

***To Kill a Mockingbird* as a case study for examining artistic practice in relation to Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) in Canada today**

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Introduction

Young People's Theatre (YPT) is celebrating its 50th anniversary this season in 2015/16. It is the oldest continuously operating theatre company in Toronto and is a national producer and presenter of TYA. At YPT, learning is at the centre of everything we do. We foster learning through the professional theatrical work produced on our stages and the enriched experiences offered by Education & Participation (E&P) Department.

YPT produced Christopher Sergel's adaptation (1998) of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the 2014/15 season, which required the theatre, especially E&P, to respond to the pedagogical implications of staging a 'classic' in a contemporary Canadian context. Our approach to the show was exemplified in a forum event that we held for teachers, parents and community stakeholders. The event was carefully planned to include multiple voices, including perspectives that raised difficult and uncomfortable questions about the text in relation to ongoing racism and

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inequality affecting young people in our audiences. Our preparation for the forum serves as a model of our best work.

As soon as the play was programmed, we realized that nostalgia would be the biggest impediment to explaining to teachers and parents the need for preparing young audiences for the show. Many people remember *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a lovely coming-of-age story told through the eyes of an innocent young girl. What people don't always remember is that the central events of the story concern a black man who is accused and wrongfully convicted of raping a white woman. In addition, in the course of the play-adaptation, the word 'nigger' is said 11 times, there is the threat of lynching by a mob, an adult breaks a child's arm, and a man is murdered with a knife on stage. While there are many reasons to view *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a classic, for children, the very concept of a classic holds little meaning. For them, it is a new story. What is familiar to adult audiences is to young people surprising, even shocking. This is particularly true with regard to the guilty verdict. Therefore, staging this play for young people requires recognition that the audience don't already know the story.

Staging a classic

Programming the play began with YPT's Artistic Director Allen MacInnis' choice of 'fairness' as a season theme for 2014/15. Each play

explored the challenge of teaching and negotiating fairness in an often unfair world and looking at systemic obstacles to fairness. He felt *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a perfect fit for this theme. Certainly, this was not without anxiety or careful consideration. Allen was concerned that this story might be too difficult and was considering the implications of taking children through these hard lessons, in part because he felt it imperative to maintain the historical language and to include ‘the N-word’ in this production. At the same time, he saw an opportunity to explore censorship of this word and thus examine racism, not only in the educational landscape, but in Canada more broadly.

Ultimately, Allen felt that young audiences would not be traumatized, but would feel connected to the perspective of Scout, who witnesses injustice with horror and who is changed by her experiences. The audience, therefore, would be ‘witnessing’ alongside her. As YPT recommended the production for children as young as 10, “seeing through Scout’s eyes” gained the utmost importance.

Why us?

Despite Allen’s leadership and careful approach to the work, there was concern amongst staff about YPT telling this story. In our research for the show, criticisms of Atticus Finch began to echo some of the traits of

YPT. The comparisons are many: Atticus Finch represents institutional authority and a justice system in which people are meant to trust. His actions in the story cannot be viewed, today, without acknowledging his white privilege and his ‘tolerance’ of racism. YPT is an established, well-resourced institution, beloved in our community, a trusted voice that speaks with authority. Despite the purposeful diversity of actors on stage, YPT still has few non-white, full-time staff members. What right do we have to be telling this story? What responsibility? What aren’t we seeing? We had daily discussions about why YPT should produce this play. We had to look at ourselves, recognizing our limitations and that our approach to the production and the education work in connection with it couldn’t help but be fraught with blindspots.



Our obligation to our audience

E&P was charged with meeting the challenges inherent in this production. So, preparing the audience became our central focus. We have an obligation to them. We know our audience. It is mostly comprised of students attending the theatre on a field trip with their schools, but also family audiences on the weekend. We know that Toronto is a multicultural city, but that it is not necessarily a connected one. For example, carding, a highly controversial policing practice in Canada, allows police officers to question members of the public not suspected of criminal activity and to input these details into a massive database. This practice is criticized because of the highly disproportionate number of young black men carded. It had been in the news a great deal in Toronto in the year of the production, and would have been known to the audience as a case of systemic racism in Canada. It is a good example of what is going on in the city, day to day, and we were conscious that the audience could be thinking of this as they watched the show. In an email conversation on June 11 2015 Thomas Hauff, the actor who played Mr. Cunningham and Judge Taylor, made the following remark regarding challenges associated with producing this show in Toronto today:

When we started rehearsals I was afraid we wouldn't address the current racial situation in Toronto, i.e., carding... The play itself opens up questions about inequality but because of the time period it's set in, it reinforces the idea of inequality.

