

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: THEATRE PRODUCTION AS EXPERIENTIAL
LEARNING: THE SUMMER MUSICAL PROGRAM AT
THE SITAR CENTER FOR ARTS EDUCATION

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Recent scholarship on educational theatre has tended to focus on process-oriented drama and on programs that deal with participant's personal identity. These programs have become regarded as the standard for drama that benefits both children and the community. However, programs like the summer musical at the Sitar Center for the Arts, though not based in the work of applied theatre theorists, have notable educational effects for participants. The Sitar's Center's theatre program is highly product oriented and focuses on the Western theatre cannon, specifically Eurocentric musical theatre, making it traditional in structure and aesthetic in focus. In this study, I utilize educational and performance ethnography to examine the effects of the theatre program and the ways in which it helps fulfill the greater mission of the center. In addition, I explore the relationship between more traditional programs and applied theatre methods in contemporary theatre education.

THEATRE PRODUCTION AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: THE SUMMER
MUSICAL PROGRAM AT THE SITAR CENTER FOR ARTS EDUCATION

by

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Introduction

“We do not do theatre for social change.”¹ This was one of the first things I was told when I approached the staff of the Sitar Center about observing the summer musical program. Throughout my research, it became clear that on the surface the theatre programs at the center are intended to be as traditional as possible, in that they teach stagecraft and artistic skills and provide students with the experience of interpreting and performing an existing work of theatre from the western cannon. However, closer observation led me to realize that though the expressed goal of the program was primarily aesthetic, the experiences and behavior of the students encompassed a larger range of learning and developmental possibilities. The unique pedagogical system of the center engaged students in actively maintaining the safe and creative nature of the center, giving them agency over their own learning environment. The choice of the Eurocentric and hyper-traditional musical *Hello, Dolly!* alternately annoyed, perplexed, and amused the cast and instructors, and its artistic and historical content raised more questions than it answered for the students. Most notably, the program’s intense focus on the final product made the program a significant and complete experience for students and became a powerful catalyst for learning.

The center staff made it clear to me that the theatre production was not meant to be an avenue for social change, and yet, the center as a whole had initially caught my attention through awards and recognition highlighting the positive effects the center was bringing about in the lives of kids and the surrounding community. In fact, an article

¹ A. Lorraine Robinson and Maureen Dwyer, in discussion with the author, April 2010.

featuring the center in NEA Arts Magazine was actually titled “Positive Change,”² and the center’s most prestigious award, the President’s Council on Arts and Humanities Coming up Taller Award, recognizes programs that “are transforming the lives of young people.”³ It was evident that, although the theatre program did not specifically delve into social issues, award-granting institutions believed that providing opportunities to a child is in its own way a political act. In its mission statement, the Center says that it seeks to “enable young people to better know and express themselves as they discover and develop their artistic gifts.”⁴ Their goals are not exclusively oriented to either students’ educational and personal development or to aesthetic purposes or training students to be exceptional artists. My research goal has been to unpack and explore the ways in which an aesthetic-focused theatre production program can affect positive change and contribute to the greater work the center is doing towards improving the lives of young people and their families.

Art versus Instrument in Theatre Education

Lorraine’s initial disclaimer was indicative of a general trend in theatre education programs and theatre education research; the vast majority of recent scholarship has focused on programs and methods that have grown out of applied theatre and which use theatre as an instrument to teach specific content or to examine personal or social issues. When I introduced myself as a scholar interested in researching the program, it seemed

² Smith, Pepper, “Positive Change: The Sitar Arts Center,” *NEA Arts*, 2 (2010): 12-14, http://www.nea.gov/about/NEARTS/2010_v2/neaARTS_2010_v2.pdf.

³ George Stevens, Jr. and Margo Lion, “National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Awards,” President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, accessed April 12, 2011, <http://www.nahyp.org>.

⁴ Sitar Arts Center, “Our Mission,” accessed April 12, 2011, <http://sitarartscenter.org/mission>.

she was prepared presumably by previous interested parties looking for an opportunity to see transgressive, life-changing instrumental theatre in action. Before I could even ask, she let me know that this program was first and foremost about students putting on a classic play, appreciating theatre, and having fun.⁵ To her there was a distinct line between the type of theatre done at the Sitar Center and what she termed “theatre for social change,” and that line is equally distinct in a majority of scholarship published on educational theatre today.

In the article “Master versus Servant: Contradictions in Drama and Theatre Education,” Shifra Schonmann lays out this phenomenon in the field of drama and education: The use of drama as a tool has overshadowed the value of the dramatic experience in itself. Her argument extends from Gavin Bolton’s 1981 essay “Drama in Education – A Reappraisal” wherein he examines five myths pertaining to the end goals of drama in education being primarily about personal development. Bolton believes drama facilitates these benefits, but Schonmann quotes him as saying “the achievement is not intrinsic to drama. It is an important by-product of the dramatic experience.”⁶

Schonmann claims that “all these by-products have become the main (not the only but definitely the main) target or purpose or aim of drama and theatre in education within the past twenty-five years”⁷ She argues that development in the use of drama in education has been hindered by a focus on using drama only as a tool and ignoring the intrinsic value of the aesthetic experience of dramatic play and creating theatre, asserting that her article is “a wake-up call, reclaiming the place of the artistic and the aesthetic in theatre

⁵ A. Lorraine Robinson, in discussion with the author, April 2010.

⁶ Shifra Schonmann, “Master versus Servant: Contradictions in Drama and Theatre Education,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 4 (2005): 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

and drama education as its core experience.”⁸ Although it didn’t begin as such, my own research at the Sitar Center has become an effort to heed that call by examining the effects of a program that focuses on the complete aesthetic and theatrical experience from auditions to performance rather than applied theatre methods where theatre is an instrument to accomplish some other goal.

Applied theatre as it is recognized today includes theatre that seeks to promote social change, community building, education or therapeutic goals. In *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, Helen Nicholson defines it as “forms of dramatic activity that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream theatre institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies.”⁹ In their introduction to *The Applied Theatre Reader*, Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston highlight the range of transformative intention in modes of applied theatre: “For both practitioners and participants there may often be an overt, political desire to use the process of theatre in the service of social and community change. For other[s]...the intention is less overt (but potentially no less political in its effect)...”¹⁰ In this research, I define applied theatre as theatre designed specifically to affect change in the lives of the participants in the form of, for example, social understanding, political empowerment, education, therapy, or some combination of these. This is a broader definition, but to overcome the split that Schonmann describes, I believe it is more important to look at the intention of an educational theatre curriculum rather than its form or content.

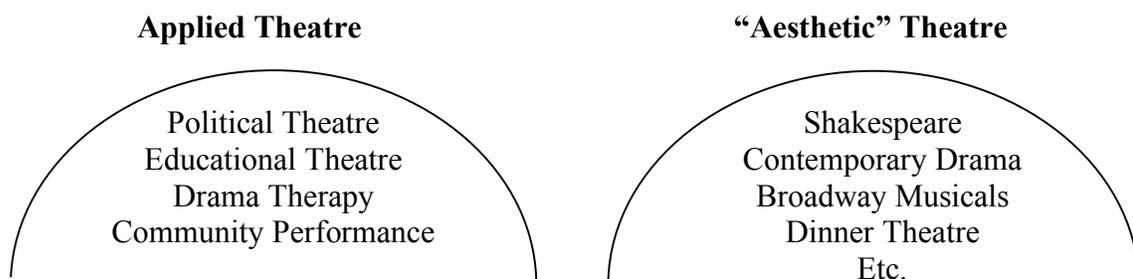
⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁹ Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 2.

¹⁰ Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, eds., *The Applied Theatre Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

In Figure 1, the “umbrella” category of applied theatre and its main subgroups is contrasted with non-applied or “aesthetic”¹¹ theatre. The typical categories under applied theatre each consist of many varying methods, but the categories as a whole are generally lumped together under applied theatre. For example, the category of drama therapy includes a wide range of activities ranging from psychodrama, a mode of therapy done in a private clinical setting wherein a patient examines his or her own real-life issues, to inclusive theatre groups which provide an opportunity for differently-abled persons to perform on stage in public. In addition, many forms overlap between categories; for example Playback Theatre, an improvisational form in which stories told by audience members are “played back” by a company of actors, could be considered a part of community performance, drama therapy, or, when used in a school setting, educational theatre. In educational theatre itself, there are endless forms and methods and they are as varied as the field of theatre itself. However, recent scholarship has tended to focus heavily on certain types of educational theatre.

Figure 1: Typical Categories of Aesthetic vs. Applied Theatre



¹¹ Though the term “aesthetic” theatre is often used to distinguish from applied theatre, this is not an ideal term because it implies that applied theatre is not aesthetic. In fact, it is often the case that the aesthetic aspects of applied theatre methods contribute to their effectiveness. What is meant by “aesthetic theatre” in this use then is theatre in which the *primary* goal is an aesthetic response rather than an educational, social, or political one.

Like Schonmann, Alistair Martin-Smith, in his article “Setting the Stage for Dialogue: Aesthetics in Theatre and Drama Education,” notes that the focus of most current research in theatre education is on programs that would be considered applied theatre (Martin-Smith uses the term “instrumental drama”). He argues that the applied vs. aesthetic conflict is a false dichotomy; instead he suggests a series of spectra that could provide a better way of looking at and comparing educational applications of drama. The first answers Schonmann’s concern directly, placing applied, or what he refers to as instrumental drama on the opposite side of a continuum with aesthetic drama, meaning theatre that exists primarily for artistic purposes.¹² Like Martin-Smith, I have chosen to use the term “instrumental drama” when referring to specifically educational methods, i.e. where theatre is used as an instrument to teach, and “applied drama” to mean the broader category of applications of theatre for social change. I also use “aesthetic drama” to refer to programs for which the *primary* intention is to create a work of art.

Martin-smith’s second continuum addresses whether a mode or activity is process oriented versus product oriented. This is a major variation and an important distinction in educational modes, as possible applications range from students putting on full-scale public productions to the myriad techniques of using dramatic activities in the classroom. Martin-Smith’s third continuum is that of educational function versus entertainment function.¹³ In this case, because the entire argument refers to educational uses of drama, I interpret this to mean a more narrow definition of education, one that specifically refers to transferring specific knowledge. The use of theatre in a school setting is still

¹² Alistair Martin-Smith, “Setting the Stage for Dialogue: Aesthetics in Theatre and Drama Education,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 4 (2005): 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

“educational drama” even if its primary purpose is to provide an entertaining activity for the students.

Though Martin-Smith does not cite Richard Schechner, his continua have many similarities with the “efficacy-entertainment braid” that Schechner describes in *Performance Theory*. For Schechner (in collaboration with Victor Turner), the efficacy end of the continuum corresponds with ritual performances that transform participants, while the entertainment pole contains performances that “transport” audiences, taking them on a figurative journey but leaving them essentially unchanged in social status. Schechner, like Martin-Smith, recognizes that the intention of a performance exists on a continuum, and states: “No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment.”¹⁴ The development of applied theatre demonstrates a modern use of the transformative power of performance, while the Broadway musical represents the epitome of theatre for entertainment.¹⁵ In the context of education, the efficacy-entertainment continuum is complicated by the fact that even if a program falls heavily to the side of entertainment as far as what is presented on stage, on some level it still exists to educate the students who participate. For the purposes of looking at educational theatre specifically, Martin-Smith’s continua are separated into three different variables to provide a more nuanced framework in which to analyze educational theatre methods.

Because applied theatre is focused on intended outcome, categories within applied theatre tend to form along the lines of the intended benefits. Applied theatre can be theatre for social change, social health (as in the health of a community), education, personal development, or therapy. These categories can perhaps better be understood as a

¹⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 130.

¹⁵ Ibid.

spectrum or series of overlapping areas. Depending on one's definition of education, nearly all applied theatre could have educational benefits. From a critical pedagogy standpoint (meaning a view that goes beyond education as the simple transfer of knowledge¹⁶), therapeutic models that promote healthy development would qualify, as would modes like sociodrama that aim to produce interpersonal or intercultural understanding.

