

# Pushing the Envelope:

## Addressing Taboos in TYA

By Sara M. Simons

As the director of programming for The New Victory Theater in New York City, Mary Rose Lloyd travels the country looking for innovative and thought-provoking work to bring to her audiences, many of whom are children seeing theatre for the first time. Watching more than 250 shows per year, she has seen the best and worst of what TYA has to offer. So when she encountered Danish company Gruppe 38, she knew what to do right away. “I was desperately wanting to bring this work to American audiences,” Lloyd recalled, who says she always strives to “present [work] on a global basis” that impacts young audiences.

In Gruppe 38’s piece, *Hans Christian, You Must Be An Angel*, actors celebrate famed Danish author Hans Christian Andersen’s 250th birthday by welcoming the audience to a festive birthday party installation, complete with multimedia elements representing different classic Hans Christian Andersen stories. The piece was recommended for ages eight and up. There was just one problem, located in the installation’s tiny video screen that looped black-and-white footage of a man representing the emperor from the story *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. As the man walked forward in the frame carrying his crown and scepter, it became clear to the viewer what any reader of the story already knew: the emperor was naked.

### “WHOSE ENVELOPE?”

“Full frontal nudity is not something we usually associate with children’s theatre,” said Lloyd. “This is something that would be very difficult for 3rd, 4th, 5th graders, much less anyone else—teachers and parents—to grasp.” Worried about responses from school groups and parents, The New Vic began conversations among its staff, board, and Gruppe 38 regarding how best to present the piece in such a way that would maintain its artistic integrity but not shift all the focus to the brief glimpse of nudity. “We pride ourselves in taking a lot of risks and pushing the envelope to the degree that we think it’s necessary to provide work at the highest caliber and without any shield over it,” Lloyd said. Still, she conceded, “nudity is where I start to get a little nervous.”

The dilemma at The New Vic is typical in that



Kaitlin Ziehr in *Goddess Menses & the Menstrual Show*. Youth Performance Company, Minneapolis, MN. Photo by Phil Lawrence.

many TYA companies grapple with presenting material that is considered taboo. Although a certain degree of edginess is expected in theatre for adult audiences, different standards still hold true for younger theatregoers. TYA companies often seek work that will appeal to their increasingly sophisticated youth demographic, but this process is not without a certain amount of hullabaloo. In the course of presenting engaging and artistic material, TYA companies across the country find themselves strategizing about the best ways to take on material that—for whatever reason—seems controversial.

When it comes to pushing the envelope, renowned playwright and University of Texas Professor Suzan Zeder asks “Whose envelope?” When Zeder’s play *Doors* was published in the 1980s, the play’s topic of divorce was considered so controversial for young audiences that it was difficult to produce the play in the US for 10 years. But with changing times, ideas of what is considered taboo or controversial change as well. Such designations vary wildly depending on the location, politics, and religious climate of local communities.

In Kassie Misiewicz’s northwest Arkansas

community, “there was a big stink about Harry Potter,” Misiewicz said, referring to the community’s reaction to J. K. Rowling’s popular children’s series featuring magic and wizardry. Misiewicz is the founder and executive director of Tricycle Theater for Youth in Bentonville, AR, where cultural attitudes force her to think strategically about the kind of shows her company will be able to perform. “[Zeder’s play] *Mother Hicks* would be great, but I’m going to have to do a lot of educating in the community” due to concerns about perceived representations of witchcraft, Misiewicz said, who describes herself as facing “a Christian right agenda.” Zeder herself says she’s always been amazed by the controversy surrounding *Mother Hicks*. “What the play really does is explore the ignorance of people who make an assumption about other people,” says Zeder. As a playwright, Zeder says that she never begins a play by trying to push a particular issue or agenda, but rather tries to address issues important to young people by staying true to the characters in her stories.

