

STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The following article about the **Albany Park Theater Project** and classroom activities were prepared for the 2002 Chicago Humanities Festival: *Brains & Beauty*.

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Albany Park Theater Project (AFTP)

The theme of the 2002 Chicago Humanities Festival, *Brains & Beauty*, inspired a series of programs exploring the experience of girls as they navigate cultural expectations during their passage to womanhood. “Growing Up Female” presented perspectives from women of different generations, races, faiths, and ethnicities—in Chicago and other urban environs.

For this series, the CHF commissioned the Albany Park Theater Project to create *Hijab and Belly Shirts*. This frank and riveting stage production presented real-life stories of how girls from Chicago’s multi-ethnic Albany Park neighborhood confront the often devastating pressures and expectations that accompany growing up. In the article and classroom activities on the following pages, Dan Weissmann examines the mission and method of the AFTP.



Doing Justice to the Storyteller: The Albany Park Theater Project

By Dan Weissmann

It's February 2002. The Albany Park Theater Project (AOTP) has just finished a performance, and after a standing ovation, members of the company are taking questions from the audience. "How do you manage to engage with such weighty material," one woman asks, "without being overwhelmed?"

Marta Popadiak takes the question. She just played the protagonist, the youngest daughter in a family in which the abusive, alcoholic father beats his wife, and sexually molests his daughters. Marta's character tries but fails to stir her mother from resignation, sees her sisters engage in relationships that mirror their mother's, and watches her younger brother go to jail for holding up a liquor store. But ultimately she finds a way out of her family's destructive cycle.

"The thing is," says Marta, "those stories are true. These things really happen. And the girl I played—Nancy Casas, whose story that was—she's a really good friend of mine." Nancy's friendship has bound Marta and the other members of the company to create a full and truthful account of Nancy's story, and to use every

resource at their disposal to convey that story effectively to an audience. "What made it easy—not easy, but not as difficult to bear—was to do it for her."

For five years, AOTP's ensemble of teenagers has created original performances out of real-life stories from their lives, of their families and their neighborhood, Albany Park, a diverse, working-class area on the city's northwest side.

AOTP's stories, gathered first-hand by members of the ensemble, reflect the diversity and struggles of the neighborhood: A girl battles depression after losing a friend to a gang-related shooting. A beloved school choral director teaches important lessons about life, then loses his own to cancer. A mother and her children start a new life in Chicago, fleeing political persecution and torture in Central America.

The company plays to packed houses, and consistently draws raves from audiences and critics throughout the city, with two recent productions named "Critic's Choice" selections by

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the *Chicago Reader*. Rives Collins, a professor of theater at Northwestern University, has said that no one in Chicago does bolder, braver work.

There are no auditions to join APTP, and no prerequisites. Any interested teenager from the neighborhood is welcome. And in fact, APTP makes a point of recruiting kids who *don't* identify themselves as artists or performers. The company's ethnic and socio-economic makeup reflects Albany Park's largely-immigrant, working-poor character: 70% of the teens in APTP have immigrant parents, tracing their roots to countries throughout Latin America, Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East. 90% live in households classed as low-income by government programs.

Ensemble members routinely refer to the company as a second family, and to co-directors Laura Wiley and David Feiner as alternate parents. Most days, members can be found in the rehearsal and performance facility from the time school lets out until 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. They may be participating in an official company activity, getting help with homework or a college application, or just hanging out.

Audience members often ask if creating theater doesn't take time away from study. APTP's directors make clear to company members that they are expected to excel in school. Often, the directors are the first trusted figures in the kids' lives to send that message.

"Before APTP I was content with a D," says Nancy Casas. "Now I'm disappointed with a C or even a B." When she joined APTP, her high school

GPA was 1.8, and she wasn't sure she would graduate. After a year and a half, Nancy graduated high school with a cumulative 3.0. Today she's a student at Beloit College in Wisconsin.