The split between instrumental and aesthetic educational theatre, and the greater popularity of instrumental methods, can be traced to the recognition and development of applied theatre forms.¹⁷ Prior to the 1960's, educational performance modes and classroom techniques had developed side-by-side. In the US, school theatre had long been a consistent part of grade school education. The creative dramatics movement, founded by Winifred Ward in the 1930's, evolved out of the progressive education movement of John Dewey.¹⁸ The theatre programs of the Works Project Administration furthered the use of theatre in education and in turn inspired Viola Spolin's important work on improvisation and theatre games in educational settings.¹⁹ Spolin, though generally focused on games and process-oriented activities, nonetheless still emphasizes the importance of performance and provides suggestions for producing plays with young actors.²⁰

In the 1960's and 70's, the modes that make up what we think of as applied theatre began to emerge, causing the beginnings of the division between instrumental

¹⁶ See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1993).

¹⁷ Schonmann, "Master versus Servant," 35.

¹⁸ Helen Nicholson, *Theatre & Education*, (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Viola Spolin, *Theatre Games for the Classroom*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern, 1986), 176.

drama and aesthetic drama within the context of education. The most influential and oft-cited method to emerge was Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Theatre of the Oppressed was originally devised to allow participants to enact political change, but it has been influential in every area of applied theatre from theatre for social change to drama therapy; Boal himself later adapted the ideas present in his early work in various ways, including a book of games and dramatic activities with educational applications and for use in personal therapy and development in *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*.

Boal's work developed closely with the critical pedagogy philosophy of Paulo Freire, first presented in Freire's 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In critical pedagogy, the definition of education is broadened, and the goal of education goes far beyond the simple transmission of knowledge. In Freire's model of education, students work together with the teacher to ask and answer questions through dialogue, praxis, and experience, and the end goal is the development and liberation of the student. The goal of critical education is for students, as well as teachers, to become more fully human and "affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality."²¹ In addition to his direct influence on Boal and other applied theatre theorists, Freire is one of the central figures (with John Dewey) of critical pedagogy and progressive education who has both advanced and directly shaped arts education.

In addition to Boal's work, applied methods of theatre emerged that were directly linked to institutional education, particularly in the UK, the largest being the Theatre in

²¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 84.

Education, or TIE movement. Theatre in Education developed first as a movement of theatre companies formed to devise and perform plays in schools with the expressed purpose of teaching specific content. TIE developed in the 1960s, and Nicholson traces its roots to the Worker's Theatre Movement of the 1920s and 30s.²² The form has since broadened slightly, and some companies began doing workshops in conjunction with their performances. In any case, however, Theatre in Education generally refers only to companies that produce original plays with the purpose of teaching through the content of the performance. Helen Nicholson notes Theatre in Education's direct impact on the division between instrumental educational theatre and aesthetic theatre saying "Perhaps paradoxically, it was when drama and theatre became more integrated into the curriculum that education developed an increasingly ambiguous relationship with the theatre as a cultural institution."²³

In the United States, mainstream arts education has drawn heavily on the work of John Dewey in the areas of education and aesthetics. Dewey's philosophy centers on the concept of experience. A work of art is powerful because it constitutes a complete experience. Education is best accomplished by allowing students to experience the world rather than only passively absorb information. In his book *Art as Experience*, Dewey "offered an aesthetic philosophy that paved the way for subsequent educationalists to understand how the practice of the arts might be integrated into children's learning."²⁴ Dewey also provides a unique perspective on the dichotomy between applied and aesthetic art in the essay "Experience, Nature, and Art;" though he is speaking of art

²² Nicholson, *Theatre & Education*, 22.

²³ Nicholson, *Theatre & Education*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

generally and not specifically about theatre, he comes to the conclusion “that fine art consciously undertaken as such is peculiarly instrumental in quality. It is a device in experimentation carried on for the sake of education. It exists for a specialized use, use being a new training of modes of perception.”²⁵ So, for Dewey, the question of intention in theatre education is moot, as all theatre (and all art) is instrumental (and thus efficacious). Aesthetic drama certainly teaches in a different way, but it still serves an educational purpose.

In “Setting the Stage for Dialogue,” Alistair Martin-Smith describes the complicated nature of the world of drama in education saying, “The multiplicity of approaches to drama and theatre education, each with its own aesthetic pattern, often obscures the common ground they all share. As a result, in its unique emphasis on art, pedagogy, and society, each may have its own aesthetic pattern; yet only by looking closely at each distinct pattern can we understand more of the power of drama and theatre to develop human consciousness.”²⁶ The multiple (and overlapping) dichotomies of applied vs. aesthetic theatre, efficacy vs. entertainment, and process vs. product focus (to name a few iterations) all reinforce the rift between instrumental uses of drama and programs that focus on the production of a work of art. Though I would not classify the Sitar Center’s production of *Hello Dolly!* as applied theatre, the goals of the program have much in common with the goals of some instrumental drama programs. For example, in the description of their drama programs states that “Drama gives students an outlet to tackle issues not easily addressed through other mediums.” and that the classes

²⁵ John Dewey, “Experience, Nature, and Art” in *John Dewey on Education*, Reginald D. Archambault, ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974), 164.

²⁶ Martin-Smith, “Setting the Stage for Dialogue,” 3.

“help students find their individual voices.”²⁷ In Martin-Smith’s system of continua it is possible to conceive of a place for traditional activities like the summer musical production within the realm of theatre that can enact change in people’s lives.

The Center and the Summer Musical

The Sitar Center is an organization that offers classes and instruction in the visual arts, music, and theatre for children, teens, and adults on a sliding fee scale to accommodate community members from all income levels. It is located in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, DC. The area is one of the most diverse (racially, ethnically, and economically) in an already diverse city, and is the only neighborhood in the District with no majority racial or ethnic group. The center grew out of an after-school outreach program conducted by Good Shepherd Ministries, when Sitar founder Rhonda Buckley began offering music lessons to neighborhood children. Soon, she was joined in her efforts by artist and community activist Patricia Sitar, the center’s namesake. The Sitar Center was officially founded in 1998 (Sitar Center 2011). By 2003, the student base had grown to nearly 200 students.²⁸

In 2004, the Center moved to its current facility, a space that includes a proscenium theatre, art rooms, music and dance rehearsal space, and practice rooms. The facility also houses staff offices, a waiting area for students, and an art gallery that displays the work of both Sitar students and professional artists. The Center is operated by a board of directors, and a staff of thirteen employees and two interns. Instructors are

²⁷ Sitar Arts Center, “Classes: Drama,” accessed April 12, 2011, <http://www.sitarartscenter.org/drama>.

²⁸ Sitar Arts Center, “History,” accessed April 12, 2011, <http://www.sitarartscenter.org/history>.

volunteers, and generally teach only one or two classes a week, making the pool of instructors very large. Currently the center serves over 400 students. To enroll in classes, a family must first be entered into the pool of students, for which there is often a long waiting list. Once students are on the list, they pay a flat rate based on income level, which allows them to enroll in unlimited classes as space is available. Students can choose from a wide array of classes in all areas of the visual and performing arts. Some classes are offered through partnerships with organizations such as the Washington Ballet. Most classes are taught by volunteer instructors, although some, including the summer musical, are conducted by members of the Center's paid full-time staff. Classes are held after school and on weekends during the school year. In the summer, the Center offers three two-week sessions called "Camp Sitar," a half-day program open to students ages 5-16. The camp allows students to take up to 3 classes per session. Students also attend weekly art related field trips.

The theatre program at the Center is made up of several classes during the school year in addition to the summer musical. During the school year, the Center offers classes including acting, musical theatre, improvisation, and technical theatre. Students who participate in theatre classes during the school year are encouraged to apply the skills they learn in classes by participating in the summer musical. The musical production takes place over six weeks in the summer as part of "Camp Sitar." Students in the musical attend the camp for all six weeks. Those in the chorus take one class and two hours of musical rehearsal. Students with principal roles spend all three hours in rehearsal, and do not attend the field trips offered to the other students. This gives them fifteen total hours of rehearsal a week for six weeks. The students in the musical range

from nine to seventeen years old, with the principal actors ranging from twelve to seventeen. The majority of the cast are students who have already taken Sitar Center classes during the year, but often there are a few students for whom the musical is their first experience at the Center.

A. Lorraine Robinson, who also serves as the center's full-time Director of Faculty and Education, directs the musical and oversees the overall program. Additional production staff present on a day-to-day basis includes a music director, vocal coach, choreographer and assistant choreographer, and stage manager. Other full-time staff members of the center are involved with the production to varying degrees, sitting in on rehearsal and providing their perspectives. Class instructors and other members of the community get involved as well; an art teacher oversees the set construction and decoration, while this year a former student who now attends school for fashion was in charge of costumes (in previous years a parent has done that job). Nearly everyone present during the Camp Sitar summer camp has some involvement with the musical production, making it truly a community endeavor.

Methodology

In order to observe all aspects of the summer musical program, I volunteered as an acting coach and instructor for the production. I attended all rehearsals over the 6-week period, as well as many production and staff meetings. My duties during the rehearsal period included running warm-ups, supervising students, and coaching and running lines with principal actors, giving me various opportunities to interact with and observe students and staff. My daily experience varied, and often I had to forgo my own note taking and observation to conduct activities or assist in other ways. During the

performances, I was able to assist with make-up and wardrobe from different locations each night. Therefore, I got to experience the performance as an audience member, backstage with the principal actors, and from the dressing room with the chorus.

This level of involvement allowed me to conduct participant observation from the perspective of an instructor. Overall, though I was a participant, this project is not intended to be a reflexive account of my own teaching practices. Throughout the process, I attempted to limit my artistic and pedagogical contributions to the day-to-day operations of the program by following the lead of the director and other instructors. However, I was often asked to work with students individually or lead the groups in warm-ups or exercises with little or no direction; in those cases, I used my own theatrical background and experience in education to choose appropriate activities and techniques, and I have noted those cases where activities were my own contribution. The result is my observation and analysis from the perspective of an assistant instructor, attempting to observe the culture and structure of the existing program and make contributions only within that structure.

In an educational setting, the concept of participant observation is complicated by the dynamics between teacher and student. As an instructor, I took part in and even chose and planned activities, but my perspective was limited by my position of authority within the group. While in some ways my observation was richer than what might be experienced by an outside observer, what I learned of the true feelings and experience of student participants may have been limited. When I spoke with students, I felt in many cases that they were giving what they believed to be the “right” answers, either to avoid a negative reaction from me or from the rest of the staff, or to validate the importance of

the program. One student in particular gave answers in an interview that seemed to be a collection of sound bites on the importance of the center to the community.

In addition to my ongoing interaction with students and staff, I conducted six formal interviews. In my interviews with students, I asked open-ended questions about what had led them to the program and how the program fit into their greater educational experience. However, perhaps because of my position as a staff member or the strangeness of being taken out of rehearsal to speak one on one, I found my casual interactions with students to be much more fruitful, interesting, and authentic than the formal interviews. In the case of staff members, formal interviews were more important to my understanding of my observations, particularly in cases where I needed clarification of the purpose or perceived benefits of specific aspects of the program. Much of my inquiry focuses on comparing the goals or intentions of the center with what I actually observed, so it was important to continuously confirm my perception of what the staff set out to accomplish through personal interviews with staff and instructors.

While interviews with individual students did not prove to be my most effective strategy at gaining insight into the experience of students in the program, I was able to successfully gather information through a student survey. In the case of interviews, it was difficult to get students to take time out of rehearsal or socializing to talk to me willingly. The surveys, however, seemed interesting to them and even sparked conversation among students as they filled them out during their downtime during performances. It was very difficult to keep the chorus members quiet backstage, so the questionnaires had the added benefit of providing a quiet activity for the younger students. I received responses from all but two students, and for the most part answers were thoughtful and sincere. The

survey questions were open-ended and focused on what the students liked and didn't like about being in the play and what they learned.²⁹ I shared the information I collected with the Sitar Center staff to supplement their internal multiple-choice questionnaire, which students completed at the same time.

