Spring 1997

Negotiating Audiences: Confronting Social Issues in Theatre/or Young Audiences

Maria DiCenzo

Negotiating Audiences: Confronting Social Issues in Theatre for Young Audiences

• *Maria DiCenzo* •

Résumé: *Cet article examine les problèmes pratiques, esthétiques et idéologiques auxquels sont confrontées les troupes de théâtre qui produisent des pièces portant sur l'expérience vécue des jeunes et qui les présentent en milieu scolaire. Si l'école permet l'accès à la culture théâtrale à des groupes d'enfants défavorisés, il n'en reste pas moins que cet accès est contrôlé par des adultes (commissions scolaires, enseignants, parents et bailleurs de fonds). À cet égard, l'expérience de deux troupes, le Catalyst Theatre d'Edmonton et la Company of Sirens de Toronto, montre les difficultés que soulèvent l'exploration de sujets comme la violence à la maison et les abus sexuels.*

Summary: *This paper deals with the practical, aesthetic, and ideological problems facing theatre groups who choose to produce issue-based plays for young audiences in schools. In socio-economic terms, performing in schools makes theatre available to a larger cross section of young people; however, a company's access to these audiences is ultimately mediated by adults (school boards, teachers, parents and funding agencies). The paper compares the experiences of two different theatre groups — Catalyst Theatre (Edmonton) and the Company of Sirens (Toronto) — whose plays for young audiences tackled issues of sexual abuse and domestic violence. The paper concludes with a consideration of the challenges and rewards of TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences) more generally.*

The dispute between the Toronto Board of Education and Young People's Theatre over the production of *Bedtimes and Bullies* drew attention to an area of theatre work which rarely makes the news. The controversy concerned the decision to cast a young black actor in the central role of the bully. School board representatives criticized the show for reinforcing negative stereotypes of young black males, warning teachers and parents about its "suitability." YPT made some minor changes, but stood firm on their policy of colour-blind casting. Each side believed it was acting in the best interests of young audiences. The case is important because it highlights a crucial feature of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) — relationships with and access to young audiences are mediated by bodies (school boards, teachers, parents, funding agencies) and considerations that differ from those influencing other forms of theatre. Artists must appeal to two audiences, relying on the approval and interest of educators and parents, and ultimately politicians and bureaucrats, in order to gain access to their target audience. The potential problems are magnified in the case of theatre companies that attempt to take issue-based plays, dealing with sensitive or controversial

subject matter, into schools. In this paper I will examine how two companies — Catalyst Theatre (Edmonton) and the Company of Sirens/S.I.S. (Toronto) — chose to structure and perform their school-based productions around the issues of sexual abuse and domestic violence.

While both groups set out with a commitment to using theatre as a tool for social action and to expand their work to include TYA, their experiences of working within educational settings proved to be very different. The productions I will consider were both pivotal for these companies; after struggling with the problems of a participatory learning program like *Mind Your Own Body*, Catalyst cancelled the production in mid-run and withdrew from TYA, while the Sirens, encouraged by the responses to and demand for *Whenever I Feel Afraid*, became more actively involved in school touring. Considered both individually and in relation to one another, these two cases raise important issues about the objectives, forms, and challenges TYA faces more generally.

TYA takes a variety of forms and by focusing on Catalyst and the Sirens/S.I.S., I am restricting this discussion to issue-based plays produced by professional companies and toured to schools. This type of work combines elements of both children's or young people's theatre (professional companies performing self-contained plays in theatres or other spaces)[1] and Theatre in Education/TIE (companies developing shows intended to educate children about social/political issues, but which are part of larger programs of educational activities). The convergence of pedagogical aims, the often sensitive or controversial nature of the subject matter, and the limits surrounding the "school" as a venue, place theatre artists in a complex role. Hélène Beauchamp notes:

> Whenever 'theatre' is brought *into* the schools an ambiguity arises as to its real purpose. Is it an artistic experience or an educational supplement? Even if the theatrical forms are undiluted, schools act in the role of the producer. (169)

TYA's work around social issues is not just about putting on plays for young people. Once artists assume roles as educators, the conditions of production and the efficacy of their work are influenced by the need to tailor material to specific age groups, the degree of involvement they choose or are allowed to have with students (participation versus performance), and the role played by larger structures, such as school boards that purchase the shows. As a result, it is important to distinguish TYA from theatre for adult audiences and to assess it accordingly.

