

Acting the Part – Comments and Responses

Hello- it's Cydelle and Ken here. Once again thanks to everyone for continuing the stimulating discussion about the use of live theatre for health education/prevention.

Since some people have brought up the use of theoretical frameworks, to further today's discussion we would like to address the theoretical framework/scientific basis upon which we have based our model of theatre for health/social change/education. Social Learning Theory (Bandura-1977) is, in our minds and work, the gold standard and the most useful underlying theory of educational theatre. (In last week's discussion on the power of radio in health promotion and behaviour change we note that Bill Ryerson also provided us with information about Bandura and the role of social modeling). According to this theory, individuals model behaviors that they experience- behaviors that are- in a way- acted out in front of them. Theatre based education offers individual audience members the opportunity to experience both the positive and negative behaviors of the characters in an authentic way that resonates with them. Shefner-Rogers found that a critical component of the effectiveness of the model is that audience members also watch- and learn- how people change their behaviour. Young people tend to model their behaviour on those whom they admire or "aspire" to be associated with. Because adolescents are proverbially attracted to risky behaviours- and those who exhibit it- this insight is particularly useful in the creation of characters who are "hip": use contemporary language/music, wear hip clothes, recognize- and may even have succumbed to- the appeal of high-risk behaviours- and yet show how and why they are moving toward adapting safer behaviours.

Since young people today, all over the world are so media-savvy, approaching them through these methods, which are entertaining as well as informative, creates a natural link to their own popular culture and reaches them in a way that is familiar and accessible.

A second topic of importance is that of Evaluation. Evaluation of a program's effectiveness can occur on two major fronts: internally and externally. By "internal evaluation" we are talking about a system of self-evaluation of our original dramatic material, built into the process of scene creation and ongoing maintenance. Once a scenario is created, rooted in an educational message and using educational objectives as we discussed yesterday, it is important to evaluate this scenario at every step along the way in its development. Some important questions to ask as a scene is evaluated may include: is the language used in the scene age and culturally appropriate?; are the characters and situations realistic, age and culturally appropriate?; is the scenario communicating your message and meeting your educational objectives?; does the scene smoothly and logically fit into a larger show (if one exists)?; is the scene timely and current (this is an especially useful question to ask of a scene that has been used for a significant amount of time)?

These evaluative questions can be asked by the company's director, peer actors not performing in specific scenes, program staff and also invited members of focus groups assisting with internal evaluation.

It is important to continue this process of internal, or self-evaluation, throughout the life of a program. It will hopefully ensure a dynamic presentation and effective presentation.

“External Evaluation” uses a more formalized process and outcome approach. This evaluation strategy can assess many services and programmatic aspects of your theatrical project. (In particular the effect on the actor/educators themselves) We assess the degree to which services are delivered as planned, and to what degree the overall goals and objectives have been achieved. For example, program process data, to be collected throughout the project can include: number of sessions offered and conducted to the participants, attendance for each session, and the monitoring of actor/educators training, rehearsal and service provision hours. Data entry is always ongoing, such that process data are up to date and clean at any given point for reporting purposes – to a funder- perhaps or for yourselves so you can keep track of the project. Data may include demographic and descriptive information for all participants. In addition to the primary service recipients, attendance and other descriptive data can be collected for teachers or NGO personnel whose groups participate in the program, and as well – for parents, caregivers or providers who view a performance or scenario.

What we have also found useful so that we can monitor our strengths and, as well what needs correction, may work in some settings and not so well in others. We always include an outcome evaluation plan, along with our process plan. Let’s take one example. Say we are working in a school or community setting with 10th graders. We always try to conduct a pretest- posttest survey of their knowledge, attitudes and behavioural intentions. If we’re lucky we will also include a comparison group with young people from similar populations who had not seen our performance or attended our post performance intensive follow up theatrically based workshops. We collect data, work with an evaluator and find out whether the objectives that we created for the performance scenarios and workshops are being met. NiteStar has published data about this and will get you more information tomorrow when we wrap up. In essence what we have found is that while a “one shot” performance can indeed impact awareness, it takes at least a performance plus 4 follow up workshops to affect knowledge, attitude and behavior (in the short term.)

The use of theatre as a prevention and educational tool can result in a magical and transformative experience-but one has to be aware that the method is not a magic bullet or panacea for immediately changing behavior. Performances certainly raise awareness, engage participants on many levels, but do not necessarily affect attitudes or behaviors unless they is followed up with behaviour based interactive workshops that continue to address the issues raised in the scenario or performance.

Ken and I will conclude our week with you with a summary posting so we can address any comments which might come in later on in the week. We will be passing the torch tomorrow to your next host for this week, Colin Dixon, whom we know will engage you in an illuminating discussion about the power and use of dance for educational purposes.

Many thanks for inviting us to talk about “Acting the Part”. Obviously there is much more to be said on the subject. We wish you great luck in your endeavors in the artistic educational world.