The Center as a “Safe Space”

The expectations for the students and the roles of the teachers were set out clearly on the first day of “Camp Sitar.” The day began with an assembly for all students, held in the theatre. We began with introductions of all the staff and instructors. Mr. Rob, the center’s Director of Students and Families, then asked the students, most of who had attended the center before, to raise their hands and share some of the rules they could remember. The younger children were much more interested in this and quickly rattled off a list of things that are not allowed: gum, cell phones, headphones. He prompted the students: “we are here to...” and they responded “to learn” and “to have fun.” One student contributed the rule “no saying ‘loser’” and the discussion quickly turned to the topic of respect for oneself and others. One student offered “no racism.” Mr. Rob replied with the question, “What is racism?” and a student answered: “Being mean to people because of how they look.” One student, who appeared to be about six, contributed the rule the students should “lead by example.” This elicited an excited “oooooh!” from the instructors and older students; it was clearly considered a great suggestion within the environment of the center, particularly from such a young student. Maureen, then Deputy Executive Director, then took over the discussion of respect, saying, “we are respectful to ourselves and each other” at the center. She explained “we can only create our best art in

²⁹ See appendix for copy of questionnaire and sample interview questions.

a safe environment.” This idea of the center being a “safe space” where students can “better know and express themselves as they discover and develop their artistic gifts”³⁰ is a primary emphasis for the staff.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding the center and its programs focuses on the physical space: the facilities and environment students experience while in attendance. In its publications, the center stresses that it is a “safe space” and says in its list of core beliefs that “we must provide a safe, nurturing learning environment with state-of-the art tools and facilities.”³¹ In this sense “the center” very much refers to the physical place where the community can come together and where a specific type of educational experience happens, not just the programs or people associated with the center. However, for the Sitar Center safety refers not only to physical safety but also emotional safety, and more specifically to conditions of the environment that provide structure and consistency, foster respect for diversity, encourage trust and collaboration among students, and expect students to be engaged and productive while in attendance.

The environment of the Sitar Center was carefully maintained through cooperation between staff, students, and community members. With students, behavioral expectations were framed in a way that emphasized the importance of maintaining the environment of the center, working collaboratively, and supporting fellow students. Rather than focusing on individual progress or responsibility, a student's primary accountability was to maintaining a center that is a positive environment for everyone, including him or herself. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey acknowledged that

³⁰ Sitar Arts Center, “Mission,” accessed April 12, 2011, <http://sitarartscenter.org/mission>.

³¹ Ibid.

learning happens through one's social environment, and the expectations and reactions of others are a powerful educational force.³² In the case of students at the Sitar Center, their motivation to learn or please instructors is likely to wax and wane, but their relationship with their peers and with the center as a place may inspire more consistent cooperation.

By enlisting students to maintain a safe, productive, and structured place, the staff enforced an environment in which teaching and learning was a collaborative endeavor. The efforts to engage students in taking responsibility for the learning environment were by no means perfect, and at times aspects of the "safe space" seemed to break down entirely. However, placing a portion of the responsibility for the environment of the center in the hands of the students was empowering; it provided them with opportunities to exercise and develop their own self-efficacy, meaning their perception of their own competence.³³ Allowing students to have agency over their own learning is a cornerstone of critical pedagogy. Students should be empowered and an educator's "efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them."³⁴ Paolo Freire's idea of liberating education hinges on the concept of praxis, whereby students become aware of their power to change their world. At the Sitar Center, this is manifested in the students' collective responsibility for their own learning environment.

The center's staff focused not on pushing individual students to learn certain things, but instead on each student doing their part to ensure that everyone could

³² John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 12-15.

³³ The term self-efficacy has replaced self-esteem in recent years as a more specific measure of a student's belief in their own abilities. See Albert Bandura, "Towards a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change," *Psychological Review* 84, 2: 1977, 191-215.

³⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 75.

contribute their best work. Students are consistently called upon to maintain the safe environment of the center, both in terms of material safety and emotional well-being. They were asked to help foster and contribute to an environment in which they and others could engage in productive activities and be creative. They were expected to follow the structure and rules set by the center. Finally, they were consistently expected to take responsibility for their actions and reflect on why they were or were not doing what was expected. The main interactions of the staff and instructors seemed to be primarily focused on helping students to maintain these standards rather than on any individual learning goals.

“Safe Space” has become something of a buzzword and is used often to describe classroom situations or programs that provide a place for students to spend time when not in school. In the 1998 article “Safe Space: Reflections on an Educational Metaphor,” Robert Boostrom examined the use of the phrase and observed that narratives of safe space typically assume and support four assertions: “(1) we are all isolated (2) our isolation is both physical and psychic (3) we can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality, and (4) students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed.”³⁵ At the Sitar Center, these ideas are clearly a part of the center’s philosophy, reflected in both the center’s mission statement and other written materials and in day-to-day interactions with students. The center strives to be a safe space physically, meaning a place free of violence and physical danger, emotionally, where students feel safe to express themselves and their individual identities, and artistically and

³⁵ Robert Boostrom, “Safe Spaces: Reflections on an Educational Metaphor,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 30, no.4 (1998): 398.

intellectually, in that students can trust that their ideas and work will be valued in classes, lessons, and (as I address specifically in the next section) theatrical rehearsals.

That a classroom or educational environment should be physically safe for students and teachers is obvious, but the need to so strongly identify the Sitar Center as a literally safe place comes from its location in an area that is, in contrast, not necessarily safe. Students who attend the center might otherwise get into trouble or, perhaps more likely in the case of the teenaged students, cause it. In the urban area of Washington, DC students have a wide variety of choices of where to attend school, and many travel by public transportation to and from school in distant neighborhoods and have a great deal of freedom after school. In addition, parents who work may not be home after school, increasing the likelihood that students could find themselves in an unsafe situation. Students who attend the center articulate the availability of drugs and the proximity of gangs and violence.³⁶ All young people potentially face problems like isolation, peer pressure, and boredom that can lead to destructive behavior, and the center strives to provide an alternative. Quoted in the article “Positive Change: The Sitar Arts Center,” Rebecca Ende, the center's marketing and communications director explained: "Kids in this neighborhood have a lot of choices about how they're going to spend their time after school and a lot of them are not positive. Here parents know it's a safe place to drop their kids off. They know their children are accounted for."³⁷

Throughout the introductory meeting of camp, staff members emphasized that students' physical safety and wellbeing was a priority for the center. Lorraine explained

³⁶ Sitar Arts Center, “Sitar Arts Center Promotional Video,” accessed April 12, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1zk1JNRDiI>.

³⁷ Smith, “Positive Change,” 14.

the attendance policy on the first day saying students must sign in and out because “you matter to us.” She explained that if students are late or absent and unaccounted for, the staff worries about them. The center is safe in the literal sense; the front desk is always staffed by a receptionist or volunteer during class hours, and students and visitors must be buzzed in to enter. The center employs a high-tech check-in system to keep track of attendance. Each student has an ID and must swipe in and out for class.

At one point during the third week of camp, we were told as we arrived that all the classes would be convening for an all-camp assembly in the theatre. When everyone was gathered, Ed, the executive director, informed the camp that some students had had money stolen from their bags during camp. One of the older girls in the musical, Lisa, had had money taken and offered to speak about her experience. She said that when she first came to Sitar she felt safe, now after she had something stolen she felt violated, and like she couldn’t trust people at camp. Rob told us that nothing like this had ever happened in the eight years he had been there.

Maureen then asked for ideas from the community for how to keep the center safer, giving the students an opportunity to exercise agency within the center environment. The kids threw out some interesting ideas. One girl suggested that the person responsible for the center should pay it back, and Maureen explained that we are all responsible, and that the center is a community that belongs to all the students, staff, and parents. Eventually, the staff actually did use that idea: a jar was placed on the front desk and anyone who wanted to help repay the money could contribute. Ed concluded the meeting, saying, “This is a place where people care about and for each other.” Though this issue seemed primarily a violation of the physical safety of the center, it is clear that

physical and emotional security go hand in hand; without feeling physically safe, emotional security is impossible.

The staff of the Sitar Center addresses Boostrom's second qualification by ensuring that it is not only a place where students can stay physically safe and avoid getting into trouble, but also an emotionally safe environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves. The staff emphasize consistently that students are valued and cared for. Both learning and creating art require students to take risks, and if students already feel socially or emotionally vulnerable they will be less likely to take the risks necessary for growth.

Boostrom posits that the use of the metaphor of safe space, particularly in the sense of emotional safety, is a rejection of a previous ideal about the process of education. "This older notion," he says "is borne out of a tradition of educational thought ranging from Plato through Rousseau to Dewey. It emphasizes that learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing things."³⁸ He goes on to suggest that although in some ways the idea of safe space agrees with this tradition, it also may encourage educational spaces to be so comfortable that conflict and stress are eliminated, and with them possibilities for critical thinking and intellectual growth.³⁹ While he argues that this may lead to a decline in educational progress in schools, whose primary job is to educate students, this argument is not entirely relevant to programs like the Sitar Center that exist primarily for enrichment rather than to achieve specific educational standards. While emphasizing the

³⁸ Boostrom, "Safe Spaces," 399.

³⁹ Ibid., 405-407.

emotional safety of the center might discourage a certain level of artistic criticism, for the mission of the center individual expression takes precedent over learning specific skills.

In “Exploring Fear: Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire on Fear and Learning,” Andrea English and Barbara Stengel echo this concern, citing recent studies that point out “that the plea for safety can amount to a plea for the removal of challenges, diversity, and difference from education.”⁴⁰ I believe these authors misconstrue the practical value of the notion of “safe space.” At least in its application at the Sitar Center, the creation of this particular safe space does not call for doing away with the fear and risk that are inherent to learning; rather, it exists to facilitate it. The risks associated with both learning and creating art are such that the other aspects of the environment must be safe enough to ensure students are comfortable experiencing fear and taking risks in order to expand their own educational and artistic boundaries.

“Safe Space” in the Theatre

Mary Ann Hunter examines the concept of safe space in the context of theatrical performance in the article “Cultivating the Art of Safe Space.” To Hunter, “the cultivation of safe space might well be considered an important precursor to any collaborative activity,”⁴¹ but this is especially true in a collaborative artistic environment where contributions are necessarily judged by other members of the group. She describes four distinct meanings of the term as it relates to the artistic process:

⁴⁰ Andrea English and Barbara Stengel, “Exploring Fear: Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire on Fear and Learning,” *Educational Theory* 30, no. 5 (2010): 523.

⁴¹ Mary Ann Hunter, “Cultivating the Art of Safe Space,” *Research in Drama Education* 13, no. 1 (2008): 6.

Firstly, the term safe space is used to refer to the physical qualities of a particular place... Secondly, in resonating with the feminist usage, safe space is used to connote metaphorical safety: that is, a space bordered by temporal dimensions (such as a workshop or rehearsal time/space) in which discriminatory activities, expressions of intolerance or policies of inequity are barred. A third, more abstract, use of the term is in its implied desired goal of familiarity: such that the people, practices, and relations that exist within a safe space are comfortable and familiar...The space becomes safe as it becomes known. Finally, the most relevant use of the term for the purposes of this investigation is in the context of experimentation or innovation...What weaves these different, although not mutually exclusive, categories of safe space together is the concept of risk.⁴²

Hunter divides the concept of what Boostrom calls “psychic safety” into three separate categories: metaphorical or temporal boundaries of the rehearsal or performance, familiarity of the space and process, and space where participants are willing to experiment and take artistic risk. All of these were clearly recognized and encouraged at the Sitar Center, but putting them into practice in the rehearsal process for *Hello, Dolly!* proved a difficult task.

In rehearsals, support for fellow cast members and the overall safe environment were not maintained as much in practice as it had been emphasized at the opening

⁴² Hunter, “Cultivating the Art of Safe Space,” 8.

meeting. Students often made fun of each other or picked fights in ways that went beyond friendly teasing. Rudeness and disrespect were major issues within rehearsals. Different staff members dealt with this differently, and after the first week, Lorraine directly addressed the issue of emotional/artistic safety with the cast. Touching upon Hunter's third usage of safe space, she explained that in order to produce a play everyone needs to feel comfortable and safe, and to feel that it is okay to make mistakes and "Being an actor is about taking risks." She explained that people feel vulnerable onstage and it is the job of the crew to be supportive and not make them feel self-conscious. She asked the cast to be sensitive to others feelings and to apologize if other's feelings are hurt. It was certainly evident in several cases that the actors did not feel comfortable taking risks. In a rehearsal with an instructor or student they trusted students would try new things and improve, but when they returned to the less safe environment of the whole group they would revert to their least vulnerable performance.

One instructor, the music director Jarrett, caused a major rift in the efforts made to enforce a safe and caring environment. Jarrett was only present about a quarter of the time (the rest of the music rehearsals were led by the assistant music director Adrienne), so the students were already less comfortable and less well behaved with him when he did come to rehearsals. During his first rehearsal with the chorus, he was teaching a song in which there was a sudden rest, and some students were mistakenly singing when they should be silent. Jarrett told them that if they heard someone sing through the rest that they should "point and laugh" at them. Many of the students embraced this suggestion wholeheartedly and a chorus of mean-spirited laughter erupted any time anyone made a noticeable mistake all the way until the final week. Not only did this go against the goal

of providing an artistically and emotionally safe environment, it also disrupted the learning process further by causing a disruption in the middle of the song. Aside from this one incident, Jarrett was in general disdainful and sarcastic with the students, in what I perceived as a misguided attempt to create rapport.

