

### 3 Students

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I won't kid you, this happened years ago. Perhaps therein lies the potency -- the 3 students, and the lessons they taught me, remain clear in my memory. We TA's teach classes, but ultimately we are teaching a roomful of individuals. And, I'm sure, these three stay with me because, though I've certainly grown and progressed since then, I think my work with them remains a shining example of my teaching artistry at its best.

#### Searching

I was engaged by the California Playwrights Project in San Diego to teach and write for "Searching for San Diego," a project that involved oral histories from residents of four diverse neighborhoods, conducted by scholars, which were passed on to me to create a theatrical performance that would be performed at sites in each of the communities. Along the way, I was to work with a tenth-grade English class to listen to, read transcripts of, and write scenes derived from the material recorded with the residents.

The rub was that the focus neighborhood was a sophisticated, artsy, intown district with a large gay presence, but the high school linked to it was several miles (but demographic worlds) away, in a less affluent, ethnically diverse part of the city.

Prior to the work, in a planning session, I told the teacher that I hoped to face the issues raised in the tapes head-on with the students. A Latina lesbian mother. A Vietnam veteran. A young gay black man. The teacher had other ideas, feeling that such social issues are best approached elsewhere, and that the students would not be mature enough to understand and discuss such topics as homosexuality and violence. I acknowledged those feelings, and we decided to play it by ear. (I suspected the teacher to have been a closeted gay person, and wanted respect that possibility and to make sure that his/her safety was not broached. At the same time, I wanted to dealing with the material in a mature, objective, responsible manner.)

On paper and in genes, the class, as if by design, was almost perfectly divided into four ethnic groups. One quarter were Asian-American, one quarter were African-American, one quarter were Hispanic-American, mostly if not all from Mexico or Mexican families, and one quarter were Caucasian. Of course, in practice these distinctions had limited meaning -- this was a group of young teenagers with many interconnected relationships and dynamics. But I offer the larger picture because the material we were exploring looked at the subjects' ethnicities, and our overall goal was to use drama to document and express moments and changes in the life of a community.

Over the course of several weeks, we listened to parts of tapes, read others, got to know the subjects, discussed their lives, processed playwriting techniques, wrote, and shared.

"How can that be?"

There was one memorable interchange, which I'll relate before I get to the 3 students. We were focused on the woman talking about her female partner and her son, when a potentially discomfiting discussion erupted. (I approximate it here, distilling the crosscurrents of a loud and impulsive interchange.)

"Wait, she's lesbian?" "That's nasty!" "No it isn't." "Yes, it is!" "Be quiet." "I don't want to talk about no lesbians."

I visually checked in with the teacher, who was a bit dumbfounded, but not completely horrified. I sensed that this was okay enough. We both listened on.

"She lives with a woman but she has a son! How can that be?" "It just is." "Who's the father?" "Is it really her son?" "Lesbians can't have children!" "Did she adopt it?" "Yes they can." "You need a man!" "Are they allowed to adopt?" "What if she was married before?" "Then she's not a lesbian!" "Why not?" "Because, you know, she doesn't like men." "What's her girlfriend gonna say about that?"

I was tempted to intervene, to take over and explain, to 'civilize' the discussion, but instead I wisely trusted my instinct to let the kids sort it out for themselves. Anything I could have said about self-discovery, sexual fluidity, bisexuality, or societal pressures came out much more appropriately and accessibly in their own way.

"Sometimes a lesbian doesn't know she's a lesbian until after she marries some dude." "That's crazy!" "Not if she married me!" "What do you know about it? You a lesbian?" "Maybe she changed." "Lesbians have kids. All it takes is once." "If she doesn't like dudes, she's not gonna let that happen." "Maybe she likes them a little." "Whatever." "Well, don't say a lesbian can't have a kid. She can."

Through the course of the discussion, the high tension waned, and the laughter rose; the room had found its answer. The more reasoned and sophisticated voices carried the day, but not without some rousing provocation from the more ignorant and extreme, and all had had their say.

