Service Learning: Staging Hispanic Theatre for Bilingual Elementary Students

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The term "children's theatre" (*teatro infantil* in Spanish) has various meanings. In addition to theatre performed by children, it includes theatre for young audiences. The latter generally takes shape in one of two ways: either one-off performances for children or what is often called Theater in Education (TiE), which is British in origin. Chief among the differences between these two forms of theatre for young audiences is TiE's emphasis on patterned activities that accompany the performance and support learning through participatory exercises designed to enhance critical inquiry.

This essay will describe a unique service-learning course in which my advanced undergraduate students, utilizing TiE practices, stage Hispanic theatre for children. For this course, I designed three units in which my students study pedagogy as it relates to theatre for young audiences, analyze theatre from the Hispanic world written for children, and draft and perform original plays for bilingual elementary students in our local school district. The course was originally developed through a grant from the College of Liberal Arts Dean's Office designed to enhance service learning for undergraduates. Service is particularly relevant at Texas A&M University, where there is a culture of student engagement and where the first-of-its-kind community-wide service project, The Big Event, began in 1982.¹

Our local community has a large Hispanic population and strong bilingual/ dual language programs in both school districts.² I chose to have students perform their plays at an elementary school in the Bryan Independent School District, where the performance counts as an activity that involves parents and thus fulfills a requirement for the school's Title I eligibility. The course fits a very local niche and the needs of its population, provides a high-impact learning practice for Texas A&M students, and has wider applicability as a model that can be adapted to fit in other curricular and linguistic settings.

Meaning of Praxis and Background on Methodology

The project described above falls into the category of what some critics are calling "a/r/tography." The first to coin this phrase were Rita Irwin and her colleagues: "A/r/tography is an arts and education practice-based research methodology that emphasizes living inquiry and examination of the spaces between arts—making/researching/teaching (a/r/t)" (18). Irwin and her colleagues emphasize the in-between nature of this kind of practice, in which the traditionally discrete identities and roles of student and teacher overlap (18). Echoing this definition, Liora Bresler further explains a/r/tography as "a form of practice-based research, referring to the arts as a way of re-searching the world to enhance understanding, recognizing the educational potential of reaching and learning as acts of inquiry" (322). The initial inspiration for this new methodology grew out of scholarship by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on rhizomatic structures. Deleuze and Guattari's research on rhizomes, as applied to cultural studies, metaphorically produces "a network of connected identities, ideas, and concepts," on which theatre practitioners like Irwin have capitalized (Irwin, et. al 18). Key to the concept of rhizomatic structures in a/r/tography is a "commitment to relationality as a condition for its enactment, and its commitment to renderings as conceptual frames for its processes and representations" (19). In other words, the play-creating process is not linear, nor is it top-down in/on the classroom/stage. Instead, the process involves an approach that allows for a wide range of pedagogical experiences that co-exist and in which teachers/students are constantly negotiating their roles as they co-create.

The free-ranging network of associations and relationality advocated by Irwin and others stems from a larger movement that has arisen in response to challenges posed by a growing interdisciplinary approach to the field of theatre and drama. Most, like Helen Nicholson, have argued that theatre and drama now take place in a variety of community and educational settings and draw from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, cultural geography, philosophy, education, theatre, and performance studies. Nicholson traces the fall of grand narratives in the 20th century to changes in the field of theatre and performance. She especially highlights the growing bewilderment by those on the political left who struggle to understand how to maintain a commitment to radical, democratic principles when many of these master narratives are crumbling or have already disappeared. One such example can be found in the politics of empowerment made famous by Augusto Boal in his Theatre of the Oppressed.³ Participatory theatre has thus become a place of exploration and part of a developing praxis for both scholars and practitioners. What was heretofore a narrowly defined field of applied theatre now encompasses a much broader scope and provides room for the in-between-ness which Irwin and her colleagues advocate. It is precisely this in-between-ness that is the basis for this article and its focus on a high-impact service-learning theatre course that draws on the "r"/research portion of a/r/tography.