A major part of creating a safe space for students is fostering respect for diversity in all forms. Boostrom acknowledges this, saying “The exhortation in these instances... is that ‘space’ is needed for diverse groups or individuals to express their identity. That is, people should be able to present themselves openly and to speak freely, without fear of censure, ridicule, or exploitation.”⁴³ For Hunter, this is part of her “metaphorical safety;” intolerance and discrimination are not allowed within the physical and temporal space of the center and rehearsals. In the Sitar Center as an educational institution, this call for an appreciation of diversity goes beyond keeping a safe environment within the center to an educational goal. Hopefully, students will carry the ability to interact with and value diversity beyond their time at the center.

This is a major concern for the Sitar Center, as the population it serves is diverse in every sense of the word. The neighborhood of Adams Morgan has no majority racial or ethnic group, and the students and staff are representative of this diversity. The students in the cast of the musical were racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. The cast was almost exactly half African or of African descent. Of the other half, the majority were of Hispanic origin, a few were Asian, and one student was white and not of Hispanic origin. Many students identified with multiple racial and ethnic groups, and I

⁴³ Boostrom, “Safe Spaces,” 406.

often overheard students discussing racial and cultural differences with what I perceived as respect and openness.

The environment of the center was essentially bilingual, and Spanish-speaking students spoke to each other in Spanish fairly often. During one get-to-know-you game, one student was asked to answer the question “What languages do you speak?” and she listed five different languages. When students were celebrating birthdays, we often heard two (or more) versions of the Happy Birthday song. There was also a group of several Vietnamese children (only one of whom was in the musical) who tended to stick together before and after camp, and spoke in Vietnamese when together. They all knew each other and were presumably the children of fairly recent immigrants (another staff member informed me that none of their parents spoke English). Other students also mentioned visiting family or otherwise having strong ties to their or their parents’ countries of origin.

On one occasion, I was working with a group of girls on some acting games. We were playing freeze tag, an improvisation game, and although I was impressed by how well they did and how willing they were to take risks in this particular environment, I was troubled by some of the stereotypes they used in their characterization. One girl portrayed a manicurist with an Asian accent, another imitated a man with a Latino accent, grabbing his crotch and catcalling, and several performed heightened Latina and Black female stereotypes. I could only guess whether these “characters” came from their personal experience or perhaps from the media, but it brought up important questions of how students can perform diversity, or even their own identities, without being reductive and resorting to stereotypes.

Another interesting and potentially contentious conversation I overheard had to do with a few students who identified as mixed-race. A group of students were discussing their backgrounds, and one said she was Chinese, and explained her grandmother had been from China. Another student said “that don’t mean you’re Chinese, that means you’re mixed.” Another student, Antonia, who earlier in the conversation had also claimed multiple ethnicities explained that yes, she was Chinese, and also Black, and having multiple heritages means she belongs to all of them, not that she is simply “mixed.” In all of these cases, it was somewhat of a shock to hear race and cultural difference being talked about so openly. It is possible that further study of how children navigate these differences without the intervention of adults might provide interesting insight on positive ways of addressing diversity.

In order to create a successful work of theatre, cast members must trust each other and learn to work as an ensemble. As Mary Ann Hunter indicated, building familiarity and trust within a collaborative group is crucial to creating artistically safe space.⁴⁴ Team building is usually accomplished through the process of warm-ups and games, and leading these activities was one of my main contributions to the process. During this particular rehearsal process building trust and ensemble was quite difficult. The daily schedule was not conducive to conducting these activities, because the chorus did not come until halfway through the day. Also, the range of ages among the cast made it difficult to find activities they all liked; if a game was fun for the younger kids, the older ones thought it was boring, and if it was challenging enough for the teenagers it was probably not appropriate for the younger students. The older students often tried to get

⁴⁴ Hunter, “Cultivating the Art of Safe Space,” 6-7.

out of participating or resisted in other ways. Lateness and absences were a major problem throughout the rehearsal process, making it hard to build ensemble when members of the cast were missing. When students were physically present, they often did everything they could to indicate that they had not fully “bought in” to the process.

In addition to, or perhaps as part of, maintaining a safe environment at the center, students are expected to preserve the creative and productive nature of the center. This ties in directly with maintaining an emotionally safe space where students can express themselves. As long as that artistic and emotional security is maintained, students are not only encouraged but also expected to contribute to the creative work being done. Participation is not optional, and students are not allowed to be in the center “just hanging out.” For example, kids who show up for camp early can color or read in the lobby, but they must be doing something productive. In rehearsal, as in the center itself, every effort was made for students to be constantly engaged. If students were not directly working onstage, they were expected to be running lines with another student or staff member.

The Sitar Center is a safe and secure space for students in part because the students know what to expect and what is expected of them. Relative to other experiences in their lives, when students are at the center they follow a routine. In order to attend the Sitar Center, students and parents must sign an agreement saying that they will follow all rules and practice a certain amount per week if they are enrolled in private music lessons. In the summer program, the routine is slightly more relaxed, but the center’s rules still apply and students adhere to a regular schedule.

Although structure was important in the center, discipline and behavior issues were still common in the musical. Around the end of the first week I realized that often

the rest of the staff was relying on me to enforce discipline. I soon tried to remove myself from that role, especially because I did not want students to see me as “the mean teacher” when I would want to ask them questions about their experiences later on. The full-time staff didn’t always support the disciplinary efforts of other instructors, including myself. I felt as though I couldn’t go over Lorraine’s head and discipline students in front of her if she wasn’t addressing a particular incident, in case she had a particular reason for letting it go. Other staff members confirmed this feeling.

After each rehearsal, Lorraine asked all students to gather for notes. This served several purposes. First, it brought the whole group together after they were often split up working on different things, and attempted to get them to feel like they were part of a team working toward a common goal. It gave the process a similarity to professional theatre, preparing students who might continue in the field an impression of what the experience might be like. Perhaps most importantly, it required that students reflect on their performance and behavior over the day, and allowed Lorraine to address these issues with the whole group. Reflection is an important step in the process of experiential learning,⁴⁵ and asking students to consider their actions and their results was an important factor in the musical staff’s attempt to maintain the pedagogical environment of the center. Notes were also an opportunity for Lorraine and other instructors to publicly dole out positive reinforcement. It was clear that positive reinforcement was the preferred way of dealing with students, but it was a struggle to find opportunities when it was appropriate.

⁴⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 169-177.

Students were consistently called upon to maintain the safe space of the center, either explicitly or implicitly. Generally they were asked or at least told why they were being asked to do something or act a certain way. Because of the way the center operates, instructors are generally forced to work with students who are being disruptive rather than sending them out. This occasionally resulted in compromises being made with regard to the rules for the sake of the group, but more often it forced teachers to use innovative ways of engaging students and encouraging cooperation by getting them to reflect on their own behavior.

At the center, students must make choices to uphold these expectations, and in reflecting on their choices they may become aware of what they have learned and created artistically, and how their behavior has affected the rest of the group. By explicitly talking about the program as a “safe space” with students, the staff is giving students a role in their own destiny: they have a choice whether or not to attend the center, and students who attend the center are making a choice to do something constructive and positive. By giving students power in creating and maintaining their educational environment and encouraging them to reflect on it, the Sitar Center helps students to develop a sense of self-efficacy. Though in practice not all aspects of “safe space” were achieved consistently, the pedagogical environment of the center depended on the cooperation of the students, and in doing so empowered students to have some control over their choices and their environment. By encouraging the students to be responsible and self-aware, the staff fostered an environment that was safe, encouraged creativity and productivity, and provided familiarity and structure. Risk and fear are inherent to the process of both learning and creating art; by engaging students in creating a space that is

physically and emotionally safe, the Sitar Center allows students to feel comfortable taking artistic and educational risks.

While the concept of safe space generally refers to the safety of students and possibly teachers within the learning environment, in the context of art and education safety is important in another sense. Non-profit and publicly funded organizations must constantly be aware of how their programming will appeal to organizations and individuals who provide the operating budget through donations and grants (a list of the Sitar Center's supporters can be found in Appendix C). The history of government funding for the arts specifically has brought us to a point where organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts are careful to either divert funds through local organizations or directly fund only relatively uncontroversial works and programs. In order to be a "safe" investment for an individual, corporation, or agency to be associated with, the methods employed and material presented must be within their artistic comfort zone. In choosing this particular play, *Hello, Dolly!*, and avoiding an in-depth analysis of its (albeit limited) social and political content, the Sitar Center provided donors with a well-known, popular, and uncontroversial work of theatre to illustrate the safety and familiarity of the material presented at the center.

Approaching the Content

On the first day, my most pressing question was "Why *Hello, Dolly!*? Why do this play with this group of students?" As the cast gathered for the first time, Lorraine proceeded to explain her reasons for choosing the play. She explained that *Hello, Dolly!* was a "more adult" play than the program had done in the past. She felt that they were

ready to do a more serious and challenging show. Recent summer musical productions had included Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown*, and Lorraine felt that the program was capable of producing not just a good "youth production," but a good production, period. Lorraine cited the beautiful music and charming story, as well as logistical elements including the large role of the chorus as reasons for choosing *Hello, Dolly!*

Choosing a play for educational theatre is a complex task, and there are many factors that directors must consider. What is the goal of the production? Who are the students and what is their level of experience and abilities? Who is the audience, and what kind of show would they enjoy? And then there are the questions of logistics: technical elements, facilities, supporting musicians, and financial considerations. In the article "Play Selection for High School Theatre," John K. Urice examines current trends in choosing plays for young people. He observes that until recently, educational institutions almost exclusively performed classic "conservative and comfortable" plays and musicals, such as *Brigadoon* and *Guys and Dolls*. These choices "helped keep all involved – especially faculty directors and student actors – in a protected 'comfort zone.'"⁴⁶ He observes that recently many more schools are producing plays like *The Laramie Project* or *Bang Bang You're Dead* that deal with relevant and controversial social issues; these plays would presumably fall within the category of "theatre for social change" that Lorraine sought to distance the program from in our first meeting. While *Hello, Dolly!* certainly is much closer to the first category, for the students involved (many of whom were not yet high school aged), some of the material, particularly that

⁴⁶ John K. Urice, "Play Selection for the High School Theatre: An Opinionated Essay on some Questions and Controversies," *Arts Education Policy Review* 105, no. 3 (2004): 12.

dealing with romantic relationships, was uninteresting or uncomfortable for them.

Lorraine chose *Hello, Dolly!* because it was an *aesthetically* “adult” work of theatre; while it is certainly “light entertainment” and contains no profanity, violence, or explicit sexual content, the show does contain mature themes and humor in the sense that certain things went beyond students’ interest or understanding.

In a theatre education program that produces theatre from an existing script, the content and historical context of that script provides significant opportunities for learning. Ideally, as students learn and interpret their parts, they will learn and analyze, for instance, the characters personal and historical circumstances, the literary structure of the play, and the musical and dramatic elements. In the article “Reflections on How the Theatre Teaches,” Jonathan Levy examines recurring theories throughout history on how knowledge or skills are transferred through theatre, many of which have to do specifically with the content of the text. He states “[Theatre] teaches the actors by causing them to memorize approved speeches and to recite them in context and in action. Acting a role is a particularly powerful way of learning because by learning and playing a part, a young actor fixes the words he is speaking and the sentiment the words arouse in him in his mind and body in a way mere classroom memorization never can.”⁴⁷ Theatre teaches by showing proper reactions to a situation, either by rewarding positive behavior or ridiculing negative behavior through comedy, even in the case of situations that a student has never experienced before in “real life.” It causes young actors in “to live in a

⁴⁷ Jonathan Levy, “Reflections on How the Theatre Teaches,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 4 (2005): 22.

compressed way *as if* through some telling experience, so that the play becomes a first instance of or a physical paradigm for future action.”⁴⁸

All of these ways of teaching make a powerful educational tool when used as an instrument to teach; however, these phenomena are not suddenly extracted from the experience of doing a play when the goal is not primarily instrumental. In the rehearsal process in many cases the students had the opportunity and expressed interest in deepening their understanding of history, social issues, and artistic form and content by asking questions. However, often these questions were brushed over and it was evident that this type of learning through the content of the play was not a priority for the staff. Whether or not learning and analysis of the themes and content was acknowledged or encouraged, students learned to tell the story and therefore on some level learned and embodied the content of the play through verbal and physical action.

