

TABOO THEATRE FOR YOUNG
AUDIENCES IN THE UNITED STATES:
THE ADULT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP,
MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND THE LAW

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Plays that deal with taboo themes are often completely proscribed when creating TYA seasons. I have examined three relationships that limit the breadth and scope of choices that companies producing contemporary theatre for young audiences in the United States make regarding content and aesthetics: the adult–child relationship, the material relationship between TYA and the schools and the relationship between curricular free speech and the law.

Two cases nicely illustrate what originally prompted me to write this paper. These two examples both involve theatre teachers who were censored for their work; they are relevant because they reflect the same ideologically charged public school system in which TYA is created for and consumed by children in the US. In the productions they sell to schools TYA companies, by and large, are not making choices that challenge conventional, traditional, and safe content and aesthetics; therefore the schools rarely censor these companies. TYA companies self–censor before

and during production in order to ensure smooth runs and full bookings. Moreover, as I will argue, the same restrictions that apply to public school teachers also apply to anyone who is working by, for, or, with children when they produce plays (or virtually any other dramatic activity) for a school audience.

In 2007, I was the Head of Theatre Activities and Drama Education at an “American” school in Puerto Rico. A particularly talented senior performed *Medea Redux* by Neil LaBute at the school’s end-of-term “Collage Show”. In the piece, a girl describes both a sexual relationship she has with a teacher and her pregnancy as a result of that relationship, and then confesses to the murder of her baby. The student delivered a virtuoso performance that mesmerized the audience of family members (adults with children). After the show, she received a standing ovation, and the principal congratulated me on her performance. The next day, however, a group of concerned parents and faculty members met at the school, formed a committee and drafted a letter to the school board demanding that I be censured for selecting a work that was so “grossly inappropriate and negligent”. The letter explained that, upon hearing the monologue, the committee members’ young children began to ask “questions about sex, rape, and infanticide”, taboo topics that in the view of committee members should not be raised in the context of the school’s drama curriculum.

The principal advised me to hire a lawyer, and despite support from the administration, from that moment forward

I was forced to submit all texts (including plays) that would be used in class to a committee of faculty and parents in order to determine their “appropriateness”. Further, each play being produced by, for, or with the students was required to carry a rating that was to be determined by a community committee elected by the principal. The traditional fall Shakespeare production that traveled to many Spanish-speaking schools on the island was eliminated and replaced by a safer “Broadway Jr.” adaptation; in addition, the theatre history course no longer included Paula Vogel, Aristophanes, or the English Restoration in its curriculum. Eventually, I left my position as the head of the theatre department.

The issue of censorship has emerged in other areas of the US as well. Margaret Boring, the former drama teacher at Charles D. Owen High School in North Carolina, chose the play *Independence* by Lee Blessing for her advanced acting course. The play addresses themes of familial dysfunction and sexuality. As usual, she informed the principal, Fred Ivey, of the title and began working. After earning accolades at a regional competition, the cast performed an excerpt of the play for students in another course in the English Department. Boring suggested that the English students should obtain parental permission to watch the play. Following the presentation, a parent protest prompted Ivey to read the script. Ivey quickly sought to cancel future productions of the play; however, students and parents lobbied to allow the play (with some textual deletions) to be performed at the state festival. The students

and their parents eventually prevailed in their lobbying efforts.

After the cast won second place in the state competition, Ivey transferred Boring to a junior high school because she had not produced the play in accordance with the district's controversial materials policy. Boring sued the school district because "her transfer was in retaliation for expression of unpopular views through the production of the play and thus in violation of her right to freedom of speech" (Boring v. Buncombe). The case ultimately went to the Supreme Court and Boring lost.

Certainly, there are physiological, cognitive, and anatomical differences between children and adults; however children can be only partially known through statistical, scientific examination. In order to make theatre that is aesthetically interesting, content rich and intellectually engaging for children, adult theatre makers must fully engage in this unknown world of children through a new kind of open and honest communication. To begin such a dialogue scholars must first recognize the constructed nature of the adult-child relationship in its current form.