Catalyst Theatre and The Company of Sirens/S.I.S.: Some Background

Catalyst and the Sirens are professional companies with histories of using theatre to tackle problems related to gender, race, and health, often commissioned by government and community agencies. They were both established, and worked for many years, as companies producing plays for adult audiences, gearing only some of their work to young audiences. Catalyst Theatre formed in 1977 in Edmonton with a mandate to "promote and practice theatre for public education and as a catalyst for social action" (Carlson 13). The company has undergone significant changes in structure and personnel over the years, but is still commit-

ted to "work[ing] in solidarity with a broad range of sectors on women's issues, the environment, economic justice, peace and disarmament, and native issues."[2] The Company of Sirens, a Toronto-based feminist theatre group, formed in 1985. It too has a long-standing reputation for producing popular plays around problems such as racism, wife assault, and women in the workplace. While the Sirens have created a range of work, they place a great deal of importance on their role as "educators for change."[3]

Given their commitment to promoting social change, it is not surprising that these companies eventually turned their attention to young audiences. In both cases, the TYA activity grew out of projects for adult audiences. Catalyst's work in TYA began in indirect ways in the early 1980s when the group was funded by AADAC (Alberta Alcoholism and Drug Addiction Commission) with shows like *Talk is Cheap* (1983) geared to teens and parents. They took a more active role in TYA when they produced *Feeling Yes, Feeling No* between 1985 and 1990 (a child sexual abuse prevention program for elementary school children first developed in 1982 by Green Thumb Theatre in Vancouver) and *Mind Your Own Body* between 1988 and 1990 (written by Sharon Stearns for junior highs). After piloting the play twice, Catalyst cancelled the tour of *Mind Your Own Body* because the company believed the program was not fulfilling its objectives. Catalyst has not produced plays exclusively for young audiences in schools since. The Sirens were involved in minor ways with school touring in the 1980s when they produced *All the Way (to Equality!)* (1988/89), by Lina Chartrand, specifically for high-school audiences, and offered performances of adult shows, *The Working People's Picture Show* (1985) and *Shelter From Assault* (1989), in schools. *Whenever I Feel Afraid* (1990), however, proved to be a turning point. Their performances in schools were so well received and supported that they expanded this branch of their work and created a separate TYA company in 1991 (S.I.S. Theatre Action in Education). I would like to take a closer look at these two productions — *Mind Your Own Body* and *Whenever I Feel Afraid* — and the circumstances surrounding their development and tours in order to assess why one group withdrew from TYA, while the other became more heavily involved.

Case One: *Mind Your Own Body*

Because of its sensitive subject matter, *Mind Your Own Body* proved to be an exercise in compromise for Catalyst, a theatre company accustomed to artistic autonomy in dealing with controversial social issues. The project was modelled on *Feeling Yes, Feeling No*, and was designed as a personal safety program for adolescents. As the term "program" implies, the visits to schools involved more than the performance of the play; it became the central part of a larger context of educational work with teens and adults (teachers and parents). According to Marie Carlson, who conducted the external evaluation, the "M.Y.O.B. program goals were identified during an initial six month period of extensive research which involved a literature search, interviews with adolescents, and consultation with educators and a variety of professionals working in child sexual abuse treatment/prevention" (16).[4] The play and the curriculum support materials were developed out of this research. Catalyst required school board approval before the play could be performed in schools, and script development was

overseen by consultants assigned to them by the board. At times there were as many as twenty people (consultants and representatives) in the rehearsal room during a reading. The company determined the creative process, but allowed people to respond to the material. As a result, some elements were declared unacceptable before the show ever reached its intended audience. Given the topic of sexual abuse, working in schools imposed severe restrictions on the content of the play, particularly in the province of Alberta where parental consent was required for student participation in the human sexuality component of health classes, as well as for seeing the play.