When I began working with the project, the director had already cast the show, with input from the stage manager, music director, and other staff of the center. I was surprised at the first rehearsal that not only were most students not familiar with the play, some students didn't even know what part they had been assigned despite being given instructions following auditions to pick up their scripts and familiarize themselves with their parts. They had each been issued scripts, but several of them did not bring them with them to the first rehearsal. It was obvious as the students began the read through of the play that for most of them, it was the first time they were looking at their scripts. Some students proclaimed that they had no idea what the play was about as they came in. Chorus members had not received scripts yet, so most of them eagerly poured over them

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23.

when they arrived for the second half of rehearsal. Lorraine told them as they looked over the play that there are “no small parts” and informed them that the chorus is the most important part of this musical.

Overall, my evidence shows that the students did not like or relate to this play. One student in particular was quite vocal about his feelings about the play. When I was working on a scene with him and another student during the third week, asked him why he felt so negatively about the play. He had attendance and discipline problems throughout the process, but on this day he was being particularly resistant. Frustrated with his lack of cooperation, I asked him if he even wanted to be in the play. He replied with an audible sigh, and said, “That card is so played out.” Apparently he believed I was inquiring in order to inspire better behavior, but that was not my intention; I was actually curious. I asked him what show he would have preferred and he said he would want to do something like *Grease* or Disney’s *Aladdin*. Later on I overheard him telling the choreographer that *Hello, Dolly!* was “dry and boring” and that he “wants to go back to Disney.” I heard similar complaints from other students as well. Part of the problem was the expectations that had been set by previous shows they had done in the program. This was a more “adult” show than they had done before, so the students who had been in the program before were used to a different experience. Suggestions of shows they would like better tended to be shows that were familiar from movies or television (like Disney musicals) and had less mature themes; over and over students stated that they would prefer to do a show that was “fun,” implying that to them, *Hello, Dolly!* did not qualify.

Another source of the problem was that they did not understand and relate to some of the content. The students didn’t get a lot of the jokes, which are a major part of

what makes this particular show enjoyable. After the performance, one of the principal actors expressed surprise at the fact that the audience laughed so much. For example, the student playing Dolly didn't realize that when it comes time for the characters to pay for their train tickets, her line saying someone else will have to pay because she only has "big bills: fives and sevens" was a joke. Sometimes staff members glossed over jokes as well: in one of Dolly's songs "I Put My Hand In" there is supposed to be a visual gag of a tall woman being matched with a short man to go with the line "and a girl over six foot three/loves a man who comes up to her ear." This could have been an easy bit to stage, especially with the range of ages present in the chorus, but it was ignored.

Even when students asked directly about things they didn't understand, they did not always get explanations that fully addressed the meaning of lines and the humor of the script. A student asked what "the defense rests" means while blocking a scene in which the entire cast has been arrested and is appearing in court. Lorraine explained simply "it means you are defending these people" but she didn't explain the joke. Later when the scene was played for the audience, the student saying the line was taken by surprise when the audience laughed.

During the first week, I was asked to take most of the chorus into the dance room so they could watch the 1969 movie version of *Hello, Dolly!* (starring Barbra Streisand) while a few of the principals continued to rehearse. As the first few scenes unfolded, I became acutely aware that the people on the screen did not look like the group of students in front of me. While the cast at the Sitar Center included only one student who was white and not of Hispanic origin, the movie was overwhelmingly white. The only visible persons of color in the movie are Louis Armstrong as the bandleader and his band in the

Harmonia Gardens scene. My reaction to the disconnect between the example being shown to students and the varying experiences of the students themselves was confirmed by other staff members, and led me to explore the performance history of the play further. I discovered that there had been an all African American Broadway production of the show (starring Pearl Bailey as Dolly) in 1975. Versions of the show have been adapted in many languages as well, including Spanish. To my knowledge this was never mentioned to the cast.

The whiteness of this particular play cannot be brushed off as a case of whiteness as the default or whiteness as an absence of a particular culture. Though to our contemporary sensibilities, and particularly within the diverse community of the Sitar Center, the play does not illustrate otherness, in its historical context it is more complex. Dolly Gallagher Levi is generally understood from clues in the text (and the role's close identification with Barbara Streisand) to be an Irish immigrant and the widow of a Jewish man.^{49, 50, 51} Irene Molloy is explicitly identified as an Irish immigrant. Diversity also appears in most of the characters in their class background: Cornelius and Barnaby are employed as shop hands by Horace Vandergelder in a blatantly exploitative arrangement (for example, he keeps their saved wages in his own safe), and Irene and Minnie are both working women, indicating a relatively low status in the time period of the show. This reading may seem a bit dramatic for what on the surface seems to be a light work of

⁴⁹ Thomas Hischack, "Hello, Dolly!" in *The Oxford Companion to The American Musical: Theatre, Film, and Television*, (New York: Oxford, 2008), 333-335.

⁵⁰ Jesse Green, "Theatre: Hello, Dollys (Funny, That One Doesn't Look Jewish)" *New York Times* June 11, 2006, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9800E0D81431F932A25755C0A9609C8B63&scp=1&sq=hello,%20dollys&st=cse>.

theatre, and it is true that for the most part these circumstances are played for comedy, but it is worth noting that the social circumstances of the play are not entirely that of a homogenous and dominant culture.

The characters of Irene Molloy and Dolly are both Irish immigrants. This could have been an interesting topic to address with the students since some of the students or their immediate family members had experience as immigrants themselves. Regardless of the personal experiences of the students, it was an important aspect of the characters' circumstances; I addressed these issues with the students playing these parts when I worked with them one on one, but from what I observed it was not addressed when staging the scenes. The character of Dolly Levi is often played as a stereotypical Jewish matchmaker, a la Barbara Streisand in the movie version, although in the play she introduces herself as "Dolly Levi, nee Gallagher," indicating her Irish heritage and perhaps that she is Jewish by marriage (or at least culturally Jewish). The trope of the meddling Jewish woman is probably not something the students are consciously familiar with, but I would be surprised if there weren't a few of them who had seen the reality television show "The Millionaire Matchmaker," featuring Patti Stanger, a self-described third generation Jewish matchmaker.

Most of the characters in the play are decidedly middle-to-lower class. Money is discussed in the play often, and is often a source of humor. Dolly, a widow, tells her dead husband in a monologue that she is "tired of living from hand to mouth." Cornelius and Barnaby are comically underpaid, and one of the major plot points of the play hinges on them taking Minnie and Irene out to dinner with no way to pay for it. Horace Vandergelder, presumably the richest character in the play, owns his own hay and feed

store and is obsessed with money. Dolly tricks him into going on a date with Ernestina by indicating she is rich, and he refuses to let his niece Ermengarde marry Ambrose because he is a poor artist. Though in the text it was indicated that the main characters (with the exception of perhaps the Vandergelders) were generally lower middle class, the students in the cast associated them with a higher class level because of the historical distance and perhaps the overall “whiteness” of the play. To the student’s understanding, things like the antiquated language, playing conventional femininity (or masculinity), and cultural clues like the characters waltzing may have falsely given them the impression that they were in an upper class environment.

As with many plays in the traditional musical theatre canon, gender roles in *Hello, Dolly* are dated, romanticized, and oversimplified. Ideas of masculinity and femininity (and the ways in which they intersect with class and ethnicity) pervade and propel the story. The plot of *Hello, Dolly* revolves around the premise that single characters (including the matchmaker, Dolly herself) need to be “matched up” in heterosexual relationships in order to be happy. This was a rather adult concept for the students at the younger end of the age range, and observing them navigating the material was at times comical and at times disturbing. In one of the first rehearsals, one ten-year-old male student asked the director “What is the point of the play?” Lorraine explained to him that it is about a woman named Dolly who sets people up. The boy told her that he didn’t like the play, and “It’s for girls. I don’t like romance!” During the first staging of “Call on Dolly,” the boys were terrified of getting “matched up.” In scenes where the younger boys were asked to stand next to girls they complained constantly.

Issues of gender roles and the position of women in the 1890s came up often in the process of staging the play. In one of the first rehearsals, Lorraine explained to principals in a scene simply that “Women didn’t have much freedom back then.” One student asked her “When did women have freedom?” No one offered an answer, and rehearsal continued. The female students struggled with the expectation that they would embody traditional 1890s femininity; Lorraine asked some of the girls to wear heels in rehearsal to help them move more femininely without addressing the historical and social aspects of what that means. There are certainly also aspects of the play that perhaps challenge traditional notions of femininity, or at least for the time period in which the action takes place. Although Dolly’s primary objective in the play is to “match up” the main characters, most importantly herself and Mr. Horace Vandergelder, she does not give the impression that she intends to be wholly subservient. She is the mastermind behind every action in the play; though she is certainly not challenging the sexist social system of the 1890’s, she is at least exerting agency within it.

During the public performances, the gender related (and arguably sexist) jokes got the most laughs by far. The song “It takes a woman” (which proclaims, for example, that “It takes a woman/all powdered and pink/to joyously clean out/the drains in the sink”) stole the show each night. I was conflicted about this reaction; it was wonderful to hear the audience responding so enthusiastically to the student’s work, but at the same time I was struck by the universality of humor that hinges on gender stereotypes and essentialist notions that “women are like this/men are like that.” Despite the diverse backgrounds of the audience and the historical and cultural distance from the world of the play, humor about gender norms resonated with everyone in the audience, myself included. The

students may not have even completely understood the gender roles they were performing, and yet they were rewarded for them with vigorous laughter and applause.

As I observed the process, I noted many instances where students expressed curiosity about the circumstances and content of the play, but they were rarely addressed. The material was not being used to teach content, yet students clearly absorbed information through the act of learning the play itself.⁵² So then, I wonder, does doing plays like this from the traditional canon, for example reinforce gender stereotypes? On some level, students are absorbing antiquated notions of gender roles by being exposed to them and embodying them through performance. Perhaps conversely, seeing traditional gender roles in a historical context also highlights the fact that they are not essential by allowing students to view them in contrast with contemporary notions of gender roles. Or in the case of the historical content of the play, while *Hello, Dolly!* is a period piece, it is a work of fiction; are students “learning” history from this play without staff members confirming or denying its accuracy? I cannot answer these questions within the scope of this project, and it would be impossible to assess specifically what or how much students learn from the content of the play; I can however theorize as to *why* staff members may not have focused on this type of learning.

Lorraine had told me at our first meeting that it was not the goal of the program to catalyze social change. I interpreted that to mean that engaging political issues was not the priority of the program; however, in practice it went beyond a question of priority to the point that almost any discussion of social or historical issues present in this relatively light work of theatre was avoided, even when students asked questions outright. There

⁵² Levy, “Reflections on How the Theatre Teaches,” 22.

are many possible reasons for this. The priority for the program was to provide students with an opportunity to use and develop their theatrical skills in the performance of a complete work of theatre. Simply learning lines, blocking, and music for this complex play took a great deal of effort on the part of both students and staff, so it is possible that the staff believed that engaging a deeper understanding of the story would have taken time and energy away from learning the elements of the show.

By avoiding discussion of meaning within the text and context, the staff may have also been attempting to broaden student's possible interpretations rather than imposing circumstances that might have been limiting or confusing. By providing or drawing attention to specific aspects of characters or their situations, instructors might have caused students to focus on that dramaturgical information rather than on making creative and expressive choices in the way they portrayed their characters. Focusing on traits in which the student playing the role differs from the character might also have caused confusion or discomfort; for example, the student playing Dolly was African-American, and obviously not middle aged. If the director had discussed Dolly's experience as an Irish immigrant and a widow, the student might have gotten caught up in the ways in which she differed from her character. Where a more experienced actor might be more comfortable imagining and portraying the experience of a person of a different race, gender, or age, for an adolescent that would be a complex task.

It is also possible that issues in the play such as race, gender, and class were being glossed over in an effort to preserve the safe space of the center. These issues are potentially uncomfortable and addressing them would highlight differences in students' identity and experiences, possibly making students feel emotionally unsafe. The adult

themes of romance and marriage were confusing for the younger students and somewhat uncomfortable for the teenagers (particularly those who had to act out falling in love with their peers), so downplaying them in the interpretation despite the fact that they are central to the plot may have been an attempt to reduce the cast's discomfort or confusion. Whatever the reasons for not addressing them, students were still exposed to the themes and issues present in the text, and undoubtedly interpreted and absorbed the story through the lens of their own personal experience.