If virtually all TYA is created by adults for children, then David Kennedy's epistemological question, "What *can* adults know about children and how?" is particularly salient (3). In his seminal text, *The Well of Being*, Kennedy posited that, "it is, after all, always as adults that we regard children and childhood. What we call 'child' is first of all a child-for-an-adult, and as such, a construct" (3). In short, the word

child does not describe a child directly; rather, *child* describes part of the relationship between the child and the adult. Children are only aware of themselves as children once they learn the construct of adulthood, a construct of which they are not a part. As Kennedy noted, “There is no such thing as a child without an adult to observe it... childhood and adulthood are two terms of one bipolar concept. If all humans were either children or adults, both terms would lose their meaning” (3). However, while children construct themselves in contrast to adults, adults construct themselves simultaneously in opposition to and as akin to children. As Dieter Misgeld wrote, “being an adult, if treated as a matter to be achieved again and again makes us take note that we, as adults, must sometimes think of ourselves as being *like* children in order for us to say that we are adults” (92). This process makes it very easy for adults to “use children as screen onto which they project their own unacknowledged psychological complexes” (Kennedy 15). As such, adults often attempt to “relive, project, re–evoke, and/or exorcise” our own childhoods through the liminal figure of the child (Kennedy 4).

This bipolar construction of the adult–child relationship exists in stark contrast to the adult–child polarity outside the US cultural and historiographical paradigm. The boundaries between these polarities vary from culture to culture and from one historical context to another. Kennedy argued that “adults tend to believe implicitly in the universality of childhood” (8). This is in part because everyone once was a child, giving adults

“first-hand knowledge about childhood and children” (Kennedy 15). Adults often privilege this knowledge over the child’s actual real-time lived experience. Despite what the child may be experiencing in the moment, her elders are always assumed to understand what is best for the child.

The notion of the innocent child is also a myth fashioned by adult desire. Children live in a profit fueled multi-media culture that provides them access to information and an ease in a tech-savvy world that their parents may not enjoy. Television and the internet are main sources through which children are exposed to adult themes once considered off limits, thus creating a youth culture that is well-versed in issues of violence, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and sex and sexuality. Many scholars have argued that the innocent child figure so often used in the discourse surrounding taboo materials for children is a “figment of adult imaginations” (Jenkins, “Introduction” 23).

The presumption of first-hand universal knowledge of children’s desires is palpable in the moralistic, linear scripts that dominate the field of TYA and is reinforced by the accompanying educational study guides. Reworked fairy tales, adaptations of children’s literature, and now the emergence of titles that have been made popular by children’s television and film (especially Disney) are commonplace on the American TYA stage. This trend is not surprising considering the current mode of adult-child relationships in which adult subconscious desires may actually supersede the child’s. TYA plays and educational materials often portray the child’s own insights and opinions

about the world as distinctly *unlike* the adult's, which in turn renders the child's opinions distorted. In other words, TYA plays are more about satisfying unconscious adult desires than about providing aesthetic experiences for the children for whom they are supposedly intended.

The great chasm between the culture of adulthood and that of childhood is full of tremendous possibility for transformative understanding for both children and adults. In her critique of writing for youth, J. Rose argued that children's fiction is "impossible" because it "sets up a world where the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) but where neither of them enter the space in between" (58). In order to enter this middle space, scholars must consider a new dialogic approach to the adult-child relationship —what Kennedy calls a "hermeneutics of childhood" (18). Kennedy's theory denies modernist theory which fails to adequately describe the whole child (18). Kennedy argued that "it is through the subject coming into dialogue with the object rather than isolating it in theoretical constructs that understanding emerges. As such, hermeneutics is theory as affinity and participation rather than [theory] as distance and domination" (18). Thus, Kennedy is arguing for genuine adult-child communication without prescribed boundaries. This form of communication is one in which "to understand" the child, says Ricouer, "is not to project oneself into the text [the child] but to expose oneself to it" (143).