Her story is typical. 90% of the teens who joined APTP in fall 2001 had at least one F or D on the first report card of the year. That's the norm at the neighborhood high school, where 4 out of 10 students never graduate. But nearly 100% of those who have been with the company for at least a year graduate, and of those, 95% go on to college. APTP's directors work intensively with every student, starting in junior year of high school, on college preparation and planning.

"The exceptional achievement APTP teens eventually attain is a testament to their own resilience," say the directors, "and to the impact of participating in a program where their success as artists inspires them to dream and pursue success in life."

Alban Park Theater Project creates two full-length shows a year, each one dramatizing several stories the company has collected and developed through a painstaking process. The performances take months, sometimes years, to create.

The process begins by gathering stories. When someone has one that sounds promising the company puts a session on its calendar. When the day comes, the directors, the storyteller, and the other members of the company pull their chairs into a circle, and turn on a tape recorder.

It's July 3, 2001. "I just want to thank everybody really quick for being here," Nancy begins. "It means a lot that you're here to hear my story." She asks herself aloud, "Um, where do I start?"

Nancy tells the story of her father's alcoholism and abuse. "Even when he's sober, it's like he's not there." She also discusses a secret she learned in the last year: her "father" isn't her biological father. Before leaving Mexico, her mother conceived her with another man. About halfway through the session, Nancy gets stuck and asks for questions, which in turn bring out new information. The transcript of the session fills fourteen single-spaced pages.

The next step is scene development. Transcripts are passed out, and company members read excerpts aloud. The directors facilitate a discussion: What's this story about? What are the most important scenes in it?

The company then breaks into smaller groups to improvise scenes from the transcript. Then they come back together to show each other their work, with the directors videotaping each presentation.

Each scene gets evaluated on the spot. What worked? What didn't? What might help? The directors contribute to the conversation, but the company members give much of the feedback. ("Richard, you were *so scary* when you were showing Carlos how to use the gun.") Sometimes, a group will quickly re-stage a scene based on the notes they get in evaluation, and sometimes the directors will break into an improvisation with some quick side-coaching. ("Is he listening to you?

What will make him listen? Find a way!" or "Your impulse is to physically touch her, right? To reassure her. Well, do it.")

Rehearsal begins about two months before the show is set to open, but first it has to be cast. The directors work to make sure that everybody gets a role that will challenge them, paying close attention to each company member's development as a performer.

There is one iron-clad rule in casting: cast-members never play themselves. This isn't documentary, and this isn't therapy. This is theater. The trust and empathy that company members develop by playing each other—and seeing themselves portrayed—are an important part of what builds community and ultimately satisfies audiences.

Once the show is cast, the directors use a combination of transcript material and the videotapes from scene development stage to write the scripts. To maintain the distinction between theater and psychodrama or documentary, characters in the stories are assigned new names.

It's December 2001. Nancy brings several friends from Beloit to see the first performance of the play based on her life. She hasn't seen a rehearsal or a script. "That's pretty brave," notes APTP co-director David Feiner. "It's like, 'OK, here's my life!'"

"Of course, I was really nervous," says Nancy. She worried that her friends from Beloit "were just going to get smacked over the head with all this. They'd known me for, what, three months?"

But her friends, both from APTP and Beloit, came through. Nancy calls the play “a beautiful reflection,” and during especially difficult scenes, her college friends “would make eye contact and let me know they were there for me. It was like I had support on both sides of

the stage—my friends on the stage and my friends in the audience.

“It brought my homes together,” Nancy says. “My Beloit life, my APTP life, and my family life.”



Lawrence Mangalindan in *A Little Thing*, based on a true story told by Nancy Casas, adapted for the stage by the Albany Park Theater Project ensemble.

Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

Bootstrap Theater: A Classroom Approach

By Dan Weissmann

Essentially, theater requires nothing more than a space and some people—your classroom offers everything you need to create theater. Here's a workshop exercise that APTP has used to give many groups a quick introduction to making theater, and that you can use in the classroom.