Despite the students' resistance to the play and my own questions about the way in which the content was addressed, there is no denying the fact that the audience absolutely loved the play. While I am certain that those parents and community members in the audience would have been proud and impressed with any production featuring this group of children, it was clear that the clever humor, uplifting music, and romantic story was a hit with the audience. The goals of performing an enjoyable work of theatre, an opportunity to showcase their work, and the learning experience of presenting a public performance were achieved in the program with great success.

Focus on Product

Displaying a polished and positive appearance is a major part of the Sitar Center's organizational model, from the well-equipped facilities and high-quality publicity materials to the emphasis on publicly showcasing work done by students. In the Center as a whole, the opportunities to show student work, including the summer musical, are a primary part of a well-coordinated effort to connect the Sitar Center community of students, families, staff, and donors, as well as other members of the surrounding geographic area. This emphasis on product also has a distinct impact on student's

experiences in the program by motivating students to conceive and execute complete projects and encouraging the development of specific artistic skills.

From the moment I entered the Sitar Center, it was apparent that the image of the center was carefully maintained. Sponsors and donors are recognized with their names on blue and green bubbles hung on a wall facing the entrance. The lobby is full of glossy publicity materials including brochures, newsletters, and even complementary CDs and DVDs of students' work. As the Executive Director of the center Ed Spitzburg explained in a promotional video, "Once we get out supporters through what I call the 'magic doors' and they can see the results of their support...it all becomes clear what their support brings and makes possible."⁵³ Donor support is crucial for arts and education non-profit organizations like the Sitar Center, and having results easily visible for donors and potential donors in the form of quality facilities and completed student art works can have an important impact on the level of support the center might receive (See Appendices B and C for more information on Sitar Center finances and donors).

The space itself is configured with product rather than process in mind. Instead of multipurpose spaces that can be adapted and used in a variety of ways, the Sitar Center space is divided up and designed for specific uses. Practice rooms line the hallway leading to the back of the center, where there is an ensemble room for groups of 5-6 students. The dance room has a sprung floor and an adjacent dressing area. The theatre space consists of a small proscenium stage and permanent auditorium seating for 85. There is basic lighting equipment and a backstage area with mirrors and a small dressing

⁵³ Sitar Arts Center, "Sitar Arts Center Promotional Video," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1zk1JNRDiI>.

room. In the open area between these rooms is a gallery space, where both student work and work by professional artists is shown.

The choice to have dedicated areas for specific art forms, and, in the case of the gallery and theatre, for the showcasing of *finished* pieces sets a clear expectation for what type of arts education is to be found at the Sitar Center. Whether or not students will use the specific techniques they learn to use after leaving the center, they are learning to create art in an environment and with tools that closely resemble those used by “real” professional artists. In the Center’s promotional video, the founder of the center explains “the art rooms were designed with our artists-in-residence from the Corcoran School of Art...we have a sprung floor that is the same floor they use at the Washington School of Ballet.”⁵⁴ Regardless of Sitar Center students’ personal circumstances, they have the opportunity to use state-of-the-art equipment and facilities.

Alternately, the space could have been designed (as in many after school arts programs) as multi-use spaces, for example, a black-box type theatre that would better serve rowdy theatre games and process-focused drama, (and could then be adapted with seating for performances). In my work on the musical, I had difficulty leading games and activities with the whole cast in any space in the building; the theatre had very little usable space between the seats and the very small stage and the only other big space, the dance studio, was terribly noisy thanks to the plain walls, mirrors, and sprung floor. In rehearsals, I found the spaces difficult to work with, but the challenges we faced working in the space were generally regarded to be a small price to pay for the sense of professionalism and authenticity that came from performing on the proscenium stage in a

⁵⁴ Ibid.

“real theatre.” In other types of classes, the space likely had a different effect. For example in studio art classes having high quality equipment and supplies likely increased the possibilities of what projects students could do. Studio art, unlike theatre and drama, is necessarily concerned with creating material artifacts. The gallery space to show finished work therefore does not enforce the creation of finished products so much as encourage their display.

Deputy Director Maureen Dwyer explained the importance of having state-of-the-art facilities as it relates to the center’s mission in an article published in NEA ARTS Magazine: “Sitar values children, and it lets them know that every step of the way. Part of the reason we want a facility that’s beautiful and designed for high quality arts education is so the students know they are valued simply by the environment. And with that we build a community of loving and caring adults around the kids.”⁵⁵ In more explicit terms, it seems the philosophy of the center is that kids will feel valued based on the amount of money spent on them. The decision to invest in facilities and equipment in this way affects the amount of money that must be raised, and/or the amount of children who can be served by the center.

The center’s focus on showcasing student work also benefits students by providing them with a sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy. By seeing their work presented in a gallery or performing onstage for an audience, students can see the positive effect their work has on others and how that work can be effective in communicating an idea or expressing a feeling. A work of art reflects something very personal about the student who created it, and seeing that work earn approval represents approval for that

⁵⁵ Smith, “Positive Change,” 13.

student as a person. In *Acting for Real*, Renee Emunah indicates that “The intertwining of product and person is intensified in dramatic art by the fact that the instrument used in creating the product is the artist’s own body,”⁵⁶ thereby intensifying the potential personal satisfaction that comes from a successful and well-received performance.

Though most of the drama classes at the center culminate in some sort of showcase, the summer musical is the only course that culminates in a public performance of a complete play with full technical elements. This intense focus on preparing for and executing a polished public performance shaped the student’s experiences throughout the project. In particular during the final week of rehearsals and performances, or tech week, I observed profound changes in students’ behavior that indicate unique educational and social effects associated with the experience of putting on a public theatrical performance. John Dewey, in *Democracy and Education*, describes the importance of having a goal or aim in education.⁵⁷ The program provides a complete educational experience, consisting of repeated “trying” followed by receiving feedback (what Dewey referred to as the passive or “undergoing” phase).⁵⁸ The public performance serves as a high stakes aim for the entire experience, in which students perform what they have learned and receive (generally positive) reinforcement.

The purpose of the program is for students to have the experience of collaborating to create a complete work of art, placing it firmly in the realm of aesthetic (as opposed to applied) drama. Richard Schechner, in *Performance Theory*, describes a scale between efficacy and entertainment in performance, wherein ritual performance and performance

⁵⁶ Renee Emunah, *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy Process, Technique, and Performance*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 289.

⁵⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 117-121.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

that exists primarily to affect change or “transform” someone or something is contrasted with that which is intended to entertain an audience. In Martin-Smith’s continua, specifically for educational theatre, that distinction is split up more specifically between three criteria: process versus product focus, aesthetic versus instrumental intention, and whether the intended function is to educate or entertain. When compared with Schechner’s braid, product focus, aesthetic intention, and a primary function to entertain would correspond with Schechner’s entertainment side, while process focus, instrumental intention, and educational function would seem to correspond with efficacy.

Schechner makes an interesting note about the complicated nature of placing a performance like Broadway theatre on the continuum that seems applicable to this program as well:

For example, a Broadway musical is entertainment if one concentrates on what happens onstage and in the house. But if one expands the point of view to include rehearsals, backstage life before, during, and after the show, the function of the roles in the lives of each performer, the money invested by the backers, the arrival of the audience, the reason spectators are attending...and how all this information indicates the use they’re making of the performance (as entertainment, as a means to advance careers, as charity, etc.) – then even the Broadway musical is more than entertainment, it’s also ritual, economics, and a microcosm of social structure.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 131.

In the case of the Sitar Center's summer musical, to this list we might add parents attending to see their children in their first public performance (a rite of passage) or as a yearly event (a family tradition). Board members and donors might have been attending to perform their duty as supporters of the center. Instructors and community members might have been attending because, as the Executive Director explained in his welcoming speech, the summer musical brings the efforts and attention of the whole community together. Any of these might move the experience for a specific audience member closer to an efficacious performance than a purely entertaining one. The cast also may have experienced the show in different ways, and like the actors in the Broadway show they developed certain rituals such as warm-up activities that they engaged in surrounding each performance. For some of them it was their first time performing on stage or having a large role, adding ritual weight to the show as a type of rite of passage.

The positioning of the summer musical on the efficacy-entertainment scale is further complicated by the center's mission to teach *through* the use of aesthetic drama that in itself would fall to the side of entertainment. In this way, the program seems to reflect John Dewey's assertion that works of fine art (in this case, theatre) *are* instrumental in that through "education of the organs of perception...they enlarge and enrich the world of human vision."⁶⁰ Aesthetically focused theatre teaches through creating novel situations in the imaginations of the participants and audience. By examining the program using Martin-Smith's more specific continua, we can gain a more specific picture of the ways in which the program is efficacious despite an outward focus on entertainment and that allows for Dewey's notion that something that is primarily

⁶⁰ Dewey, "Experience, Nature, and Art," 164.

aesthetic in intention can also be educational in function. On the scale between instrumental and aesthetic the intention was primarily aesthetic: through this experience, students learned and developed artistic skills and created a work of art. There were instrumental effects (for example, students' sense of accomplishment), but they were not the primary intention. On the education vs. entertainment continuum, taking the program as a whole it would fall somewhere between the middle and the education side. Though the actual performance of *Hello, Dolly!* itself is not a very educational piece for the audience and only certain types of learning were emphasized for students, the program exists in an educational context, and rehearsals were conducted with the goal, at least in part, being to educate students.

In the case of process versus product, the summer musical falls clearly to the side of product focus. From the beginning of the process, it was clear that the highest priority for the staff, particularly the director Lorraine, was to present a polished finished product. She often used the words "real" and "adult" to explain her reasons for both choosing *Hello, Dolly!* as the show and for using fairly elaborate technical elements (at least by youth theatre standards), and it was always emphasized that the musical was a "full production." Learning and other benefits were achieved through creating the product. Much of the acting instruction I observed focused on external elements such as speaking loud enough, cheating out (or turning one's body) to face the audience, and other skills primarily important for performance rather than on delving into the creation of character and believable action. While a different approach might have placed more emphasis on developing students' skills in the craft of acting (which they might transfer to future endeavors), and/or teaching the rich social and historical context of the play, the

instruction in this program was primarily limited to only what was necessary for this particular performance.

In rehearsals, the eventual performance was used as a motivating factor, both positively and negatively. From the first rehearsal it was communicated to students that challenges and difficulties would be a part of the process; Lorraine told them “Rehearsals can be long. Attention pays off in good performance.” Later in the rehearsal process when behavior and excess talking became a problem, another staff member informed them that it was noticeable when they made the extra effort and “when you are focused, it shows in good performance.” In the best cases, appeals were made to students’ sense of community and the potential rewarding feeling of presenting a good show after weeks of hard work. At worst, the impending performance became fuel for threats of embarrassment. At one rehearsal late in the process, when cast members still didn’t know their lines and were not focused and following directions, Lorraine informed them “If I were you, I’d be scared.” The public performance was held up as the only goal of the program; other goals such as learning or improving skills were mentioned rarely, if ever.

The Pressure of Public Performance

When we got to tech week, the students were very excited and worried. We had not yet staged part of the most elaborate scene in the play, the Harmonia Gardens scene. As of two days before the opening I noted that lines and dances still were not learned, and that I felt uncomfortable putting the students onstage with the show in that condition. I wondered at that point if such an intense focus on product and external factors of performance had actually hindered the students in learning the material. They were so wound up for the first tech rehearsal that it was impossible to get them to do our usual

warm-ups. The actor playing Ernestina, for example, didn't understand why we were doing warm-ups instead of letting them work on lines since some of the cast didn't have them completely memorized. She was afraid the show would be bad. Another student was worried too and got frustrated to the point of exclaiming, "I suck at this song!" while they were reviewing dance steps before the show. Patricia, the choreographer, reassured her and explained that that was why they were practicing. Though we had many discipline and commitment problems during the rehearsal process, it was clear once we got to the performances that the cast was very concerned with doing well and looking good onstage.

Overall, despite attempts to play it cool, particularly by the older students, most of the cast was noticeably excited for the public performances. Lateness, which had been a major problem throughout the camp, decreased over tech week and by the last couple of performances students were waiting at the center doors when the first staff members got there. Behavior in general also improved somewhat for most students starting at the beginning of tech week. The pressure or even fear of the live performances and the responsibility the students felt to provide a good performance to their friends and family and the Sitar Center community caused a powerful change in the way students approached their responsibilities. They began to see the value in the experience they were taking part in; they simultaneously took their roles more seriously and delighted in them.

