

inciteinsight

Volume 1, Issue 2

June 2009

A Digital Publication of the American Alliance for Theatre & Education (AATE)



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West Side Meets Middle East: A Story of Cultural Rapport

by Helen Wheelock

Swathed from head to foot in her black *abiya* and *shayla*, the young woman stood quietly in front of her classmates. Arm extended, her hand was resting somewhat tentatively on the back of the vibrant yellow sun-puppet as she prepared to become the puppet's voice.

The puppeteer, holding both Sol and Luna, the blue moon-puppet, waited, frozen. Then, at a signal, her university classmates chanted, "One, two, three, action!" and Luna spoke.

"What do you mean you have a solution to the missing food?" he demanded imperiously.

The moon, and everyone else in the classroom, stared at the young woman, awaiting her response.

This was just one of many moments of drama that unfolded on the women's campus of the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) last October.

As senior members of the CUNY/Creative Arts Team's (CAT) Early Learning Through the Arts (ELTA) program, Steve Elm and I had been invited to lead two weeks of training in the use of drama in the early childhood classroom. Working with students attending an eight-session, eighteen-hour practicum, our goal was not simply to model drama, puppeteering, pantomime, and storytelling as art forms, but to build the student's capacity for using them to teach.

Since 1974, CAT has pioneered the use of drama as an educational tool in New York City public schools and led numerous professional developments for educators. But this cohort of learners was unlike any we'd worked with: none were early childhood or education majors, all had limited exposure to Western theater and, while they did speak English, it was unclear how fluent they were.

We were also sensitive to the tensions possible when two quite distinct cultures seek to collaborate. We



Helen and Steve with their UAEU students.

were equally intrigued to see how our methodology—with its roots in student-centered pedagogy and issue-based work—would translate, both literally and figuratively.

Nothing, though, quite prepared us for the visual impact that greeted us that first morning: twenty-two women wearing the full-length black *abiya*, *shaylas* (the flowing head scarf), and, if they were married, a face veil. However, any thoughts of "uniformity" and "monolithism" that might have sprung into our heads were quickly dispelled by the openness with which the students greeted us. So, after the briefest of introductions, Steve and I launched into a truncated version of our curriculum, *Coyote's Surprise*.

In the story, Bear (Steve in role) and his family (the students as little bears) are best friends with trickster Coyote (Helen). The arrival of a baby bear (a stuffed bear), though, signals a change in the status quo. Bear is thrilled, but Coyote is upset; taking care of the baby means Bear won't go play. Coyote expresses her anger through a puppet show, *Bear Says, "No!"* Recognizing their dilemma, Bear asks the little bears if there's a way to take care of the baby and still have fun. The little bears side-coach Coyote as she uses the puppets to practice their different suggestions.

For assessment purposes, we divided the demonstration into two sections. During the first, we asked the students to identify the various theatre

Translation of methodology.



elements used. In the second, we asked the students to consider what they, as “children,” were learning and how we, as facilitators, were making it an interactive, student-centered experience.

The students easily identified our use of role, props, costume, pantomime, puppetry, and narration. They also recognized the connection between theater and education—not just that we were exploring the issue of sibling jealousy, but how the interactive nature of drama supported language development, empathy, imagination, critical thinking, and problem solving.

As for the language barrier, Steve and I noted that the students side-translated for those whose English was not as strong. In fact, the very nature of our work—its physicality, dramatic emotions, and age-appropriate language—made it as effective in the UAE as it was in the multi-linguaged classrooms of New York. The students could engage because they read the story in our bodies and in the faces of their classmates.

We also observed that some of the students’ tentativeness in response to our questions was not simply an issue of language, but most likely reflected their social and educational experiences as female students. Opportunities for women in the UAE are expanding, but there is still a very clear expectation of public behavior. Also, not unlike many in the United States, the majority of the UAEU students experienced teacher-directed learning. Questions with no “correct” answers were a new and slightly disconcerting experience. If we wanted them to participate fully, we would have to build their trust. If we wanted to train them to implement CAT’s methodology, we would have to build their educational, artistic, and facilitation skills through a process of demonstration, reflection, training, and reapplication.