This created serious problems for the company because their preference was to deal with the issue of sexuality in a more complex way, by starting from the assumption that healthy, positive sexual relations between teens are possible. The play was supposed to be about the continuum of human relationships (from good to bad) and former artistic director, Ruth Smillie, admitted that in a theatre space it could have been a piece about teens and sex.[5] While the company was encouraged to talk about abuse, it was not allowed to talk about positive aspects of relationships (particularly as they pertained to gay and lesbian relationships). Consequently, the play's potential to engage and challenge students was diluted in the interest of making it acceptable to administrators. *Mind Your Own Body* is a series of self-contained scenes, using elements characteristic of Catalyst shows at the time, such as music, songs, factual information, and participatory segments. The importance of "asserting oneself" is the main theme linking the episodes. The title suggests a focus on personal safety in terms of physical/sexual contact, but the play in fact links "mind" and "body" by showing that assertiveness in everyday situations involving peers is connected to behaviour a young person must learn in order to protect him/herself in more threatening encounters. The play develops from scenes involving the responsibilities of baby-sitting, cheating on class tests, and shoplifting, to scenes depicting forms of sexual harassment and abuse by adults. On a thematic level, the gradual shift in the seriousness and sensitivity of the scenes is a deliberate way of forcing connections. On a practical level, because the show involves participation on the part of the audience, it also serves to establish a safe and comfortable environment for teenagers to respond to potentially threatening and embarrassing situations, by building up to them gradually.

Participation is a much debated feature in TYA and raises some important problems in the case of *Mind Your Own Body*, where it proved to be limiting in this particular institutional setting. Not all of the scenes in *Mind Your Own Body* involve participation. In some, the resolution to the particular dilemma is communicated through a closing monologue. In the participatory sequences, the action stops at a point of crisis and an Animator (either in or out of character) appeals to the audience for suggestions. The script outlines a variety of options that might arise and be explored and the performers play out the possibilities. According to Smillie, participation can be a valuable tool because it provides a safe opportunity for children to try out ideas and assertive behaviour. This is crucial in a program that tries to teach children how to assert themselves in intimidating or threatening situations, but these segments are contrived. Each time it is clear there are "right" and "wrong" approaches to the situation. On one hand, as Smillie explained, certain things don't work and the play tries to

demonstrate that. For example, in the "Bedroom Scene," the younger Sarah is not going to get rid of older Marty just because she asks him to leave her room. On the other hand, the form becomes manipulative if there are predetermined answers to the questions — the participatory segments are not about exploring the audience's input to the fullest, but about getting to the "right" behaviour quickly and demonstrating it.[6] The risk is that the audience realizes it will be shown the correct solution and ceases to participate in a serious way. Smillie agreed that, even though open-ended participation is the goal, it is difficult to create.[7] An additional problem with this kind of participation is that it places the responsibility for preventing or stopping the abuse on the potential victim, and thus minimizes the play's ability to examine larger structural factors and solutions.

The sensitive subject matter and the need to teach clearly defined objectives identified in the research make the use of participation in *Mind Your Own Body* problematic and limit the possible scope of the play. In addition, the restrictive atmosphere of the schools made it difficult for the company to respond to student interventions adequately, particularly when they touched on issues of sexual orientation.[8] While participation is generally regarded as a desirable and preferred element in educational theatre, what this case demonstrates is that its suitability and effectiveness can vary, given the restrictions and conditions imposed on specific productions and institutional settings.

In 1990 Catalyst cancelled the show in spite of a generally positive response from schools and a waiting list for the program. According to Smillie, the decision was based on what Catalyst believed was a failure on the part of *Mind Your Own Body* to meet some specific teaching objectives, in addition to problems related to the larger program. The evidence came from an independent evaluation of *Mind Your Own Body*, commissioned by the company, involving extensive surveys and interviews with students, teachers, and parents in three junior high schools participating in the program.[9] The evaluation's overall conclusion was positive, claiming that "M.Y.O.B. adequately meets the minimum standards for preventive CSA [child sexual abuse] programs" and "improves students' awareness of sexual abuse and its prevention and appears to enhance the interpersonal skills necessary for appropriately responding to individuals and risk situations, and in seeking help" (Carlson 77). But the report also identified a number of problems, including the fact that the program did not adequately address "healthy aspects/expressions of human sexuality to counteract [the] dominant negative messages" (72) and that the focus on the individual/victim and prevention did not allow for a more detailed examination of social and cultural factors contributing to these situations — an approach which would have been more in keeping with Catalyst's social action mandate. Regarding Catalyst's reasons for cancelling the program, Carlson claims: "My strong sense is that by opening up the opportunity for skepticism/self criticism, the evaluation process sufficiently reaffirmed Catalyst's primary committments [sic] and at the same time demonstrated the shortfall between the organization's larger structural and critical philosophy and practices and the individualistic approach of the M.Y.O.B. program" (80).