Mutual perceptions will be enriched between adults and children as this new dialogue continues. If the adult

opens herself up to the child and to the child's different meanings, then the adult will not only learn more about the child and his culture but also about herself. This creates a process of the adult seeing the child and the child seeing the adult anew or with fresh eyes in a cycle of changing perceptions.

TYA is a fitting place to begin a dialogue between children and adults that would engender profound changes in the ways children see adults and themselves. The theatrical event inherently allows for a dialogue between actor and spectator. This interaction could be a sight for an adult-child dialogue on many levels depending on the nature of the theatrical event.

Unfortunately, American TYA generally fails to understand the art form as an ongoing social experiment in which the adult theatre maker meets the child in a space where mutual transformation is possible. The root of problem is this: the material conditions of production have historically and currently situated this work within the public school system which is subject to federal laws pertaining to curricular free speech or the lack thereof. As Boring's case poignantly illustrates, a teacher —like a TYA company— must delicately negotiate the practice of teaching within the confines of communication prescribed by the law, or risk jeopardizing the ability to teach or produce at all.

In the United States where “virtually every professional TYA company relies on school audiences for the majority of its earned income,” scholars must consider the power of school curricula, as well as the policies and

laws that govern them, in shaping content and aesthetic choices (Bedard, “Negotiating” 90). TYA companies work in the schools in direct contact with students, providing pre- and post-show educational activities, study guides and educational workshops. In some cases the companies argue that their productions have direct links to curricular standards. Bedard calls this “theatre–but–not–theatre” (“Negotiating” 97). TYA is theatre in that there are actors, spectators, a play and, in general, the superficial qualities that are associated with the theatrical art form. Bedard argues, however, that the limitations of working in the educational setting (those dictated by curricular standards, and aesthetic and content restrictions) are so severe that they change the nature of the art form altogether to something like theatre–but–not–theatre (“Negotiating” 97). If TYA is not theatre, then given that TYA companies are, in fact, fulfilling functions of the classroom teacher for the time it takes to complete a production, I define the role of TYA in the schools as *teacher–but–not–teacher*. In my longer paper I examine the ways in which the law subtly determines the conditions in which theatre for young people is created reveals a great deal about the precarious position that TYA teachers–but–not–teachers currently occupy within the school system.

In short, there are no specific guidelines regarding what is and is not off limits for TYA. The Supreme Court has never directly ruled on the extent of teachers’ free speech rights in the classroom. Nor, by extension, has the court addressed the free speech rights of TYA practitioners

working in the schools. Because TYA companies sell their productions to and work within the school system, in the eyes of the law, they forfeit their right to free speech. Certainly these companies hesitate to push the envelope for fear of losing funding and privileges. This situation forces TYA companies to skirt taboo issues in favor of themes more in line with dominant “safe” ideologies. The law does not protect TYA speech as it would if these companies were operating in their own theatres.

The current context, in which TYA artists are afraid to produce taboo material, has many negative consequences for both artists and audience members. First, this phenomenon fosters a marginalization of theatre for youth as a viable field of both academic and practical pursuit. Furthermore, by allowing fear to dictate content and aesthetic choices, TYA companies are complicit in the gross cultural assumption that minors are harmed by taboo subject matter.

Inventive TYA is happening for children on the extremes of the adult–child relationship (with babies and teens) and further and further from schools and their contingent limitations. Some US scholars have called for more reception studies in order to create more artistically innovative theatre and for content that is more relevant to children’s realities. However, until new funding sources emerge, TYA is bound to the conservative language and look favored in public education.

For the present, the child in the middle is, as Jenkins writes, “an emblem for our anxieties about the passing of

time, the destruction of historical formations, or conversely, a vehicle for our hopes for the future. The innocent child is caught somewhere over the rainbow —between nostalgia and utopian optimism, between the past and the future” (“Introduction” 5). The field of TYA is caught between the nostalgia felt for a simpler, theory-free past and a utopian optimism about the progress of a growing field. The future of US TYA is often articulated in terms of a long-established positivism that continues to entangle those working in the theatre by, for and with children in restrictive knot with schools and the laws that govern them. The question of what it will take to shake it loose remains unanswered.

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