It is important, however, to remain mindful of the fact that theatre always retains the act of witnessing. As a result, it can never completely abandon the possibility of social or personal change that is implicit in the subjunctive, imagined quality of a theatre performance-most notably present in the suspension of disbelief and the artifice of the illusion of a staged world and how audiences co-make meaning of that action on the stage. In this sense, we cannot discard entirely the "applied" aspects of theatre. Authors Robert J. Landy and David T. Montgomery assert that "drama is an action taken, and theater [is] a place for observing an action," thus affirming the "confluence of acting and witnessing" (xvii). These actions, created on a stage by directors/actors and received by an audience, can prompt change, especially when applied to learning, social action, and therapy (xvii). Landy and Montgomery view "praxis" as a "practice informed by theory (and vice versa)," finding that, when engaged in theatre, praxis can become a model for change: "actionobservation-reflection-re-action, where re-action points to change" (xvii), an idea that stems from their reading of Artistotle's tragedy as mimesis praxeos.

Whereas those like Nicholson attribute the abandonment of fundamentals associated with Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed or Paolo Freire's "concientizaçao" to the postmodern discounting of master narratives, others like Landy and Montgomery have adapted these same ideas for discussions about social change in new millieux. For Landy and Montgomery, applied theatre has the goal of developing participants' critical thinking skills, which, they posit, leads necessarily to changes in understanding (1). Kathleen Gallagher makes a similar argument for those doing applied theatre in an educational setting, remarking that the learning outcome for committed teachers is to "stretch the minds of young people beyond the scope of their current understandings" through the "responsible use of cultural or personal student realities" in theatre and performance (7). What I see as the common thread in these theoretical stances is an opening up of the field to possibilities that take scholars, directors, actors, audiences, teachers, and students out of the binary of stage/page, research/spectacle, and performer/audience, allowing them to explore drama and its effects in multivalent ways, which inevitably leads to multiple strands of knowing and understanding. Joe Winston supports this notion, stating that "[d]rama is an *open practice*, not closed and private but public and open-ended so that, through it, the closed narratives of myth and ritual become *variable* through *action*, action which mirrors the social and moral life" (emphasis in original, 46). While some, like Jill Dolan, might take issue with the use of the concept of mirroring, preferring instead to see drama as something that mediates the representation of reality (16),⁴ Winston's argument for the open-ness of theatre is important for our discussion. He goes on to align his thoughts with those of Dolan:

So, through drama, we *move beyond* the presentation of myths as narratives which aspire to carry universal meanings irrespective of time and culture to *versions* of these narratives, each exploring meanings dependent upon the contexts within which they were created. (emphasis in original, 46)

What Winston and Dolan highlight is the practice of interrogation and inquiry rather than the rhetoric that is being foregrounded in contemporary theatre, especially in an applied setting. Applied theatre is currently being transformed to allow the in-between-ness that Irwin and her colleagues identified to become part of the discussion, praxis, and research undertaken by multiple stakeholders.

Critical to those working in this kind of theatre, especially in academic settings, is the effort to create new kinds of literacy. Thomas P. Cumpler, Theresa Rogers, and Jenifer Jasinski Schneider call this the need for "multiple literacies," which implies "learning across a range of print and non-print genres and media" (xiii). Others, like Jack Zipes, argue for "critical literacy" (53). For Zipes, critical literacy is the "ability to analyze the presentation of information and identify how the presentation influences listeners' and readers' understanding of the information. Writing, performing, and analyzing narratives are therefore powerful means of developing critical literacy" (53).

This application of critical literacy can be seen in unexpected ways when students engage in projects where they create original theatrical productions. The act of writing, producing, and acting in musical/theatrical productions as part of an honors college first-year experience makes students more "re-

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spectful and more critical of the works of literature, philosophy, history, and theology they are reading concurrently with their work on the production" (Schwehn 3). Mark Schwehn further notes that when students must invent characters who are consistent, connect endings to beginnings, and carry forward thematic emphases, they are more intrigued with questions of theme, structure, argument, and text in works they read by Plato and Jane Austen, for example (3). In this way, these new types of literacies mean that students are truly developing the "liberal" aspect of liberal arts: learning through inquiry that is based not solely on textual references, but on embodied practices, and through the creation of rhizomatic structures, which allow for learning across, in between, and among disciplines.

