



# IN THE NEWS

## Feature Article

### West Side Meets Middle East: A Story of Cultural Rapport

by Helen Wierlock

*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 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 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 sidetranslated for those whose English was not as strong. In fact, the very nature of our work—its





**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!

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-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!”

**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.

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.

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!”

“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: [ELIA.wordpress.com](http://ELIA.wordpress.com).

Helen Wheelock joined CAT in 1994 and was named the CETA program director in 2007. Steve Elm has been an actor/director with the CETA program since its founding in 1983.





# IN THE NEWS



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## Education & Culture

### UAE UNIVERSITY FORGES PARTNERSHIP WITH CUNY CREATIVE ARTS TEAM

Helen Wheelock and Steve Elm, two senior Teaching Artists at Creative Arts Team (CAT) which is in residence at the City University of New York's (CUNY) Office of Academic Affairs, will venture farther afield than their usual venues to bring CAT training to a group of undergraduate education students at United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in the city of Al-Ain, United Arab Emirates.

From October 6th to 15th, in addition to class time, the teaching artists will hold meetings and demonstrations for government agencies, schools, and community groups. Like CUNY, which is the largest urban public university in the nation, UAEU is a top public educational institution in its region.

Ms. Wheelock and Mr. Elm are among 50 professionals who, under CAT's banner, use interactive drama to strengthen the academic and life skills of New York City students. CAT was founded in 1974.

Typically, Ms. Wheelock and Mr. Elm work in public schools and preschools in the five boroughs. They split their time between working directly with kids and training teachers to use CAT's proven approach and methods. Teacher training is especially rewarding, said Ms. Wheelock, who also serves as CAT's director of early childhood programs.

"CAT's residency at UAEU will allow our students to gain a unique academic and artistic experience and help our students learn to use the arts as a catalyst to learning," said Dr. James Mirrione, an UAEU faculty member at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and one of CAT's cofounders who arranged the residency.

The residency will serve as a pilot for future CUNY partnerships with UAEU, said John Mogulescu, Senior University Dean for Academic Affairs and the Dean of the School of Professional Studies. "We at CUNY are delighted that CAT is partnering with a leading public university in the Middle East. We hope this is the foundation for a long and productive partnership between the two institutions."

Ms. Wheelock and Mr. Elm are already making their packing lists. In their luggage will be clothing, personal items, specially chosen storybooks, and an armful of puppets. However, the most significant item will not take up any space, says Ms. Wheelock.

"Our passion is for the power of CAT's work and this wonderful opportunity to introduce it to a new group of people. That's when I feel most proud of what I do."

For more information, please visit [www.fhss.uaeu.ac.ae](http://www.fhss.uaeu.ac.ae) or CAT's website: [www.cuny.edu/creativeartsteam](http://www.cuny.edu/creativeartsteam) for further information.





# IN THE NEWS

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العين . محمد جاهين

تصوير . محمد معين

استخدام الفنون الإبداعية ومسرح العرائس في تحفيز التعلم كان موضوع ورشة العمل التي نظمتها كلية العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية بجامعة الإمارات بمشاركة الفنانين المبدعين (هيلين ويلوك) و(ستيف إيلم) وهما عضوا فريق الفنون الإبداعية بجامعة سيتي في نيويورك.

وقد استطاعت كل من هيلين واستيف وعلى مدى ثلاث ساعات هي مدة ورشة العمل وتقديم رائع من الدكتور جيمس ميريون من كلية العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية بجامعة الإمارات أن يقدموا العديد من المشاهد المسرحية التفاعلية التي تساهم في تقوية المهارات الأكاديمية والحياتية والتي يمكن أن تطبق ليس فقط على طلاب وطالبات الجامعات مثلما يحدث في جامعة سيتي الأمريكية ولكن أيضا على طلبة المدارس خاصة مدارس رياض الأطفال التي استحوذت على مساحة ليست بالقليلة من اهتمامات المبدعين ويلوك وإيلم. ليتم تخصيص باقي الوقت لتدريب المعلمين والمعلمات على استخدام الوسائل والطرق التي تساهم في زيارة المهارات الأكاديمية