Zeder is currently working on *The Edge of Peace*, the third and final piece in the *Mother Hicks* series. The play is set right before peace is

declared in World War II, but Zeder's aim is not to comment on the war but rather to focus on the experience of a child waiting for the war to be over, asking herself, "What is the impact of a war on foreign soil on kids who are left at home?" The key, says Zeder, is being accurate to the experience of the child. "If I do that well, then I'll be speaking to kids in 2008. If I do that poorly, then I'll be preaching to the choir," she says.

In order to produce theatre that speaks to the children of her community, Misiewicz says, "I'm going to have to get the right people on the bus to sell the stories ... I'm just going to have to build the trust, I think, and walk the tightrope, the fine line between doing something very commercial and keeping the integrity of the art form."

University of North Carolina Greensboro Professor and North Carolina Theatre for Young People Artistic Director Rachel Briley describes the conundrum this way: "When you have to sell tickets, it imprisons you to think a certain way about the choice of material. It becomes a commodity, not a piece of art, because you have to sell something, not make something."

It is a dilemma that Larry Snipes knows well. As producing director of Kentucky's Lexington Children's Theatre, Snipes looks for "a balance of [shows] we know we can pay the bills with and [shows] that are artistically challenging ... those two things don't always gel well together." Many of Lexington Children's Theatre's shows are based on literature as adaptations of familiar stories. But a show that ended up sparking furor was a Laura Ingalls Wilder story. "It's the things you don't expect that end up being controversial," he says.

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In Snipes's case, parents complained that a death in the play was too disturbing for 5-year-

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olds, even though the play had been advertised for audiences ages nine and up. Despite the theatre's best efforts, Snipes has found that parents and teachers often ignore the theatre's age advisories, believing that their children are mature enough to handle the onstage content. Still, Snipes makes a concerted effort to educate school groups about the shows they are about to see. "There's nothing worse than a teacher getting a question that they're not prepared to answer," Snipes said. Full disclosure is often the key when dealing with school groups.

"You haven't met ire until [school groups] have already come, they've spent some money, they've booked the buses, and they're not happy with the show," said Jeff Church, the producing artistic director of the Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, MS. Briley compares the idea of disclosure to another popular entertainment venue. "I feel like on the one hand, theatre is theatre and we should just let it be ... Movies have these ratings so [audiences] know ... Do we owe it to the public to do that? I feel like it's the expectation of the public that we owe it to them, and I feel like it's to our advantage to communicate clearly."

"The problem," Church says, especially when it comes to controversial material, "is that children's theatre is an industry built on people who don't willingly buy a ticket. Gatekeepers are always going to be the problem."

Theatres find different ways to address "gatekeepers," a term that can encompass parents, teachers, principals, and other leaders of youth groups. Misiewicz plans to put together a parent/teacher advisory committee before she ever produces a play as a way to create buy-in from the community. She envisions other advisors including elected officials, principals, school superintendents, school board members, and church leaders. Misiewicz calls this strategy "coalition-building," saying that she understands that it will take a while to build up trust in her theatre.

When Briley produced Zeder's play *A Taste of Sunrise*, which is performed in both spoken English and American Sign Language, she worked hard to build relationships with the deaf community and the deaf studies program at UNC-Greensboro. "Relationship building can't be like, 'Insta-community! I'm doing a show that appeals to your population! Come see it!'" Briley explains. "You have to really invest and put a lot of effort and time into these relationships."

The Coterie Theatre has also spent time cultivating community relationships by building links with the press, local schools and community partners, and even having former teachers on staff in the box office. But community relationships have been especially important when the Coterie produces work considered controversial, Church explained. When the Coterie premiered *The Wrestling Season* by Laurie Brooks, they worked with The Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault, a local agency which partnered with the theatre to create pre-show workshops. Church said he found that partnering with an organization that was widely respected in the community lent the production a sense of validity. At the same time, he noted it was necessary to avoid more politicized organizations that "come with baggage and don't appear neutral."