The second part of this essay focuses on how to connect these strands of learning and meaning-making in a service-learning course. We will explore how students engage in high-impact practices through traditional learning models and embodied practice and how they use critical thinking skills to construct a model for applied learning through TiE methods. We will also look at how this course fits into the profile of service learning as well as that of a/r/tography.

Staging Hispanic Theatre: The Class

My objective in this class is to study children's theatre from Spain and Latin America and to perform short plays for children in a dual-language program at a local elementary school as part of a service-learning curriculum. After taking this class, students should be able to demonstrate that they have met the following learning outcomes:

- 1. Define the two strands of children's theatre that exist and the pedagogical or artistic reasons behind them;
- 2. Identify historical and theoretical concepts linked to the plays;
- 3. Perform an original play in Spanish;
- 4. Devise an anticipatory set and facilitate a talk-back session;
- 5. Understand the importance of service learning within the framework of character development at the elementary school level.

As mentioned in the introduction, this course began as a service-learning project. It has three components: pedagogy, the study of theatre texts/performance studies, and play writing/performance. Throughout, I have endeavored to include the four main skills for foreign language acquisition: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The class relies on textual material, collaborative work, and embodied practice. It is also designed to allow students (both mine

and the elementary school students) to discover how Spanish is useful not simply as an academic pursuit or exercise in memorizing grammar, but as a tool for understanding culture and literature, as well as a method for creating a space for communicating through the exchange of information and the co-creation of meaning in a real-life setting.

My own desire to apply for the grant stemmed from my interest in service and my membership in Rotary, a professional and philanthropic organization whose motto, "Service Above Self," motivates us to incorporate service into our professions and use our professions to serve others. I wanted to use my background in theatre to serve the community and to inspire students to serve in their future professions. It so happens that I am also employed at a university that has a strong commitment to service through its military heritage and through activities like The Big Event. Because it is a land grant institution, one of the missions at Texas A&M is to serve the people of Texas. It is this sort of atmosphere and the value that the university places on service at both the institutional and cultural levels that made my service-learning course a success.

In its first iteration, the course was organized slightly differently in the final unit, which focuses on creating and performing a play. I used the grant money to create the class and invite a Uruguayan playwright to assist with a workshop for my students. In this workshop, students were asked to produce an original play in Spanish to perform at a local elementary school with a bilingual Spanish program. Overall, this was a positive experience for the playwright and students, but there were some moments that proved challenging. In most cases, my third- and fourth-year Spanish students lacked the in-depth knowledge of acting and ease with performing in front of others that the playwright was accustomed to in her work with professional actors. My students' comfort with Spanish was also uneven given that the class was split nearly evenly between heritage learners/native speakers and Anglo, non-native speakers. It also proved very challenging to find quality children's theatre that we could adapt for a production in a relatively short period of time and with scarce resources. The playwright was unable to provide a published play from Uruguay that would work in the time frame and for the purposes we intended. Instead, the playwright created a piece that relied heavily on group movements and small vignettes written by the students to produce a work about violence and bullying and how that could be transformed into peace and kindness. The performance piece was called Imagina un mundo sin violencia [Imagine a World Without Violence] and used music from John Lennon's song "Imagine" in the final scene. While this performance piece

might have worked for more advanced young audiences, I believe that its meaning was difficult for primary school children to grasp.