Smillie, however, referred to other and more specific reasons for cancelling the program. Firstly, as part of the evaluation process, students were

surveyed before and after the program in order to gauge its effectiveness in changing their understanding and attitudes towards the issues. The tests were distributed and results tabulated according to gender, asking, in some cases, specific questions of boys and girls. Smillie was not satisfied with the results, claiming that they did not indicate a significant enough change in the boys' responses to particular questions to justify continuing with the program.[10] The evaluation asserts that *Mind Your Own Body* appears to *add to*, rather than *change*, students' overall knowledge and awareness of sexual abuse and its prevention" (my emphasis) (59) and describes the program goals for students as "ambitious" (62).

Secondly, Smillie had serious concerns about the way teachers/administrators and parents were handling their part of the program. The company observed a shift in attitudes about child sexual abuse from a social issue involving people at all levels to a child's problem to be addressed by the education system. Indications of this shift could be seen in the turn-out at parents' meetings (a required component of the program) which dropped from 95% at the beginning to about 10% and less later on. An orientation to the program and to the possibility of child disclosures for all school staff was contractually required. Smillie claimed that by 1990, no one was coming to these orientation sessions and the schools were asking that they keep the meetings to ten minutes. There was even some evidence to suggest that disclosures were not being handled properly.

The decision to pull the program was a costly one for the company. *Feeling Yes, Feeling No* and *Mind Your Own Body* had been very lucrative for Catalyst and having to cancel bookings for a long waiting list of schools was bad public relations. *Mind Your Own Body* marked the end of Catalyst's involvement in school-based touring and Smillie insisted that any further TYA would be in the area of public performance works where they could deal with issues in less restrictive ways. It was not until 1995 that the company ventured back into the area of teen sexuality when they produced *Quake* as part of The Young and Edgy Project, sponsored in part by Health Canada, designed to give teen participants the skills/training and opportunity to create their own theatre pieces around issues such as sex, sexuality, relationships, and AIDS. As an approach, it represents a significant departure from the earlier projects and points to an interest in giving teens the tools to create and perform for their peers, outside of educational institutions.

The Catalyst case is instructive for a number of reasons. As an example of school-based TYA, *Mind Your Own Body* is more closely linked to theatre-in-education models in its emphasis on small group, intensive, participatory learning through theatre. This model possesses what is perhaps the greatest potential in pedagogical terms, but it relies on the involvement, co-operation, support, and approval of individuals and structures external to the actual site of performance/teaching. It also raises crucial questions about the goals and evaluation of TYA work, specifically whether it is realistic to expect to "change" attitudes, and what the appropriate methods of measuring the impact of a particular play/program are.[11] It seems that Catalyst took the issue of efficacy so seriously that they pulled out when their objectives were not being realized. The failure to meet objectives was a real and serious reason for cancelling the tour, along with other problems

surrounding the program. But their opting out of TYA, instead of pursuing different approaches, highlights the fact that the restrictive conditions of working in schools in the province of Alberta also played a vital role.

Case Two: *Whenever I Feel Afraid*

Through *Shelter From Assault*, a play about wife assault, the Sirens had gained a strong reputation with the Ontario Women's Directorate and government ministries for dealing with women's issues. The play was created for adults, but it had been performed in schools. When they decided to develop a show specifically for high school students, they worked with the full endorsement of representatives of the Ministry of Education and community organizations such as the London Family Court Clinic and women's shelters. *Whenever I Feel Afraid*, written by Cynthia Grant and Susan Seagrove, grew out of student feedback to *Shelter From Assault*; it had input from specialists in the field of domestic violence, and it followed the company's own set of guiding principles and objectives for the material.

The result was a show characteristic of the Sirens' adult pieces, using a presentational format (performed for the audience with no participation) and an episodic structure. The main components include realist as well as satiric sketches, monologues, and factual information. The scenes are held together by a narrative about a brother and sister with a history of family violence and strategic use of songs and images from popular culture.