## "IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT YOU GET TO PLAY A VAGINA."

The Coterie also tackles sensitive topics in its Young Playwrights Festival, which allows the theatre to take on more controversial topics that speak to teen audiences. "By 1992, I was on to the fact that young playwrights could get things done that adult playwrights couldn't," Church said, describing one piece that portrayed a violent gay-bashing confrontation. "None of that would have been possible in the hands of an adult playwright—not any of it." The beauty of the Young Playwrights Festival, he says, is that it avoids any perception of "a hidden liberal agenda of a playwright foisting their ideas onto the students." When the ideas come from the students themselves, the work becomes less controversial and more a matter of students speaking truths about their lives.

Students speaking truths is the cornerstone of Minneapolis-based Youth Performance Company's (YPC) PG-13 initiative, which began six years ago



*The Taste of Sunrise* by Suzan Zeder. Taylor Stage at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC.

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with the creation of *Goddess Menses and the Menstrual Show*. When YPC Artistic Director Jacie Knight started talking about doing “a show about young women getting their periods and the crazy things that happen ... a lot of people thought I needed to go on vacation,” Knight said. Although the idea was initially met with skepticism, the student-written show became a huge hit.

It was followed by another teen-written show, *The Talk: An Intercourse on Coming of Age*, which was turned into a film that has been sold all over the country. The show, which took a humorous approach to facts about sexuality and development, encouraged parents to talk to their teens about sex. In a sketch called “Puberty Support Group,” students portrayed different changing parts of the male and female bodies, providing an overview of puberty that Knight describes as informative but hilarious, adding, “It’s not often that you get to play a vagina.” Although such work is an invitation for abstinence-only advocates who work with young people to step



(l-r) Derek Prestley, Ty Sosina and Aaron Bock in *In The Talk: an Intercourse on Coming of Age*. Youth Performance Company, Minneapolis, MN. Photo by Phil Lawrence.

on their soapboxes, Knight feels that the students’ role in creating the show helps to shield it from controversy. “We’re telling their stories, and it’s hard to argue with that,” Knight said. How does a show featuring Captain Condom and a song called “Fifty Nifty Sexual Terms” become such a success? One reason, Knight said, is that “we’ve never taken any of these [shows] to schools. We have done public performances, and I think that’s the best way to do it, because then people choose to come versus it being mandated, because that’s where trouble can arise, especially with these kinds of topics.”

Youth Performance Company’s strategy of bypassing schools (and their attendant gatekeepers) altogether is not an unusual one. The Coterie Theatre’s Young Playwrights Festival is now a two-act roster: a daytime performance that has been vetted for school audiences, and an evening performance that includes the daytime roster as well as five additional pieces containing edgier material. “In the past, I kept trying to make

it work for schools, but I thought ‘I’ll just step around that,’” Church said.

### A DELICATE BALANCE

Theatres that cater to school groups have some difficult considerations. At The New Victory Theatre, one of Lloyd’s concerns about the Emperor’s nudity was teachers potentially getting in trouble with parents or their school system for bringing young children out of class to see the show. When it came to the fabled Emperor, Lloyd “fought and tried really hard to come up with something that everyone could stand behind and be proud of.” The conversations with her board and Gruppe 38 strove toward “a delicate balance,” she said. “When it becomes about one little moment as opposed to the whole piece, it loses credibility.” The cultural differences in what is considered taboo were especially apparent with this collaboration, as the Danish company seemed somewhat amused by all the fuss. In the end, and with the blessing of Gruppe 38, a little bit of beveling was placed over the video screen so that the viewer could see the “essence” of nudity on the screen without seeing genitalia.

Whether creating an out-of-school venue for controversial performance, warning schools thoroughly before they come, or selecting tried-and-true material, theatres for young audiences take many different approaches to material considered taboo. Suzan Zeder believes that the approach is what we need to be focused on. “There is no issue that I can think of that should be taboo in TYA. Not a single one,” she says. “It’s all in the way it gets handled and explored. Life is too perilous for kids today not to treat them with the respect of complexity.” ■

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Young Playwrights Festival. Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, MO.