Through live theatre performance, on stage in front of an audience, students have the unique opportunity to learn through a high-pressure experience. It is true there are many opportunities for experiential learning throughout the rehearsal process and that the whole process constitutes an educational experience, but learning by doing becomes

especially necessary for students during the actual performance. Instructors are not able to oversee students closely, and a great deal of independence and personal responsibility is required for preparing for the show, getting dressed, checking one's props, and being at the right place at the right time. This was explained to students before the first technical rehearsal, but that did not prevent the excitement and chaos of the students' first experience facing their pre-show duties.

Lorraine had told the group on the first day of rehearsal that "theatre is a collaborative sport," and it was their primary job to connect with both the audience and their fellow cast and crew members, but participating in the public performances brought out a greater degree of teamwork in the group than I had observed in earlier rehearsals. When performing a play, each cast and crew member has his or her own unique role with unique responsibilities. If one person had not shown up, there would have been no one to replace them and the show might not have happened. This makes each student vitally important, unlike in a typical classroom setting where the presence or absence of one student has little effect on the classroom environment. In fact, the knowledge that the performance of others would reflect on the whole group actually caused some tension between students at times, if cast members did not appear to be fulfilling their responsibilities. In theatre, whether or not students like each other personally, each must acknowledge the importance of the contributions of others, and feel both the pride and responsibility associated with their own contributions. This can be a valuable experience, particularly to a student who has had less than positive experiences in the traditional classroom or felt their contributions were not valued.

In the experience of live performance, students are given complete ownership of their work. The stage manager may determine the structure of when the show begins and a few technical elements, but beyond that no staff member or instructor has control over the course of the show. Though staff members repeatedly tried to communicate to students that they were the ones ultimately responsible, it was unclear to me if the students were consciously aware of this exciting autonomy. However, to me as an instructor the moment when the students assumed collective control of the play was both exhilarating and nerve-wracking. For the next two hours, a group of students I had observed as relatively unpredictable and undisciplined would be responsible for remembering and executing an elaborate series of actions including but in no way limited to, dressing and grooming themselves, paying attention, keeping quiet, listening, acting, remembering lines, remembering cues, singing, and dancing. And overall, each night they were successful in the vast majority of cases. I noted in that moment that I could not think of a comparable educational experience where students had that level of independence and responsibility, both individually and as a group.

When I had the chance to watch the Saturday night show from the audience, I was blown away by how much they had improved since the first technical rehearsal and their ability to keep going when mistakes were made. Certain students rose to the occasion in unbelievable ways. Alissa, who played Mrs. Molloy, had been apathetic, uncooperative, and uninspired in rehearsals and I had wondered many times why she had been cast in such a large role, but she came alive and gave an excellent performance in front of an audience. Another girl playing a small part that I had never even noticed in rehearsals created a truly beautiful moment with only two or three lines. These changes were not

universal, however, and even at this point, James, the boy playing the lead of Horace Vandergelder, never really seemed to buy into the importance and excitement of the public performance. Neither his behavior nor his performance improved very much once the show opened; he continued to pick fights with other students, and onstage he didn't seem completely connected with the play or with his fellow actors.

Perhaps the most notable result of performing for an audience was the sense of accomplishment displayed by every student following the performances. Renee Emunah attributes this to the unique circumstances of theatrical presentation: "At the end of theatrical productions, the actors come onto the stage and are applauded for their creative achievement. This direct acknowledgement is limited to the performance arts; in nonperformance arts, the artist is not necessarily present at the time the viewer/audience witnesses the art work."⁶¹ Even the students who had been most resistant throughout the process commented on how happy and proud they were following the final show. The positive reinforcement gained from completing the project and performing in public completes the process of learning through experience by providing consequences that reinforce the work students have done.

At the cast party following the final performance, it seemed the conflicts and tensions between cast members had miraculously disappeared, or at least been set aside for the moment. Even though in my estimation (and in some cases, their own) they hadn't been completely ready for the performances, they felt proud and accomplished for what they did. In fact, it seemed that perhaps part of their feeling of success came from the fact that they were able to put on the show despite all the obstacles and concerns they still

⁶¹ Emunah, *Acting for Real*, 289.

faced on opening night. The cast was able to work together to elevate the level of performance considerably when faced with the reality of a public audience, and both the cast themselves and the staff felt a great deal of pride in their ability to rise to the occasion.

This ability to perform under less than ideal conditions is a valuable skill. Regardless of preparation (or lack thereof), nervousness, or personal issues, the students had to show up and perform their part without letting the audience know that anything might be wrong. They had to be attuned to unexpected challenges on and offstage, adapt instantly in the moment, and keep going no matter what. In rehearsal, instructors tried to get students to keep going when they made a mistake, but it was not until the actual show that they were able to do so. They were not nearly as prepared as any of the instructors would have liked, but they brought it together and the show was enjoyable to watch. Perhaps the challenge of coming together and making it work with what they had under pressure was a more valuable learning experience than if they had been perfectly prepared.

It is a popular saying in theatre that “the show always comes together somehow,” and in the case of theatre with young people, that “somehow” has particular implications for the educational experience of the students involved. The focus of the summer musical program on creating and executing a polished public performance caused the entire six-week program to build towards the final week, creating a climactic, high-pressure environment during tech week. The necessities of putting on a public performance required students to learn quickly and independently through experience, experimentation, adaptation, and teamwork. In the act of creating live theatre, this cast of

25 nine-to-sixteen year olds assumed collective responsibility for the show and exceeded expectations in their ability to come together and perform under pressure, reflecting one aspect of the unique educational value of theatrical performance.

Conclusion

On the final day of camp, a party was held to reward students for their successes and to celebrate a successful opening night of *Hello, Dolly!* Students could play games, watch movies, and work on art projects. At one point the activities paused for students to gather and watch performances by some of the classes. One of the dance classes performed something a student had choreographed, a music group played a song composed on instruments made from found objects, and a very talented student rock band played, causing people walking by on the street to literally stop and stare. The mood was joyous, as students cheered each other on and excitedly anticipated that evening's performance. After the rock band finished, a staff member brought out ice cream and sundae supplies. She explained that so much money had been contributed to replace what was stolen from Lisa earlier in the summer that there was enough to buy ice cream for the whole camp. Students and community members had responded wholeheartedly to the breach in the physical and emotional safe space of the center, paying the money back and then some to make up for whoever had violated the safe environment and hopefully restore trust in the community.

Though the musical program itself is not intended to be an instrumental theatre experience or a transgressive attempt at social change, it is clear that the center as a whole strives to create positive change in the lives of its students through social and artistic experiences. The way in which the center engages students in maintaining their

own educational environment is empowering to students and promotes cooperation and respect. The center's identity as a "safe space" is particularly important because of the nature of both learning and creating art; each requires students to be willing to take risks and experience a certain level of fear. The safe space of the Sitar Center provides a secure environment, within which students can feel comfortable taking risks without fear of drastic consequences if they should fail to accomplish their goals.

The center as a whole was for the most part successful in the endeavor to create a physically, emotionally, and artistically safe space, but within *Hello, Dolly!* rehearsals both efforts and results were more mixed. Students (and sometimes instructors) were less focused on or at least less attuned to the well being and success of the group, which coupled with the greater importance of trust and collaboration in theatre at times caused the safe space in rehearsal to break down. The disconnect between the socially conscious mission of the center and the professed nonpolitical goals of the musical was most apparent as students approached the play itself, which as a long-standing work of the Eurocentric musical theatre cannon seemed to be such an artistically and politically "safe" choice that it seemed awkward or uninteresting to the students and quaint and out-of-place to me as an observer.

The most dynamic part of the program, and the place in which educational and social change was most visible, was in the focused preparation for the final performance. Particularly in the final week, the summer musical program went beyond simply engaging students in an aesthetic experience; the process of performing in a play provides plentiful opportunities for learning and developing transferable skills. Through the cycle of interpreting the script, making artistic choices, and receiving feedback, students

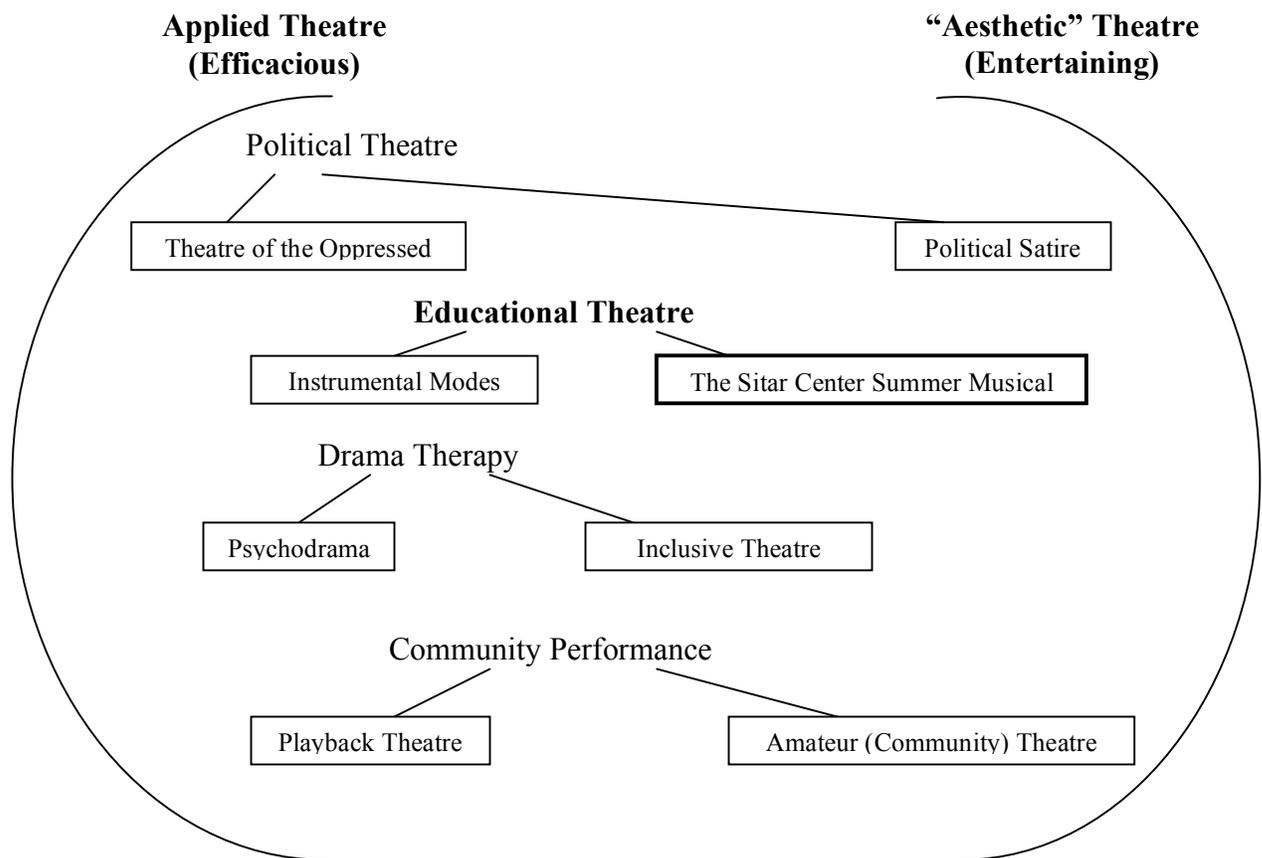
experience what John Dewey would consider a complete experience. The public performance provides a high-stakes culmination to the educational experience, as well as an opportunity for students to work collaboratively and autonomously. Public performance is a powerful way to promote self-efficacy and self-esteem, as students are rewarded not just for learning or making something, but also for expressing something deeply personal and unique. When a student is praised for his or her performance, that positive reinforcement is an affirmation of him or her as a person.

Where then does a program like this, which is nonpolitical and arguably non-instrumental in an artistic sense but that exists within an organization that clearly works for social change, fit in the complex web of applied and educational theatre? Is simply existing within an educational context enough to categorize an otherwise aesthetically focused work of theatre under the realm of applied drama? The answers to these questions are further complicated by the scope of our focus: if we consider only the public performance from overture to curtain call and from the perspective of the audience, the play is in no way instrumental. But consider the significance of activity in rehearsals and backstage, family and community significance, or opportunities for learning and personal development within the entirety of the program, and (like Schechner's example of the Broadway play) the picture becomes much more complicated.