So it went during most of our sessions. As in many high school classrooms, opinions were tossed out freely, and peer appraisal -- spoken, hissed, grinned, snickered, back-patted -- was often more important than response from us adults.

It was in this setting that I encountered the three students.

Adalberto

Not his real name, of course. He was a slender, quiet, bored young man, with a wisp of a mustache just beginning to emerge. He spoke English well enough, but wrote only passingly, and with much labor. We would start many sessions with creative writing prompts, just to get the juices flowing, with the goal of moving pen on paper for several minutes without stopping, regardless of what comes out. It would be about your most frightening experience, or a time when you felt left out, or a particular place you feel a strong connection with.

And then during the main part of the session, the students would write character sketches, monologues, or other exercises. Once they had been introduced to playwriting format, dialogue, conflict, and other fundamentals, they would write scenes -- at first from improvisations scenes or their own ideas, and later from the oral history material.

Throughout, Adalberto was sluggish. I would pass by his desk, point at the paper, and urge him on. I'd crouch by his side and try to engage him. I asked *si prefiera escribir en espanol*, and told him I could work my way through reading it. But that wasn't the issue. It was a steady flow of "can't think of anything" or "this is boring" or "just don't want to" or "don't like it." Then he'd just look at the wall, as if it had more to tell me than he did.

I talked to the teacher, but learned that this was how Adalberto had been all year. Language Arts wasn't his thing. It was basically irrelevant to him. I told him he could write about anything he wanted to. He said he didn't want to write about anything. I asked the teacher what did interest Adalberto, and was told that Adalberto played soccer and loved math. I suggested that he write about a problem on a soccer field, or a problem he had or observed with a coach, or what his biggest hope or dream might be as a soccer player, to score a winning goal, to turn professional, and what obstacles might stand in his way. He was unmoved.

In between sessions, I remembered something from when I was in 10th Grade. Mr. Carpenter, my wonderful Algebra teacher, had given us an assignment to explain ten hypotheses relating to the concepts of Continuous and Instantaneous Rate of Change. Mr. Carpenter had expected us to explain the statements in a straightforward, mathematical manner, but he had been open to creativity. I still had my paper from that assignment.

During the next session in Adalberto's class, I settled the students into their assignment for the day. Adalberto was idle as before. As I moved past his desk, I quietly asked him to step outside into the hall. He was of course afraid that he was being reprimanded for non-participation, perhaps even being sent off to a school authority. Instead, I sat him down at a desk in the hallway. I said, "I understand that you like math. I want to show you something." I pulled out my paper. It was called "The Diabolical Mr. X." It was a Sherlock Holmes story in which the famous detective, bumblingly, and his assistant Dr. Watson, intrepidly, wandered the streets of London trying to catch a criminal called X. X was naturally quite variable, and they had to track his rates of change to keep up with him; Watson elucidated all for Holmes with the help of explanatory charts and equations.

Adalberto sat up. He looked. I returned to the room, leaving him out there to peruse it. When I came back out to check on him, he had opened up. He told me he liked it, it was pretty cool. He hadn't read it all, but he was definitely amused. He came back into the room and gave the day's assignment a fighting chance. Which he continued to do for the rest of our sessions. He didn't emerge as a great dramatist a prolific writer, but he wrote, usually on topic, sometimes on topics of his own choosing. And he was present to the work, the discussions, and the idea of drama.

Sherita

Sherita was very present. She was a character, full of spirit and independence. A student of high attitude and high energy, but not high achievement. She seemed to dislike the whole business of school, beyond the social dimension it offered, and had apparently developed a way of coping, which involved generous doses of arrogance and rebellion.

To give the kids a change of pace, and to get their pulses moving, I often started classes, before or after a quick writing prompt, with a physical warm-up. I'd ask them to stand in the aisles and stretch up, down, swivel, arch, shake, and so on. Sherita would have none of it. The first few times she stood up, but always with skeptical glances and muffled commentary, sighs and snickers, slumping shoulders and rolling eyes. The teacher and class seemed accustomed to her, and soon enough I was too.