The company's objectives and its experience of dealing with the issue of domestic violence shaped the content of the play. One concern (relevant to all their work) was to expose the socio-cultural roots of the violence. The presentational format, the use of stylized/non-realist elements, and the flexible structure of the play grow out of the need to make broader connections. Artistic director, Cynthia Grant, notes the difficulty of trying to examine socio-cultural factors within the confines of the single plot: "the danger is, if you focus it on an individual set of circumstances, people won't see it ... they won't get that what you are trying to say is that it happens because of larger societal conditions."[12] The use of realistic scenes to facilitate participation limited Catalyst's ability to make these larger, more abstract connections. The Sirens were also concerned to create a set of characters who would offer a range of types and they consulted literature and experts dealing with the children of battered women in developing these aspects of the show. While they were careful to present an appropriate and realistic range of characters and situations, the play never actually shows the violence. Grant explained: "one of our guiding principles is that we don't show women being hit on stage. That kind of imagery has been used so much within entertainment (a sensationalized, eroticized experience with the audience) and we don't want to perpetuate that. Another reason is that it can just inure people to seeing that violence, so our monologues describe the violence, and we stylize it."

The Sirens, compared to Catalyst, worked with relative freedom in creating the play; no one was assigned to supervise the process. Because the play previewed for the Ministry of Education, including top representatives on the issue of family violence, they went into schools under the auspices of senior

planners in the field, so the play was not vetted by school boards. They did take comments and feedback seriously, but were not required to do more than change a few lines. It should be noted that this has not always been the case; TYA shows in Ontario are generally viewed by school board representatives before they are booked and these preview performances, in addition to being costly for small companies, can make or break the demand for the production. Objections or requests for changes can range from relatively minor points (like deleting offensive words) to more serious conflicts over the suitability of themes, or, as in the recent case concerning Young People's Theatre, casting decisions. Seagrove explained that S.I.S. has had few conflicts with board members or teachers over such matters, and has been willing to compromise on minor points of language, for the sake of getting information out to teenagers. But school board approval is something all these companies consider when they are developing their shows.

In order to examine the continuum of violence and gender more generally, *Whenever I Feel Afraid* shifts from scenes in the school yard, to a parody of television commercials, a fantasy encounter between two John Claude Van "Damns" and three Barbies, monologues expressing internal states of mind, and disturbing family scenes. Each scene is designed to explore a problem related to family violence — the impact of wife assault on children, how violent behaviours are reproduced, the impact of gender stereotypes in the media on self-image and relationships — thus encouraging young people to make connections between different aspects of their lives. In fifty minutes, the performers are able to cover a range of related issues and evoke a range of responses, from laughter, to tension and fear. The presentational format gives the performers control over the content, pace, and tone of the overall piece, in a way that is not possible in participatory work where the overall effects can be unpredictable and depend on the given audience. This format can also cover more material, since participation takes time and limits the number of scenes or situations a group can explore.

Along with the presentational format, what distinguished this project from *Mind Your Own Body* was that it is was not part of a larger (required) program of learning activities. In many cases, the company performed the show as a "one-off," sometimes for the whole school during the lunch hour break. The Sirens included a question and answer period after the performance and provided teachers with a discussion guide. Ideally, they would have ensured that the issues raised by the play could be explored in pre- and post-performance sessions, but requests for more staffing were turned down because the ministry had already launched several initiatives and supplied the boards with resource material for these purposes. Most schools were prepared for the event with counsellors and consultants on hand to do follow-up work and only in the case of junior high audiences did the company insist that students be prepared for the show. The company occasionally conducts workshops in schools and Grant's belief is that good workshops are the best thing they can be doing in this kind of education around gender issues because interactive, participatory exercises in small group situations are where you can get students to talk about their values, challenge them, and explore detailed aspects of problems. But because they knew they would be performing in auditoriums for large groups, they did not expect to involve the audience. As Susan Seagrove noted, an audience of 750 is not ideal

even for a production like *Whenever I Feel Afraid*, but that show has a much better chance of making an impact than a participational show.

There was no formal assessment of the production, but reviews and letters indicated responses from different groups. The endorsements of educators and experts in the field of family violence were significant because they indicated how much more effective the play was in generating concern and debate amongst students than were more conventional approaches such as information sessions. Students' letters revealed some of their reactions to particular features of the play. Many letters (in both the junior high and high-school groups) stressed the importance of dealing with these serious issues because they do not always get talked about. Some commented on how powerful the use of statistics in the play had been and how important it was that the play pointed to organizations and people who can assist in these situations — the very features of issue-based shows often regarded as too overtly didactic for 'art.' To the credit of the actors and the script itself, many were struck by the authenticity of the performances and scenarios and felt that the actors understood and cared about the issues they were dealing with. Some of the most moving letters came from students who had experienced family violence and they praised the quality of the play, stressing the need for such productions. *Whenever I Feel Afraid* had managed to relate to and communicate with these students and to evoke serious and thoughtful responses. Whether or not it would have withstood the rigorous evaluation process Catalyst subjected their play to is difficult to assess, but the letters indicated it was reaching at least some of its audience.