For example, during one session we modeled our adaptation of Augusto Boal’s Forum Theater work. In the scenario, I presented the story of two puppets, Luna and Sol, who go on a picnic and end up in a Punch-and-Judy-



The solution!

esque fight because they forgot the food. Steve pauses the action mid-argument, asks the audience to identify the reasons behind the conflict, and solicits possible solutions. He then invites a student to step up and try out her idea by becoming the voice of a puppet (in this case, Sol). The story rewinds and then, at a signal, her university classmates chant, “One, two, three action!”

Helen Wheelock

“I’m not sure what was more thrilling—the unrestrained voices and bodies of the practicum students, their giddiness at the audience’s response, or the astonished faces of the first-time visitors.”

Luna/puppeteer: What do you mean you have a solution to the missing food?

Sol/student: Go fishing.

Luna: Do you know how to fish?

Sol: (A slight hesitation) Yes.

Luna: Well, what do we need?

Sol: A fishing pole.

Luna: Where can we get one?

Sol: (A pause) Here! (The student picks up the sleeve of her abiya to use as a fishing pole/line and offers it to Sol. Sol grabs it in her mouth, and both move towards the audience members. They “drop” the line into the audience, and a member reaches out and playfully tugs at it.)

Luna: (Yells) FISH! We’ve caught a fish!

Afterward, we discussed skills the children were developing and the choice to use puppets, but we also concentrated on the skills Steve and I needed in order to execute the scenario/intervention. For starters, we had to develop an engaging show with clear conflicts. I needed to manipulate two puppets, then match one puppet to a student’s voice. As the facilitator, Steve structured the intervention—gathering ideas, clarifying the options, and supporting the “intervener.” Instead of expecting the students to master all the skills they identified, we explored basic puppeteering and created simple two-puppet scenarios.

In the first half of our residency we worked through various examples of CAT’s drama strategies. The second half focused on the students’ development of their own interactive storytelling practices. This involved taking the text

of a picture book, building it into an original storytelling exercise, and adding targeted “points of participation” — both student-centered and teacher-directed—to engage their audience physically and verbally.

A public share-back had been scheduled, during which the UAEU students would, in two groups, lead a story, ask questions of a group of guests, and instantly incorporate the answers into their telling. No easy task in your native tongue, much less a second language. Because of this, Steve and I chose to have the students work from storytellings we modeled. We hoped that, by scaffolding their work off a familiar base, they would feel more confident.

Helen Wheelock

“...the presentation was delightfully chaotic, full of interruptions, frantic signaling, and not-so-sotto-voce negotiations in Arabic.”

Though we had four days to practice with our groups, there was a wild card in the mix. Our sessions had an open door policy so, depending on schedules and interest, attendance swung between fifteen and fifty. Working with this influx of “old” and “new” students meant nothing could be set. As a result, the presentation was delightfully chaotic, full of interruptions, frantic signaling, and not-so-sotto-voce negotiations in Arabic.

It was extraordinary watching the students *enjoy* leading. For example, during the story *No Dinner!* (transformed into *No Water!*), a small imp of a student invited the audience to chant, “Big problem! No water!”



West Side meets Middle East.

“Again!” came the order.

“Once more!” she insisted.

“More bigger!” she demanded. And all laughingly obeyed.

One moment captured the essence of what Steve and I were hoping to teach. In rehearsal, the leader’s questions had been answered in a respectful, ordered manner. During the presentation, though, all bets were off. Participants couldn’t resist bellowing out suggestions. In one instance, a student asked the group, “What color do you think the door

was?” and received a flurry of responses: “Red! Pink! Yellow! Blue!”

Momentarily nonplussed, she took a breath and then, to the delight of everyone, found a way to move the story forward. “The door,” she told her audience, “was rainbow colored.”

I’m not sure what was more thrilling—the unrestrained voices and bodies of the practicum students, their giddiness at the audience’s response, or the astonished faces of the first-time visitors.

No one wanted the evening to end. They had to shut off the lights to make everyone go home.

Words can barely capture the impact these students had on Steve and me. To watch them dare and struggle and absorb all that we threw at them—the drama work, the educational pedagogy, the push to become fully engaged — was awe-inspiring. Especially considering they were doing it all in a second language with a pair of strangers.

Though, ultimately, perhaps that is the final lesson: the power of drama to cross borders, open doors, and forge bonds.

Read and see more about Helen’s and Steve’s time in the UAE at their blog: ELTA.wordpress.com.

Helen Wheelock joined CAT in 1994 and was named the ELTA program director in 2007. Steve Elm has been an actor/teacher with the ELTA program since its creation in 1993.

