spend eight months rehearsing with seven professional musicians, taking voice, movement, singing, acting, dance and other classes offered by their mobile school, and in the process create the most exciting piece of theatre I will probably ever see. They communicated a reality to me that I could never have experienced without spending years in the townships. They opened a door to a way of life and a vision that would be otherwise forever closed to me. My children assured me that this was a door they were not ready for, that the reality of watching beautiful kids being machine-gunned in their school yard was just too much at ten and twelve. Suffice to say the issue should suit the audience.

I fully expect that young people's theatre companies will continue to find a way to open doors for children in this country. Black theatre workers are addressing AIDS prevention in South Africa, although they are not allowed to carry their messages to white audiences. Alan Filewood at the University of Guelph is working on an AIDS prevention programme using theatre here in Canada, and a report from an International Conference on AIDS in Montreal called for prevention programmes which tell the truth to young people. One of the more successful programmes for high schools has an AIDS victim talking to Quebec teen-agers. Actors might be able to accomplish the same kind of verisimilitude and reach greater numbers, especially if they were to work hand in hand with victims, adding the strength of their healthy bodies to the knowledge and insight to which only victims have access.

The work of Headlines Theatre in Vancouver and Catalyst in Edmonton, among others, provide us with a model for creative work with issues and innovative funding characterized by cooperation with churches and other social agencies. Gang violence, alienation, AIDS, an oppressive world economic system which encourages the abuse of the earth's resources instead of effective stewardship over the land, even oppressive relationships between individuals, are all issues young people must face. Change must start with our perception of the issues, and it is the perception of the young which will decide the future of the planet. The belief that it is the young people who will bring about the needed change was most beautifully expressed in *Sarafina*, and a similarly positive vision of reconciliation and healing were part of *Feeling yes, feeling no*. Brian Torpe shared a memory with me which he thought illustrated the success of the project:

I think there has been a lot of evolution and development in the support systems since the project was first done, and I think that one of the positive effects of the project is that it does bring to light some of the red tape that exists and needs to be snipped through. Also I remember an incident when we were working with mentally handicapped children. A little boy came up and hugged me and said, "Yes".

It is that "yes" that young people need to make happen. They must be given

the opportunity to understand the world they live in and to practise making their own choices. Theatre which deals with issues important to kids can provide the kind of learning situation they need.

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