The following year, I adapted the course for a different kind of performance based on conversations that I had with a local school administrator and the experience I had during the workshop in the previous year's course. I was still very interested in finding a way to combine service with my profession, and after talking to the vice principal of another local elementary school, whose husband was a fellow Rotarian, I learned that our theatrical production could be used to facilitate Title I funding for the elementary school if we included parents in the audience. I began to think about how we could incorporate character training (training in positive character traits for both students and communities) as the basis for storytelling in our plays.⁵ Elementary schools, including those in the Bryan Independent School District, are increasingly using character training as part of the curriculum in school-wide and grade-level specific pedagogy, so it seemed to be a good place to start for our plays.

Unit I: Pedagogy

The course begins with a unit on pedagogy that comprises about four weeks of the semester. Our assigned readings trace the beginning of children's theatre from its emergence in the early 20th century, when the concept of "childhood" became pervasive in Western society.⁶ As the middle class became more affluent and developed, interest in children's theatre and its capacity for instruction increased (Reason 3). Students learn the difference between Theater in Education (TiE) practices and theatrical performances for children. Selections from Matthew Reason's *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theater* (2010) are the foundation for exploring these two strands of children's theatre and guide our discussion throughout the semester. As part of the conversation, we also explore Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" as it informs cultural accessibility and familiarity with the arts in Western culture. We discuss who has access to the arts, how access to the arts elevates student academic performance, and if access to the arts can and should be considered a fundamental human right.

In addition to these topics, Reason's study also provides fertile ground for discussing the role of audiences in the production of theatre. Immanuel Kant's theories on aesthetic engagement and learning underlie our discussions about audience reception and participation. How spectators engage with art—whether actively (instrumental) or ritualistically—can have a dramatic impact on reception. Students with literary and cultural skills and "habitus" tend to approach theatre in productive ways that lead to serious engagement with themes and the production of meaning both within and outside the theater. Those who simply attend for the purposes of escapism do not necessarily always experience or construct the same kind of active learning and integration of new knowledge into their existing repertoires. These two vastly diverse experiences have therefore undergirded the development of TiE. Educators and theatre practitioners seek to promote opportunities for pre- and post-learning activities and to provide students with some of the cultural capital necessary for grappling with art and theatre in the kinds of ways that Kant envisioned as a lifelong engagement with aesthetics.

After covering the basic components of children's theatre, its rationales, and the ways in which students might participate as spectators, this first unit incorporates the task of covering the "instructive" portion of children's theatre by introducing the topic of ethics. One of the main texts that we use for this purpose is Teatro infantil y dramatización escolar (1997), co-edited by Pedro C. Cerrillo and Jaime García Padrino. This collection, specifically the chapter by Isabel Tejerina on the teaching of values through theatre, allows students in the course to reflect during class discussions on how societies, families, and individuals define "ethics" and how values can come into conflict among various institutions and practices. In this way, we look at how art and life overlap. I usually divide the room into two groups and have students discuss topics such as the following: Do we have a responsibility to educate children in ethics in public institutions? Is the purpose of education professional or personal/civic development? Is there a conflict between what we teach and what society values? When we reconvene as a class, these conversations help us grapple with the topic of character education in public schools-the principle that will guide our development of one-act plays later in the semester.

We end the unit by turning a critical eye on the differences between traditional theatre studies and performance studies curricula. This topic is, of course, relevant for the class as we move through the semester and blur the usual binaries. As students study and construct plays, they employ skills that are part of the literary and textual components that make up traditional theatre studies. However, as they explore the components of performance and embodied practice, they are also moving through the range of behaviors and practices that are part of human experience via language, culture, and ethics. Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer provide an excellent description of embodied learning in their introduction to *Teaching Performance Stud*- *ies* (2002), which I use to help students understand experiential learning. In this final section of this unit, research on arts-making and pedagogy unite, while the blending of experiential art-based learning that is the focus of a/r/ tography begins to take shape.