Though judging from the focus of most recent research in the field it might seem that all educational theatre is firmly under the category of applied theatre, the example of the Sitar Center indicates that a more nuanced analysis is needed. Even Martin-Smith's system of multiple continua fails to provide a clear picture of where a program like this

lies in relation to applied or aesthetic drama. Returning to our original diagram, rather than categorizing educational drama (or any subcategory, for that matter) under applied drama exclusively, it may be useful to incorporate the efficacy-entertainment continuum and acknowledge that within any specific category, different specific modes may fall at different points on the scale (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Revised View of Applied vs. Aesthetic Theatre Categories



In the realm of educational theatre, the difference between instrumental and aesthetic theatre education parallels that of applied and aesthetic theatre in general. While the category of educational theatre as a whole may best be located nearer the applied side of the continuum, modes within the category may vary in their individual positions. This allows for the vast difference between a program like the Sitar Center, where the

experience is only instrumental in the sense that it is educational, and one in which theatre is used primarily as a tool and its aesthetic aspects are minimized. Regardless of this program's desire to produce strictly aesthetic drama and avoid "theatre for social change," it is impossible to entirely divorce any theatre that exists in an educational context from the instrumental benefits it provides. The Sitar Center exists to educate and empower students, and one of the ways in which they do that is through theatre. In this particular instance, *Hello, Dolly!* became the unlikely instrument through which students were provided opportunities for learning and personal development.

Appendix A: Population Statistics for District of Columbia Ward 1(including Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, and Shaw) as compared with Washington, DC as a whole.

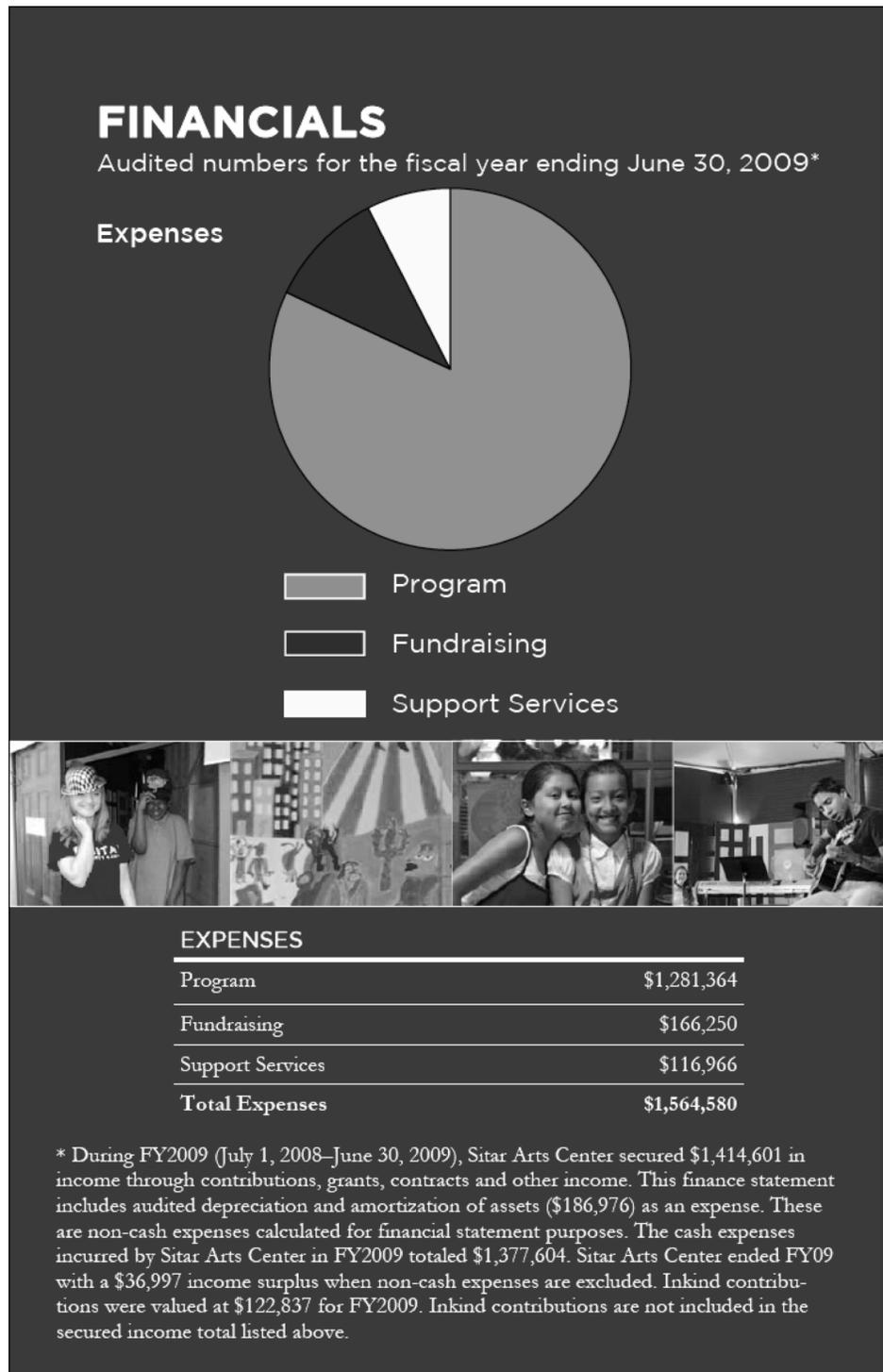
Demographics	1990	2000	2010	Washington, DC (2010)
Population	72,580	73,334	76,197	601,723
Foreign born (%)	23	29	ND	13**
Black Non-Hispanic (%)	58	46	33	51
White Non-Hispanic (%)	22	25	41	35
Hispanic (%)	18	25	21	9.1
Asian/P.I. (%)	1.7	3.7	5	4.2
Income	1989	1999	2005-2009	DC (2005-2009)
Average Family Income (2010 \$)	\$64,223	\$77,405	\$98,485	\$115,016
Family Risk Factors	1990	2000	2005-2009	DC (2005-2009)
Poverty Rate (%)	21	22	16	18
Unemployment Rate (%)	7	7.4	7.2	9.2
Persons over 25 without HS Diploma (%)	34	31	19	15
Female-headed Families with Children (%)	52	46	42	53
Child Well-Being Indicators	1990	2000	2005-2009	DC (2005-2009)
Children in Poverty (%)	30	35	23	29
Births to Teen Mothers (%)	ND	12	12*	12*
Reported Crimes (per 1,000 pop.)	1990	2000	2009	DC (2009)
Violent Crimes	ND	16	15	13
Property Crimes	ND	55	51	46

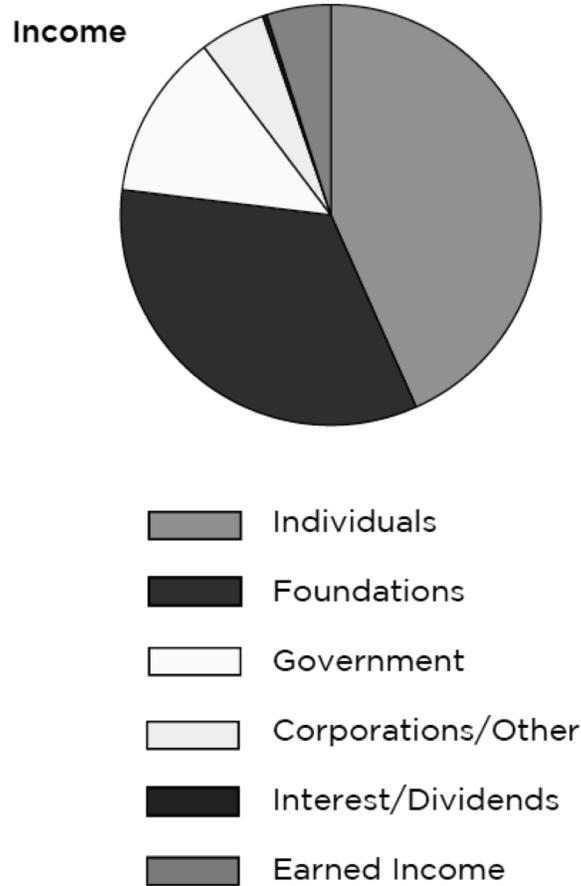
Source: NeighborhoodInfo DC, The Urban Institute and Washington DC Local Initiatives Support Corporation, March 24, 2011., accessed May 1, 2011, <http://www.neighborhoodinfodc.org/comparisontables/comparisontables.html>.

* Figures are for year 2007.

** Figure is for years 2005-2009.

Appendix B: Financial Information (Excerpted from Sitar Center 2010 Annual Report)





INCOME	
Individuals	\$611,298
Foundations	\$478,518
Government	\$178,397
Corporations/Other	\$72,394
Interest/Dividends	\$2,254
Earned Income	\$71,747
Total Income	\$1,414,601

Source: Sitar Arts Center, *2010 Annual Report*, 2010, accessed May 1, 2011.
<http://www.sitarartscenter.org/publications>.

Appendix C: List of Current Sitar Center Sponsors (except Individual donors).[†]

Foundations/Community Organizations

The William S. Abell Foundation
Abramson Family Foundation
America's Charities
American University - Spinoza Practice Club
Charitable Lead Annuity Trust of Gladys S. Borrus
Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation
Dan Cameron Family Foundation
Sam and Louise Campe Foundation
Capital for Children
Clark-Winchcole Foundation
Community Foundation for the National Capital Region
Dallas Morse Coors Foundation for the Performing Arts
Dimick Foundation
Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation
Lois and Richard England Family Foundation
Ernst and Young Foundation
Philip L. Graham Fund
Harman Family Foundation
Inter-American Development Bank
International Monetary Fund
Jacquemin Family Foundation
KAP Foundation
Leonard and Hilda Kaplan Charitable Foundation
Kirstein Family Foundation
Lainoff Family Foundation
Jacob and Charlotte Lehrman Foundation
Yolande Leon Foundation
Anthony Francis Lucas-Spindletop Foundation
Mead Family Foundation
Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation
Morningstar Foundation
National Philanthropic Trust
Pierce Family Foundation
Howard and Geraldine Polinger Family Foundation
Prince Charitable Trusts
Rising Phoenix Foundation, Inc.
H. Rubenstein Family Charitable Foundation
The Shiloh Foundation
Hattie M. Strong Foundation
Alice and Russell True Foundation

[†] *Source:* Sitar Arts Center, "Our Supporters," www.sitarartscenter.org/supporters.

United Way of the National Capital Area
Vanguard Charitable Endowment Program
Venable Foundation
Wake Up and Dream
Weissberg Foundation
World Bank

Government

DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities
DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education
Embassy of Malaysia
National Endowment for the Arts
Neighborhood Investment Fund
President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities

Corporate Supporters

Atlantic Trust
Avalon Bay Communities, Inc.
Bennet Communications
Brookfield Properties Corporation
Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney, PC
Capital One
DirecTV
Doyle New York
Fathom Creative
Fidelity Investments Charitable Gift Fund
First Savings Mortgage Corporation
Fitness Together
Glass Construction
Harris Teeter
Horning Brothers
M&T Bank
McWilliams Ballard
NBC Universal
Pepco
Production Solutions
Pullen and Associates
Salamander Hospitality
Schwab Charitable Fund
Robert Shields Interiors
Sterling LLC
Target Stores
Verizon
Vida Fitness
Volkswagen
Willkie, Farr & Gallagher

Appendix D: Sample Interview Questions and Student Questionnaire

Sample Interview Questions for Students

- Does your school offer classes or extracurricular theatre activities?
- Have you participated in theatre classes or productions before? If so, was it through school, the Sitar Center, or another program? Describe the program/activity.
- What did you like about it? What didn't you like?
- What did you learn from the experience? What skills did participating in the class/production help you develop or improve?
- What made you want to participate in this program? Why are you interested in theatre/performing arts in general?
- What is your role in the production?
- What do you expect to experience in this program? What do you hope to learn?
- What is your favorite part of being in this production?
- What is your least favorite part?

Student Questionnaire

What grade will you be in this fall? _____

What school do you go to? _____

Have you been in the summer musical before? Yes / No How many years? _____

What is your favorite part of being in the show? _____

What is your least favorite part? _____

What is one thing you learned during camp this year? _____

What do you think could make the musical even better next year? _____

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