“Hello”

The group stands in a circle. In turn, each person says “Hello” and gestures to the group, in a gesture that should, in one way or another, involve the whole body. The voice can be as loud or as soft, as joyous or menacing as the person chooses. The gesture can be as outsized or as understated, as goofy or serious as the individual wants: a leap into the circle, a recoil, a clap, a stomp. As soon as the first player has given his or her “Hello” to the group, the entire group repeats it back *exactly as it was given*. Exactly as loud or soft, as joyous, as understated, as goofy or menacing. The mirroring should be as precise as possible, capturing nuances of tone and facial expression.

Now on to the next person in the circle: A new “Hello”—and it must be new—new intonation, new volume level, new gesture—and the group repeats it back as precisely as possible. Remember that everything gets mirrored back: If there's hesitation, pause for thought, protestation of embarrassment, or a blunt refusal to engage, the group just mirrors it back, with as much precision as possible. It's important to play hard and mercilessly. Commitment is everything.

The “Hello” exercise is the most basic form of Bootstrap Theater. It engages the voice, the body, and our powers of observation. It teaches us to observe each other's behavior, and reminds us that every sound and gesture we make is full of meaning. Whatever we may *say*, our behavior tells our story.

If you really want to see how many readings, how many points of view even the simplest “line” can be invested with, play a second round, going around the circle again—and remember to insist that *every* new “Hello” must be different from every “Hello” that has come before. Then go around again. This is, in fact, the best way to play the game. You won't run out of “ideas”; in fact, with every round, the presentations will likely become more nuanced and subtle, as well as more free and creative.

Zero to Sixty in Fifteen Minutes

Take a minute to evaluate and discuss with the group what the “Hello” exercise was like—how it felt, what people thought—and then it’ll be time to get started with stories.

Now that everyone has warmed up, it’s important to keep things moving. So move quickly through these steps, without allowing for breaks in the action:

The group needs to break up into small groups—preferably groups of four. Go around the circle and count off. (Each group will need an even number of players, for reasons that will become clear shortly.) Now, have each group get together—ones over here, twos over there, etc.—and find a place to stand.

Relate instructions quickly to keep the exercise moving:

“Within each group, everyone needs to find a partner—somebody you don’t know well. Good. Now, each pair, quickly decide which one of you will be A, and which one of you will be B. Ready? Good. Now, whoever is A, take these next five seconds, while I’m talking, to decide on a story—something true, from your own life—to tell B. It can be anything at all. You’ll have one minute to tell it. Ready? Go.

“OK, time’s up. B, you’ve got thirty seconds to repeat back the story A just told you. (A, if they get something wrong, be sure to correct them.) Ready? Go.

“Good. OK, now we switch roles. B, quickly think of a story to tell A—anything at all—something true, from your own life. You have one minute to tell it. Ready? Go.

“Time’s up. Now, A, repeat B’s story back in thirty seconds.

“Good. Now, turn to face the other pair from your group. Decide which is pair 1 and which is pair 2. Good. Now, person A from the first pair, you’ve got a minute to tell your *partner’s* story to the other pair. Ready? Go.

“Time’s up! Now switch: A from the second pair, tell your partner’s story to the other pair. Go.

“OK, now B from the first pair. Go. Time’s up. Now B from the second pair. Go.”

7 or 8 minutes have elapsed, and we’re halfway there. Everyone’s told their own story once and somebody else’s story twice, and everybody has heard three other people’s stories.

“Each group of four, take thirty seconds to decide which of your four stories you’re going to perform for the entire group before we leave here today.

“You’ve got seven minutes to decide on how you’re going to stage this story. Don’t sit down: you’ll lose energy and you’ll lose time. Instead of describing your ideas to each other, move around and show each other what you have in mind—you don’t have much time to rehearse. Go with your first, best, most active ideas. Go!”

At this point, as an instructor you might want to observe groups from a distance, moving in only to spur groups to action if they're losing energy, sitting down, talking rather than doing. Remind the groups when there's about two minutes left.

“OK! It's show time! Which group will be first?”

Enjoy the show.

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