Over the last six years, S.I.S. Theatre Action in Education has become an important presence in TYA and has toured to schools across Ontario, mainly outside Toronto. The company is part of the Theatre for Young Audiences Association which, according to Susan Seagrove, is doing advocacy work to raise the profile of TYA. The next production S.I.S. mounted was *Datelines* (1994), a collectively devised piece about date/acquaintance sexual assault. This play included material on sexual orientation and the problem of homophobia in high schools. Grant explained that the importance of introducing students to issues around gay and lesbian identity is coming up frequently for them. Although they expected to have problems with some school boards, they were not required to make cuts. But Grant believes that homophobia will prove to be a difficult issue to tackle with students as well as administrators. Other new directions have included *Singing Between the Lines* (1995) by Shakura S'Aida, with Quammie Williams, which traces Canadian Black History through musical forms, and *Media Madness* (1996), a multi-media performance/installation which explores the influence of media on young people's lives.

The Sirens and Catalyst demonstrate the critical nature of the goals, forms, and conditions of production of TYA work. Practitioners have to make choices about the objectives they set for themselves, and adjust their expectations according to the means and time available to them. But this is difficult to do. Much of the impetus — at least for issue-based work — comes from a commitment to changing attitudes and giving children and teens the tools they need to confront problems on personal and larger social/political levels. While most practitioners prefer to work with small groups in an interactive way, this does not always prove

to be an ideal approach. In the context of British TIE, Tony Jackson outlines the debates concerning participation and the loss of confidence in it as a method:

> Many TIE actors with a conventional theatre training have felt that participation work was better handled by teachers, others have found it simply exhausting, while others still became frustrated by activating children towards decisions and understandings about the need for change in society only then to walk away, leaving them in the hands of the institution, resulting in little or no change. Surely, it was argued, actors should play their strengths: could not theatre be powerful through performance alone, through sharper imagery and more controlled, resonant narrative... If you have to walk away, better to leave children with the memory of a powerful theatre performance that might continue to work, beneath the surface. (27)

Jackson's summary reinforces the fact that after many years of work, practitioners are still debating the efficacy of participatory versus performance forms. What is clear is that the decision to do intensive, participatory programs or performance-based shows determines the degree of involvement a company will have with the figures/bodies (teachers, parents, and bureaucrats) who mediate between them and their target audiences. In turn, the nature of this involvement is shaped by the extent to which the values and priorities of the artists are shared by those who position themselves as guardians of the young. At its best, the relationship is one of collaboration, at worst, a political battle.

The Challenges and Rewards of TYA

The same features expected of adult shows — strong writing, performances, and design — are crucial to the success of TYA productions. At the same time, this work can be an effective teaching tool, particularly when it is part of a larger context of discussion and activities related to social issues. By taking the shows to the schools, companies can reach larger numbers of young people and a greater cross section in terms of socio-economic groups than any play in a theatre space. But the process and the touring can be gruelling for theatre groups. It is particularly demanding on casts who are not only required to perform, but also to learn about the issues and be prepared to respond to questions, even at times disclosures. The stresses of the work are intensified, as in the case of Catalyst, by the restrictions of a morally conservative milieu, or school authorities who prefer to avoid controversy. The difference between Catalyst's and the Sirens' experiences of working with school boards is a good example of the discrepancies between provincial education policies in Canada. Wayne Fairhead explains:

> There is no national curriculum. As a result, the position of the arts varies according to the agenda of the provincial political party in power at the time. For drama educators this is a tricky business; for professional theatre companies who specialize in work for children and youth, it is a constant concern. (151)

Occasionally, these companies also face hostility from the community. Smillie offered the example of one parent, a lawyer who campaigned between 1985 and 1990 to shut down both *Feeling Yes, Feeling No* and *Mind Your Own Body* because he believed they gave misleading impressions of fatherly affections. He had not seen either show, but received air time for his views. Social issues are by their very

nature divisive, and it is inevitable that this kind of work will generate controversy as it challenges people at different levels of authority.

