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Getting Inside of Literature

Mark Shaheen

Staging a Class for the Unheard Voices

There is a very beautiful parable of Jelaluddin Rumi, the greatest of Moslem Sufi teachers, in which he speaks of a man who has lost a camel. The caravan is about to start when he realizes he does not have his camel and night is quickly approaching. He becomes frantic and runs from person to person asking, "Have you seen such and such a camel? It has got lop ears and bandy legs."

The others in the caravan begin to say things like, "Yes," and "I saw it over near the grove," and "What good is a camel with bandy legs anyway?" The man who lost the camel continues to run about, looking for the camel and creating quite a commotion. Another man sees this and realizes the first man is attracting a lot of attention to himself. The second man also begins to shout, imitating the first man.

"I have lost my camel! Where is my camel?"

Finally, after a great deal of suffering, the first man—the true camel seeker—finds his camel.

The surprising thing is that the second man also finds a camel. The second man says to the first man, "Because you had lost a camel, you sought, but because I sought, I found I had lost a camel."

—as told by Kate Veihl

The metaphor of the lost camel begins our meeting of ReAct, a theater company built from students at East Lansing High School who are concerned about the need for developing and sharing survival skills for their future and the future of their community. ReAct Company consists of students who have been trained in at least one semester of acting and who have also overcome or successfully coped with a major obstacle

in life such as divorce, substance abuse, or being a teen parent.

As Kate reads the story of the lost camel to the students, they are directed on stage by myself or Juliet McQueen, the other company director. By giving the words a visual representation, students are able to explore the Rumi metaphor and discuss its value theatrically. They are also able to discuss it not only in terms of their own experience but also on more levels than just the intellectual one. One student, Stephen, suggests that the second man did not deserve to find a camel and, in fact, was an impostor who had little or no redeeming moral value. Other students began to argue on behalf of the man who had lost nothing but found much. Tamaki states that many people don't understand what they have lost because they themselves are lost. Zach and Leah think that allowing yourself to find what is lost is the same thing as allowing yourself to learn. They believe that the act of imitation on the part of the second man in the Rumi parable allows him to find what was unknowingly lost. The discussion quickly turns to talk of the function stories have in our culture and how the original act of storytelling was embodied in theater.

ReAct tells of stories from the edge as young people recreate the conflicts they have faced in

their lives and offer the audience more than just a single resolution. ReAct explores issues important to a young and diverse group of individuals—race, gender, dating, physical and emotional abuse, friendship, sexuality, and teen violence. Students work improvisationally through a particular subject, discovering its value in terms of conflict, accessibility, societal needs, and age appropriateness, and then begin scripting the situation to preserve and take to others.

The issues we explore in ReAct might be considered taboo in many general education classrooms. What ReAct provides is live, critical, and absolutely essential tie-ins to multi-voiced literature. If we can prepare the way for literature of a diverse nature to be used by providing real live voices from our own classrooms, we have hopefully begun building coalition between students, teachers, and the parent communities. If we can bind prominent educational theories such as the Theater in Education (TIE) movement to students devising ways to survive through ReAct, then we help pave the way for a literature that celebrates the multiple voices we encounter everyday in our school hallways, classrooms, and extra-curricular activities. Creating a stage for voices which have traditionally been silenced is the first step in building a class whose literature explores these same unheard voices.

Students bring to ReAct a willingness to share because they see the need to help educate others. An example of the highly creative ways the students approach a subject is the case of “When Girl and Boy Meet.” The students improvise on a situation that was brainstormed earlier in the hour, namely, how do young people handle dating and friendship issues? During the improvisation, Kate and I allow for students in the audience to interact with the actors, guiding them in vocal and physical presentation. This structure that the students use in developing a more fully realized script is the same format they will use when presenting to elementary and middle school students—the audience will guide the actors and manipulate the situation on stage in order to see several different outcomes from the same conflict. ReAct actors ultimately script out the scene in

order to build a portfolio of issues to present to prospective schools and groups.

The following script is skeletal at best, but contains initial attitudes at work in each scene.

“When Girl and Boy Meet.”

Scene I

“He is soo fine,” and “You got that right.”

Girl and her friends are clustered stage right whooping it up and talking about what they are going to do when they all get together Saturday night. Dialogue.

Scene II

“Kewl, dude,” and “You think you all of that?”

Boy and his friends are clustered stage left and are concurrently whooping it up about Saturday night as well. Dialogue.

Scene III

“Whassup?” and “I am all of that...”

Boy and Girl discover each other and slowly begin moving toward each other center stage. Boy’s friends and Girl’s friends move with them uncomfortably, trying to steal the focus back to the friendship groups. Dialogue.

Scene IV

“there’s a place for us...”

Boy and Girl meet center stage and all else fall silent. Dialogue.

Boy: I couldn’t help but notice you today in science. You looked great even with that cat half dissected in front of you.

Girl: Thanks. I noticed yours was a Tom...

(They make plans to go out.)

Scene V

“My boyfriend’s back and there’s gonna be trouble.”

Boy and Girl go back to their groups and their friends become mad when the subject becomes love. They link arms and try to pull Boy and Girl further away from each other. Boy and Girl break from friends and meet back up center stage.

Scene VI
"I will if you will."

Dialogue. Boy and Girl discover each has made plans with friends for Saturday night and decide to blow off responsibility in order to be together. They sit on bench and pretend to watch movie eating popcorn. Friends have moved stage right and left respectively, where they began. They are silent. Couple hold each other and bow heads signaling end of Saturday night.

Scene VII
"Forget you then!"

Girl is happy and runs to share with friends. Boy does same. Conflict. Boy and Girl find no friendship in their respective groups. Dialogue. End result: both Boy and Girl yelling at their friends and running away.

Scene VIII
"Why do fools fall in love?"

Boy and Girl find their way back to bench center stage, holding hands uncomfortably, staring off in opposite direction.

The abstract qualities of staging are perfect for the realism represented. The actors have "chunked" an incredible amount of dynamic into less than a two-minute sequence. Several important issues surface during this presentation. Students understand the need for urgency and pace (thank you, MTV) and what effect this pace has on an audience. They also transform the freshness of

language into a bridge to be understood and acknowledged, instead of using language as a barrier to keep the "adult world" distant from them.

The possibilities of introducing non-canonical literature into the Language Arts classroom becomes more real when the issues that have traditionally prevented such literature from being accepted (language barriers, subject matter, the "throw away" characters in our society) are represented as learning experiences by and for our student body. ReAct, an after-school pilot which uses such "literature," is expected to become part of the theater curriculum for next year. Some of the work presented in the theater curriculum at our school has always drawn on the literature from the English classes as material, thus bringing life to the study of literature from student to student. ReAct paves the way, therefore, for an infusion of broader literature perspectives, giving students across the curricular areas more choices in interpretation and voice as well as more opportunities to develop critical awareness skills. ReAct also gives voice to those who too often become statistics in our dropout rate. What society in the past has deemed the "throw away" now has an opportunity to teach us how not to succeed at failing. ReAct students have come back from the edge and are eager to share what they have learned. We experience the metaphor of Rumi as people who imitate in order to learn, and in the process, acquire something very real about ourselves— finding the solution is about identifying the loss.