I decided the best strategy would be to ignore her -- she was clearly bidding for attention. At first it worked, but Sherita upped the ante. Her rebellion, running commentary and self-righteousness became magnified and more disruptive. As the agent of discipline in our partnership, the teacher challenged her from time to time, but Sherita resisted, unfazed. She was threatened with various measures; but I did not particularly want to exile her. She was spunky. There was life there.

When my strategy of ignoring her stopped working, I tried various other tactics. I responded to her in ways that let her know that her intrusions were not appreciated, even, as I recall, with mild sarcasm. I told her she was free to refrain from participating, but should not distract the others. I even asked her nicely to just sit and try. Or sit and be quiet. To no avail.

I was losing patience. She was getting to me. No matter what I did, she managed to find my buttons and press them. Obviously, this was a particular skill she had. She was masterful. Then I realized: in a certain way, she had something the others didn't. On an artistic level, she was my colleague.

One day, I gave an assignment and the class basically set to work, and Sherita hissed through her teeth and slumped back in her chair. I called her name and signaled for her to come to the front. She rebuffed; I said I needed to talk to her. She glared at me, rustled herself out of her seat with great effort, and moved up the aisle with the speed of a slug. Others looked up, aware, unsurprised. Sherita came to the front and faced me sideways.

I led her to a corner, then leveled with her, no anger, no authority, just person to person.

"Look. I've been watching you. You've been working hard to get to me, and you've succeeded. You want power. Well, this work, this drama stuff, is about power. It's about conflict, about people wanting different things, and fighting to get what they want. You understand this stuff. You know this stuff without thinking. You know about power, about how to get under someone's skin. You know just what to do. You are constantly calculating how far to go. Most of these kids can't do that. But you can. You're an expert."

She looked at me. For the first time in weeks, she softened.

"I have no interest in fighting you. My job is to help this class explore this material, these issues, and this community. You can help, or not. This is a part of your grade, and I'll report what I see, and your teacher will grade you accordingly. Your choice is to use what you know, write and talk about people and how they struggle with each other, and become a leader, and -- like it or not -

- get some positive recognition out of this, or to sit back, play your regular part, press my buttons, throw out disruptions, which I will do my best to incorporate or ignore, take others off track, though I'll do my best to keep them on, and get a bad grade, a chair in the hallway, or a trip to the office. Just remember -- you have choices here that some of these other kids may not have, because you understand this material. Most kids your age are basically clueless about human dynamics. But you know all about drama and conflict and objectives and the nuances, the fine points of communication. Have you been listening to the tapes we've been playing?"

She nodded.

"Those are real people trying to make good lives for themselves. I bet you understand them. What it means to be angry, or to feel like you've been cheated, or to have dreams."

She smiled faintly.

"Anyway, you could be a leader."

The smile crept wider.

"So it's up to you. Understand?"

She looked at me. She nodded ever-so-slightly.

I said, "That's all," and looked at her seat. She turned and went back.

That day, she stopped snickering and was neutral. The next, she joined in a discussion, then put pen to paper, then spoke out. She did become a leader -- not clear-cut, not a 360-degree change, but a leader nonetheless. Her comments were always clear, insightful, energized, and to the point. She still had her attitude, her humor, her sass, her hard edge -- but from that day on the softness remained.

Kevin

Adalberto sat to the left, near a wall. Sherita was in the second or third seat back, just to the right of center. Between them, to the left of Sherita, and a seat behind, was Kevin. A blonde boy in a colorful vest. In the first session, I picked up some mannerisms that could be considered effeminate, and got the sense that this was a boy who was potentially, or might someday become, gay. The others seemed to keep a certain distance, to tolerate him, to view him as something of an oddity. His comments sometimes drew chuckles, but he didn't seem to mind. With further sessions, I came to feel pretty sure that Kevin was likely at some point on the road to a gay identity. Of course, I calculated how this might play into some of the oral history material we'd be encountering; and pondered the irony as I remembered the teacher's reticence about dealing with issues that the students might not be ready for, and my ruminations about the teacher's own personal life.