This situation is compounded by the long term economic threats to this work. Arts funding is shrinking across Canada and the attempt to restructure granting bodies often means that specialized areas no longer receive separate consideration. The Ontario Arts Council has recently eliminated its Arts Education Office, so TYA groups will compete with other forms of theatre for program and project grants. Contributing to this funding crisis, the recent assault on educational funding in Ontario makes the prospects for TYA bleak. As education budgets shrink, less money is available to pay professional companies to perform in schools. Britain has seen a trend towards performance-only work (a shift away from participatory TIE programs) as arts and education funding has decreased (Jackson 26). Participation-based productions are more labour intensive, and hence more expensive for schools. But even performance-only shows are often geared to specific age groups, limiting their potential audience. S.I.S. has seen a significant drop in requests for its shows, due simply to budgetary cut backs. Some of the departments and organizations that booked and even commissioned its work in the past have now disappeared altogether. And TYA is in a disadvantageous position to seek other, private forms of funding. As Dennis Foon notes: "Corporate sponsors are reticent to fund a form of theatre that has such a low profile — and an audience that does not control the purse strings" (261).

TYA in particular, and issue-based theatre in general, also face the less tangible obstacle of a dubious status in the larger theatre community, where the pedagogical and advocacy aspects of the work — the very features that make it so important in the wider community — are considered to be antithetical to "art." In the specific case of TYA, this is complicated by the fact that the status of the artist is based on the status of the audience. Foon argues that the stigma attached to the genre has a direct impact on the practitioners — "artists who work for children are held in low esteem" (253). Similarly, Shirley Barrie, explains: "historically, it has been difficult to achieve credibility for the work or to create a sense of community among the producers . . . Theatre for Young Audiences too often has been dismissed as something you do until you manage to get something 'better'" (6). There are practical reasons for TYA's low profile as well, as Barrie reminds us, "Plays for young audiences are likely to `open' at 9:15 a.m. at a suburban school off the subway line. Time and place mitigate against attracting an audience of peers" (6). Consequently, these productions are seldom reviewed and, because issue-based plays are usually devised by the companies, it is rare for them to be published (unlike the work of professional playwrights like Dennis Foon). These factors have and will continue to affect the kind of funding TYA can generate.

On the other hand, for companies like S.I.S., the rewards of the work are great. Cynthia Grant explains: "I feel really good about doing this material with the shelter movement and educators who actually know the issues ... we come at this as people who have been involved in the women's movement and that has really made a difference to what kind of product we will produce ... this is not just us capitalizing on an issue, it is an issue we care about and have looked at for several years before we embarked on dealing with it for teenagers." The respect

and support they have earned from community organizations, educators, and especially young audiences confirm their accomplishments. Seagrove sees this kind of work as central to making theatre *part* of the community, by taking it into schools and social service organizations. But while they struggle to make young people think about social issues in new ways, they are also struggling to get the "adult" world — bureaucrats, politicians, parents, and other theatre practitioners — to recognize the artistic and pedagogical value of their work. The survival of TYA depends on it.

(The author would like to thank Susan Seagrove, Cynthia Grant, Ruth Smillie, Jane Heather, Catherine Graham, and Graham Knight for discussing these issues and productions and for making necessary materials available.)