So, mindful of the varied lived experiences of our audiences with regard to racial inequality, how would we as an organization approach preparing audiences for this classic text? Our forum was designed to help teachers and parents do the same.

Our approach to the forum

This event came out of a desire to meet these questions head on. While community events and programming for teachers are a regular occurrence for us, this particular forum was unique. It was a way for us to respond to the challenges of this particular play. Designed for adults to examine together the challenging discussions that would be required with children attending the production, it was also a way to bring stakeholders – parents, teachers, community members and artists – who may not always talk to one another into conversation together. We started planning three months prior with a committee of staff members from different departments. We met regularly to determine the tone and goals for the event. We strove to make a space for people to speak freely about themes and issues fraught with tension and controversy. In planning, something that became clear was that the forum could not become a debate on whether or not to do the play - as that decision had been made - it had to be an exploration of different perspectives on the most pertinent themes.

Upon arrival, participants were given a number, indicating where they would begin the discussion. There were four discussion questions: ‘Banning Books?’, ‘The Law vs. Justice?’, ‘The N-word? and ‘*To Kill a Mockingbird* in Canada Today?’ Only 10 minutes were allotted per question and facilitators moved to each group. A scribe, who unobtrusively took notes during the discussions, was also assigned to each facilitator.

We were careful in the casting of the facilitators for each of the four groups. We ensured that we had a range of experts and practitioners and that our cast for the evening was diverse with regard to ethnicity, gender and perspective. The facilitators were: Roy Fernandes, a principal for the Toronto Catholic District School Board; Dr. Jean Wilson, a comparative literature professor at McMaster University; Dr. Gary Warner, a French and linguistics professor and social justice activist, also at McMaster; and April Julian, Deputy Director of Education at Canadian Civil Liberties Association and Education Trust. Our panel was also carefully selected and included: Allen MacInnis; Anna Burnett, a teacher (who loves teaching the book); and Rosemary Sadlier, the head of the Ontario Black History Society (who has mixed feelings about it).

The panel discussion, which followed the facilitated discussion, was also carefully considered. Associate Artistic Director (Education), Karen Gilodo, moderated. We deliberately did not have any set questions for the

panel. Instead, all of the questions came from what the scribes had recorded during the first part of the event. So, the panel was truly reactive to what people were bringing into the room. Its success was largely due to this structure. Much of the discussion ended up centering around the question of ‘when are children ready for the truth and whose truth?’ This discussion was one we felt confident moderating, as this is a question we ask ourselves with each show we program.

A parent put this into clear perspective by sharing a story of her 4-year-old daughter coming home and asking her if she was a ‘nigger’.

Deciding when children are ‘ready’ is often beyond our control, so it is incumbent upon us to be prepared to be responsive. What many participants owned was the anxiety around their own readiness and, indeed, willingness to broach subjects that are uncomfortable. Having this particular conversation brought to the fore was an especially helpful outcome of the forum and was further instructive to all participants in helping us to understand the value of preparation for all involved, rather than focusing on children’s ‘readiness’ for the play. This was carried into our work with teachers and parents bringing young people to the show, and into our encounters with all of our audience members. Having tried out these conversations and reflected on the issues raised in a ‘rehearsal’ space and collaboratively, we could be more responsive and open in on-going work.

We became more comfortable in our discomfort. Furthermore, due to our initial concerns about children’s readiness for what we were offering them, we may not have looked honestly enough at the varied and complex experiences they will bring as audience members to the play and to the discussions afterward – and the forum helped us address this.

The forum we did in connection with *To Kill a Mockingbird* is something we keep talking about at YPT. We know that what we did with this event was special. Though our work will always be unique to the production and context, this pedagogical approach will continue to serve as a reference point, informing future projects.

Notes on contributors

Karen Gilodo is the Associate Artistic Director, Education for Young People’s Theatre, Canada’s oldest and largest professional theatre for young audiences. She is an Ontario Certified Teacher and holds a Masters of Arts in Drama from the University of Toronto. Karen has worked for several arts organizations in Toronto and across Canada including the National Arts Centre. She consults regularly and sits on several boards and advisory committees.

Lois Adamson is the Member Schools & Education Manager for Young People’s Theatre. She is an Ontario Certified Teacher and holds a Masters in Curriculum Studies & Teacher Development from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Lois is a board member for the Professional Arts Organizations Network for Education and the Paprika Festival and is a founding company member of Shakespeare in the Ruff. Lois works with artists, theatres and not-for-profit organizations across the country as a consultant and arts educator.

References

Sergel, Christopher. 1998. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Based on the novel by Harper Lee. Woodstock: The Dramatic Publishing Company.