Unit II: Children's Theatre, *el arte por el arte* and *el arte docente y comprometido*

The next unit for the semester is divided into two main themes: *el arte por* el arte (art for art's sake) and el arte docente y comprometido (educational and activist art). Students read in Spanish a variety of plays written for children's theatre. In the "art for art's sake" category, I include Jacinto Benavente's La cenicienta, Ramón del Valle-Inclán's Farsa infantil de la cabeza del dragón, and Miguel Angel Tenorio's Otros tres cochinitos. The phrase "art for art's sake" comes, of course, from the 19th-century slogan "l'art pour l'art" created by Victor Cousin. It defines artistic expression as an aesthetic end in and of itself and not just a means to express a political or didactic view.7 We examine these plays in terms of content and structure and analyze how authors such as Benavente utilize aesthetic concepts such as symbolist techniques to convey the experience of the senses in a play that blurs reality and fiction through a revision of the Cinderella story, or the ways in which Valle-Inclán employs the grotesque, particularly his trademark *esperpento*, in a tale about a kingdom and its monsters (both human and animal). For Tenorio's play, students read critical theory on metatheatre and apply the concept to the intertextual rendering of the fable of the three pigs and the wolf.

In the following section on didactic and socially motivated plays, we seek to understand how theatre can be used to inform audiences, offer political commentary, or promote social activism. We focus on Sabina Berman's *Maravillosa historia del chiquito pingüico* and Lauro Olmo's *El raterillo*. In studying Berman's play, students combine theory on metatheatre with critical approaches to fairy tales and cultural information on the *Popul Vuh*⁸ to understand the work as a historical, artistic, and cultural text.⁹ Used primarily in modern times as instructive texts on behavior and civic duty, fairy tales form the basis for our discussions on the function of children's literature and theatre. The *Popul Vuh* and Berman's metatheatrical rendering of the Mayan story of the Pirámide del Adivino are discussed through the lens of oral tradition and ancient indigenous concepts of wisdom and learning. Finally, in order to understand Olmo's play, we look at the influence of the Franco regime and dictatorship in Spain, the work of the Generación Realista, and

the ways in which Olmo uses children's theatre to question power structures and tyranny and explore themes of justice and class conflict in a repressive and censored society.

Through these two sections on literary and performance analysis, students apply critical theory and historical contexts to their readings of plays from Spain and Latin America. The unit provides a brief view of how children's theatre is both an aesthetic experience and a tool that can be used for pedagogical and activist ends. This second unit of the course seeks to combine both the applied aspects mentioned above as well as the more esoteric concerns of artistic content. We combine theory and literature as well as artistic and practical aspects as we look at textual examples.

Unit III: Staging Original Plays

In the final unit, students combine the knowledge they have accumulated during the previous weeks to design and execute original plays in Spanish for bilingual elementary school audiences. Here I ask students to take into account TiE practices and write an original play with pre- and post-performance exercises for the student audience at the elementary school. As part of our preparation, we look at a handout provided by the vice principal on character traits and discuss as a group the kind of ethical choices that the university students would like to emphasize through their dramatic renderings of character trait education. After settling on a couple of traits, the class is divided into two teams and tasked with composing a storyline, then dialogue, and finally stage directions that include actions and props.

By this point in the semester, students are comfortable interacting with each other; throughout the previous weeks, a small portion of each class period, at either the beginning or end of the hour, has been dedicated to acting exercises. The exercises are mostly interactive, so students work in pairs, small teams, or even as an entire class to practice improvisational skills, voice and breathing exercises, and corporeal movement. After several weeks of performing exercises that range from silly to serious, from scripted to made up, and from cerebral to corporeal, the student-actors in the class develop a high level of rapport with each other and a new level of comfort performing in front of other people. Almost all of my students are novices when it comes to acting and hence enter the class with varying degrees of apprehension about performing in public. These acting exercises are meant to develop not only morale among the classmates, but also to alleviate some of the awkwardness that I witnessed in the first iteration of the course with the Uruguayan dramatist and my inexperienced student-actors.

The acting exercises allow students to work collectively on developing a play script that often comes together as a mix of writing and performance, as page and stage overlap in the process of storytelling. Once the students have scripted the dialogue, they concentrate on the spectacle, deciding on costumes, music, gestures, entrances and exits, timing, and other elements of the play. Finally, students rehearse for several weeks, memorizing lines, perfecting stage presence and voice projection, and polishing their performances.