Notes

1. It should be noted that Young People's Theatre in Toronto fits into this category and differs from the other companies discussed in the paper. YPT is unusual in that it has its own space and audiences go *to* it; the other companies produce shows and rely on touring them.
2. For accounts of Catalyst Theatre's earlier work, see "Catalyst: A Theatre of Commitment" by Vivian Bosley (*Canadian Theatre Review* 27, 1980), and *Collective Encounters* (1987) by Alan Filewod. For more recent accounts, see "Making Change: Administering Socially-Committed Theatre at Catalyst" by David Burgess (*Theatrum* April/May 1990) and "Women's Circle: Women's Theatre" by Jane Heather, et al (*Canadian Theatre Review* 69, 1991).
3. For further accounts of the Sirens' work, see "Ballrooms and Boardroom Tables" by Amanda Hale (*CTR* 53, 1987), "The Company of Sirens: Popular Feminist Theatre in Canada" by Kym Bird (*CTR* 59, 1989), "Women, Popular Theatre, and Social Action: Interviews with Cynthia Grant and the Sistren Theatre Collective" by Maria DiCenzo and Susan Bennett (*Ariel* 23:1, 1992) and "Penelope" by Cynthia Grant, Susan Seagrove with Peggy Sample (*CTR* 78, 1994).
4. Carlson notes that M.Y.O.B. grew out of community requests and that it "operate[d] under the jurisdiction of the Canadian Actor's Equity Association, and [was] funded by Health and Welfare Canada, the Muttart Foundation, and Edmonton Social Services" (16).
5. My references to Ruth Smillie are based on a series of personal interviews I conducted with her in May 1993 and April/May 1994.
6. Alan Filewod considers the manipulative potential of participational forms in the context of Catalyst's work with adult audiences (see *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
7. An earlier Catalyst production, *Zeke and the Indoor Plants* (1986), was more successful in using the same format to generate open-ended participation, but the play deals with learning skills and responsibilities — not harassment and abuse — so the stakes are not as high. The script for *Zeke and the Indoor Plants* can be found in *Canadian Theatre Review* 60/Fall 1989.
8. The most disturbing example was the "Music Teacher Scene" where the teacher, Mr. Eliot, begins to touch his young male student, Jesse, in inappropriate and unwanted ways, during the lesson. Smillie explained that there were occasions when children screamed "kill the fag" and the company members felt they could not respond appropriately (particularly in a province where protection under the Individual Rights Protection Act does not extend to homosexuals). She did not regard it as entirely the schools' fault, because they too were so severely restricted in terms of what they could discuss. Carlson's evaluation identifies this scene as the most controversial in the play and finds it "was largely misinterpreted by

students as demonstrating a connection between sexual preference and sexual assault, rather than as an abuse of power and authority within relationships which was the scene's actual intent" and concludes that "Students' responses to this scene reflect the strong homophobic bias in society in general" (57).

9. The evaluation is in the form of a 118 page Master's thesis, by Marie S. Carlson, for the Department of Sociology, University of Alberta, 1989. A detailed discussion of the process of assessment and the findings is beyond the scope of this paper.

10. The questions vary, like the scenes in the play, from common peer pressure situations to questions concerning forms of sexual assault. The students answer using a five-point scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). I believe Smillie was referring to a series of seven questions about sexual assault. Two examples of the questions asked of boys in this section are: (16) if a girl/woman says 'no' it means a guy should keep trying, and (18) it's alright to expect sex from a girl/woman if a guy is so turned on he thinks he can't stop. I should note that there are parallel questions directed at girls. She must have believed that it was realistic to expect that the program could change their attitudes.

11. In "Evaluating TIE" Ken Robinson argues that the "objectives model," common in this field, is not necessarily the most appropriate model. He points out that while a program may not seem to achieve its stated objectives, it may possibly have effects that were not anticipated. He also notes the problem of measuring short-term versus long-term effects, arguing that effects may not always be apparent in the short term.

12. All references to Cynthia Grant and Susan Seagrove are based on personal interviews I conducted with them in April and May 1994.

Selected Bibliography

Barrie, Shirley. "Theatre for Young Audiences Association of Ontario." *Impact!* (Winter 1994): 6.

Beauchamp, Hélène. "Impressive Beginnings: Petite histoire des grands événements en théâtre pour les jeunes au Québec." *A Mirror of Our Dreams: Children and the Theatre in Canada.* Ed. Joyce Doolittle and Zina Barnieh. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979. 159-82.

Carlson, Marie S. "*Mind Your Own Body*: An Evaluation of A Personal Safety Programme for Junior High Students in Three Alberta Communities." MA Diss. University of Alberta, 1989.

England, Alan. *Theatre for the Young*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Fairhead, Wayne. "Establishment or alternative? Two Canadian models." *Learning Through Theatre: New Perspectives on Theatre in Education*. Ed. Tony Jackson. London: Routledge, 1993. 151-64.

Foon, Dennis. "Theatre for Young Audiences in English Canada." *Contemporary Canadian Theatre: New World Visions*. Ed. Anton Wagner. Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1985. 253-61.

Jackson, Tony. "Education or theatre? TIE in Britain." *Learning Through Theatre: New Perspectives on Theatre in Education*. Ed. Tony Jackson. London: Routledge, 1993. 17-37.

Vincent, Isabel. "Theatre, school board clash over racism issue." *Globe and Mail* 1 Feb. 1996: D1.

Maria DiCenzo is an Assistant Professor of English at Wilfrid Laurier University. She is the author of ***The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)*** *(Cambridge UP, 1996).*