My instincts about Kevin were confirmed in a subsequent session. We had been talking about the neighborhood we would be examining and were moving into a writing exercise. In a semi-public moment, a transitional moment, a getting-your-papers-and-pens-out moment, Kevin, perhaps sensing in me an open mind and kindred spirit, stated that he had been in that neighborhood the year before, marching in the Pride Parade. He told me that it was a great experience, that he was a little apprehensive but really glad he had done it and couldn't wait until the following June. The way he said it -- simply but with

some satisfaction and a touch of bravery -- left no doubt in my mind that he was coming out to me. I was impressed: out -- certainly as out as you could be at 15 -- in a tough urban school. I told him that was terrific. Papers and pens were in place and we moved on.

As the lessons progressed, Kevin participated in the discussions as much as anyone. He was fairly intelligent and articulate, though at times a bit immature. As we dealt with the gay and lesbian subjects in the histories, we began to develop scenes based on their experiences. In his tape and transcript, the African-American male who worked at the Gay and Lesbian Center recounted a disturbing experience, being the victim of a gay-bashing encounter, and one of the girls in the class created a scene portraying a similar incident. Our process was to write scenes, and then I would review them and choose scenes to copy and share in readings in front of the class. The author would have the right to 'cast' the parts.

I knew we had to read the gay-bashing scene. When it came time, the author looked about for people to cast. Various hands went up. By now, the class knew what the scene was about and who the characters were. A couple of tough boys were cast to read the roles of the perpetrators, others would be onlookers. Then it was time to cast the victim. People started calling out, "Kevin! Let Kevin play that!" Some chuckled. I sensed something like mild derision in the air. There was a moment in which I feared that all my trust and openness was going to come crashing down -- that the scene would on some level come to life in emotional brutality and ridicule targeted at the class's token gay boy. I thought, there's no way I can let these kids shame Kevin into reading that part.

And then I looked at Kevin, and I started listening. Kevin did not seem worried, or nervous. No shame. He looked a little excited, even flattered. And in the seeming catcalls, even from some of the more macho boys, I heard a different connotation: "Let Kevin play it. He's right for the part. He'll understand it." Even an undertone of "Now or later, on some level, it's his story. Let him inhabit it." The class was acknowledging him, validating him for who he was.

Kevin stood up and came forward. He and the other actors lined up and took the scripts. They read the scene, as we had read many scenes before. The bashers played their parts fine, and Kevin did a lovely job in his. Then they sat down, and we had a lively, but not extraordinary, discussion about it. Kevin talked about his character's feelings. Others commented on the motivations of the bashers and the onlookers. The discussion expanded to similar situations at school or on the streets, to instances of bullying and the complicity of inaction. Throughout, the discussion was respectful and mature, even sophisticated. Then we moved on to another scene.

For me, that day was a wonderful example of how art -- in this case drama -- can give voice to the inner life of an individual or a community. What struck me, oddly, is how ordinary it all became, and how the class was able to explore and disarm some discomfiting realities through the artistic process. The varied truths about Kevin, the rest of the class, the subjects of the oral histories, and the prejudices and violent propensities of society remained with us as we moved on, continuing to work with playwriting technique and develop scenes based on the life of the community.

## The Real Lesson

Of course the real lesson in all this, and the reason I keep coming back to those three students, has to do with my own assumptions about how to reach a class or a student, and my own fears about what might happen in a classroom if I make poor choices. Those three students taught me a lot about trusting my instincts, about continuing to search for ways to connect, about really looking and listening, about being as authentic as I possibly can in my role as a teaching artist, and about remembering that each student I encounter is as unique, as enigmatic, and as wonderfully human as Adalberto, Sherita and Kevin.