ضمن ورشة عمل

## استخدام الفنون الإبداعية ومسرح العرائس في تنمية المهارات الأكاديمية والحياتية

(AL FAJR ARTICLE TRANSLATION EXERPT)

### In the workshop The Use of Creative Arts & Puppets Theater in Developing Academic and Life Skills

The workshop, which was organized by College of Humanities & Social Sciences (CHSS) in UAEU with the participation of two creative artists (Helen Wheelock and Steve Elm), members of Creative Arts Team (CAT) from The City University of New York (CUNY), was about using creative arts and puppet theater in motivating learning.

John Mogulescu, CUNY Dean of Academic Affairs and the Dean of the School of Professional Studies, said that the presence of creative artists (Helen and Steve, who are among 50 professionals who work at CAT, which was founded since more than 30 years ago), at UAEU is considered an important experience to be followed with partnership projects between UAEU and CUNY.

ممثل هذه الخطوات والتي أجتمع الكثير من التربويين على جدواها. أسلوب التعلم باستخدام الفنون الإبداعية ومسرح العرائس ربما لم يتعلم.. ومن جانبه قال عميد جامعة سيتي الأمريكية للشنون

والحياتية لطلبة المدارس استحوذت كل من هيلين وستيف على اهتمامات كل من حضرة ورشة العمل لتتضمن الحضور أساتذة ومختصين في مجال التعليم. وفي إشارة من ميريون الأستاذة الإنسانية والاجتماعية في جامعة سيتي في نيويورك في الإمارات أن الفنون المبدعين هيلين وستيف وهما مدرسان متخصصان في جامعة الإمارات سوف يساهم في تطوير المهارات الأكاديمية والحياتية حيث تساعد على كيفية استخدام الفنون



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## CHSS becomes *smART!*

Under the patronage of Dr. Abdullah Al Khanbashi, Vice-Chancellor of the UAE University, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences recently hosted the first of a series of five, 14-day cultural workshop / residencies by visiting artists and professionals in the arts.

Known as *SMART* (Seminars in Mastering the Arts), these workshops are designed to enhance both the academic and cultural life of the institution and the community.

Team (CAT) of the City University of New York spent two weeks recently in the Multi-Purpose Room on the Maqam Campus, where they interacted with students and taught them how to incorporate the theatre and drama in education.

The *SMART* team were also invited to visit HCT in Ras Al Khaimah, where an eager and appreciative audience awaited them.

**"I am sure the educators who attended [this workshop] will be talking about this event for a long time"**



Above: Helen and Steve involve a member of the audience during a public presentation at the Zayed Centre for Heritage and History



Steve and Helen of CAT demonstrate the use of puppets as an educational vehicle to students.

According to Dr. Dennis Leavens, Assistant Dean of Humanities, "these diverse and complementary art forms provide the opportunity for our students to gain a combined academic and artistic experience not currently available at UAEU."

Helen Wheelock and Steve Elm of the Creative Arts

The classes were very well attended by students from various disciplines, including drama, social work, psychology and counseling and education.

"Word of the workshops spread quickly throughout the campus and we were amazed at the excitement and turnout the workshops generated," said Dr. Jim Mirrione who facilitated the sessions.

"We had around 30 attendees, of whom the largest percentage were RKW B.Ed. students and graduates," says Anna Bailey, RAK Representative for TESOL Arabia.

"I am sure the educators who attended [this workshop] will be talking about this event for a long time", Anna added.

Graduates from the UAE, who are now teaching in RAK, and several teachers from the Educational Zone and RKW were also in attendance.

The next *smART* Workshop is scheduled from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2008 and will focus on the art of film writing and production.

"We are hoping to get students from across the University to these workshops," Dr. Leavens says.



November workshops will take place from daily from 17:00 – 19:00 at Maqam. Workshops for the male students will take place either at Falaj Hazza or the Islamic Institute, depending on the student's availability and schedules. For more information or to register, visit [www.fhss.uaeu.ac.ae](http://www.fhss.uaeu.ac.ae).