After students have a written text with a well-conceived storyline, their final homework consists of developing TiE activities that will serve as tools to enhance learning. Students receive a handout explaining the pedagogical term "anticipatory set"-a short activity or set of activities designed to introduce a topic and generate discussion before the main concept is introduced formally in the classroom. The tool of the anticipatory set guides students as they develop pre-performance activities that we distribute in advance to the elementary school so that students, teachers, and parents can begin a discussion about the character traits that will be highlighted in the plays. The student-actors also create a set of questions to follow the performance and to be used in a talk-back session to check comprehension, to reiterate the concepts presented in the performance, and to engage students in discussions about how the character traits and behaviors might be applied in a real-world setting. The performance of the plays (they are usually short plays lasting about 10-15 minutes) is followed by the talk-back session led by studentperformers as they entreat the elementary students to apply critical thinking to the spectacle they have just witnessed.

Learning, Researching, Teaching Outcomes

Returning to our initial discussion of this project, the pedagogy of a/r/ tography, with its quality of in-between spaces, is the framework that I believe best describes the Staging Hispanic Theater and service-learning course just described. In this process, as undergraduate students mentor and model behavior for elementary students in the target language, they are also simultaneously developing their own linguistic, literary, and pedagogical skills. They are providing necessary cultural capital for young students who may not be familiar with theatre practices and behavior, while also expanding their own repertoire through an exploration of how language can be used to communicate in real-world settings and how liberal arts education can be applied to understand existing works of literature and to create new compositions. Likewise, the fact that I am writing this essay exemplifies how arts-making, research, and teaching practices can overlap in unexpected ways. With the added component of service-learning, applied theatre's impact can be further enhanced through TiE activities. Whereas one might argue that the emphasis on educational components in the course means that we sacrifice some of the spontaneous joy of attending a theatrical spectacle for the sake of simply appreciating and losing ourselves in its artistic quality (and this is, of course, one of the criticisms of TiE), I believe that this course provides the opportunity for students to think about how theatre can be not only an aesthetic experience but also a transformative one for both student-artists, researchers, and teachers through practice-based inquiry. If we argue that liberal arts education is important for teaching students to analyze and solve problems through inquiry, which in turn provides them with the ability to synthesize and extrapolate meaning in complex situations, then a course that endeavors to do these things might (I hope) be forgiven for what some may perceive as a heavy-handed approach to applied results and outcomes.

Texas A&M University

Notes

¹ This volunteer event now involves over 20,000 students who participate each year in service projects at the homes and businesses of local residents on a Saturday in March to show their appreciation to the community for its support of Texas A&M and its traditions. The Big Event is now a model followed by other universities nationally and internationally. For more information please see http://bigevent.tamu. edu/

² For more information on the bilingual education program for Byran Independent School District, see http://www.bryanisd.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=366634&type=d&pREC_ID=818132; and for more information on the dual language program at College Station Independent School District, see http://www.csisd.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=164498&type=d&pREC_ID=337465

³ Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed grew out of the theoretical approach taken by Paolo Freire and his philosophy of *conscientização*, a term that Landy and Montgomery define as "practice [that] urges people to raise essential questions about their circumstances and to expose the mechanisms of oppression" (xix).

⁴ See Dolan's "Gender Impersonation on Stage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?"

⁵ For instance, in the past my classes have selected traits like responsibility, respect, compassion, and sharing. For more information and examples, see www.charactered.net

⁶ The list of reading selections used in class and presented in this section is only partial for the sake of space.

⁷ See for instance http://www.britannica.com/topic/art-for-arts-sake.

 $^{8}\,$ The *Popul Vuh* is a pre-Columbian text that describes the Mayan culture's creation myth and vision of spirituality.

⁹ As part of the basis for our analysis of the play, students view the critically acclaimed film by Patricia Amlin titled *Popul Vuh: The Creation Myth of the Maya* (1989), produced by Berkeley Media LLC.

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