

# MICRONESIAN

JOURNAL OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

---

Vol. 4, n° 1

Dry Season Issue

June 2005

---

## VITALIZING CULTURE IN YOUTH

Daniel A. Kelin, II

*Honolulu Theatre for Youth, Honolulu*

This article chronicles a process used extensively by the author to immerse Pacific Island youth in artistic traditions of their own culture by combining indigenous art forms with western theatre techniques. This process, practiced in Hawaii, Micronesia and American Samoa, captures young people's interest in being engaged and involved, while being given the opportunity to actively contribute to the project and not just receivers of information. By building original performances from music, dance and cultural folklore, the young participants both take charge of their own learning and deepening their understanding of their cultural identity, helping to put their lives into perspective, making sense of who they are and what they are able to achieve

A teacher at the College of the Marshall Islands once asked me to lecture on a project I was conducting with Marshallese youth in Majuro. The topic focused on how the literary traditions of a culture, in this case the folklore of the Marshall Islands, provide valuable material for the cultural and social education of youth. As I gave the talk, I mentioned several folklore characters from the folklore that I had read about, collected and with which I had worked. Several times during the talk, the students nodded in recognition, or laughed at the remembered exploits of a particular character. However, more often than I anticipated, the students professed a lack of awareness of stories and legends to which I referred. A few days after the class, when next I met the teacher, she noted that some of the students had felt a little embarrassed as they did not feel that they knew as much about their own culture as I seemed to.

This lack of familiarity of both the literature and cultural traditions of the students' own

ethnicity is lamentable and unfortunate. However, it is also not truly surprising. The elder members of many societies note that the youth of their culture seem blasé about retaining and respecting cultural ways. I have had storytellers from several Pacific Islands share their dismay over this situation. It is also one I have encountered many times as during my work with children and youth from throughout the Pacific and Asia, both in Hawaii and on other islands as well.

In the past, older relatives modeled for children the ways of life within their society and culture, sharing pearls of wisdom embedded within proverbs, stories, chants, songs, dances and other artistic traditions. With the coming of an urban-based life style, however, extended families begin to dissolve. The younger generation moves to the easier and more convenient life of capital cities or wealthier foreign countries. With a high preponderance of Pacific islanders leaving their island homes to cultivate a more secure life for them-

This is a peer reviewed contribution. *Received:* 25 Feb 2005 *Revised* 10 July 2005, *Accepted:* 14 July 2005

© *Micronesian Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN 1449-7336

Letao Publishing, PO Box 3080, Albury NSW, Australia

selves and their children, the dissolution of certain aspects has increased. With lack of regular exposure to elders and respected leaders of the society, cultural identity is not modeled, passed along or ingrained.

In addition, schooling often features textbooks from other countries, lacking representation of the culture within which they are being used. Moreover, as families move or children are moved to other countries, teachers outside of the islands have little knowledge of the Pacific cultures. The accessibility of technological entertainment, from cell phone games to television to DVDs, chips away at the interest the young have in sitting and listening to stories of long and not so long ago. You might see a group of people gathered as in pictures of old when people gathered to hear tales told. However, at the center, you are more likely to hear the buzz of a television or rumble of a boom box than a storyteller's words.

Certainly progress will always be a part of human life, and many people use technological advances to help capture and preserve valuable aspects of culture, from knowledge of plants and medicine to navigational acumen to epic tales of cultural heroes. A question remains, however. How can one instill in youth a sense of excitement and interest about cultural intelligence, knowledge and tradition?

A process I have practiced in several Pacific Islands combines indigenous art forms with western theatre techniques in a way that builds on young people's interest in being engaged, involved, and given the opportunity to actively contribute to an activity or project not just receivers of information. Moreover, young people love a good story, especially if the story touches on who they are and where they are from. Stories are powerful forms of communication that not only validate our own experience, but also connect us to family, culture and community. Sharing stories of our past helps us put our lives into perspective, making sense of whom we are and what we can accomplish. By interacting with stories of their culture, family and themselves, young people not only gain a sense of self and their peers, but also be-

gin to discover how shared experiences bind us together as humans.

The process to which I refer features at its center a drama technique known best as "playbuilding." Playbuilding is an improvisation-based, exploratory technique that encourages group cohesion, builds verbal confidence, challenges young people to explore a range of verbal expression and develop problem-solving skills. In addition, it builds confidence in language use, whether helping a child feel more comfortable presenting and talking in front of a group or those who are limited English speakers to develop additional language skills.

The playbuilding process involves and engages all participants at every step. They decide for themselves how involved they should be and how to best shape their involvement. They review and assess their involvement, challenging themselves to further achievements. They evaluate their ongoing creations and alter their work as they decide is best. The process also builds naturally on oral and dance traditions, which offers students significant and personal ways to achieve success. Through all these purposes, this engaging and involving process builds on student interest in deepening cultural identity and understanding.

The effectiveness of playbuilding with Pacific Island youth in particular first struck me in 1992 through my outreach work with the Honolulu Theatre for Youth servicing a Marshall Islands social service agency for youth, Jodrikdrik nan Jodrikdrik ilo Ejmour (JNJIE). Contracted to teach Marshallese youth how to "do" theatre, it seemed to me that I needed to engage them in a process that would elicit their own understanding of their community, island, peers and culture. Instead of writing a play for them or bringing to their islands a scripted play that had proved successful in Idaho or Michigan or even Hawaii, I decided to tap into their own performance understandings and abilities, both learning from them and guiding them to discover how to create effective, meaningful work both for themselves and their audiences.

There were hurdles, of course. The most unexpected for me being this lack of connection to some cultural traditions. However, that

very surprise proved to be the impetus for the experimentation that led to the process I outline here.

As I experimented most with this process in the Marshall Islands, I will focus primarily on work I have done with JNJIE in this article. However, the structure and philosophy is similar to projects I have been involved with in Samoa and Hawaii, the latter including a project with a group of Marshallese and Chuukese youth. In each case the young participants were generally between the ages of 12 and 20, although I am now using a simplified version of the process with younger children who are in ESLL (English as Second Language Learners) programs in Hawaii's public schools, a high proportion of which are Micronesian.

The first step in this process is always basic drama training. This begins with performance skills and technique exploration, focusing on improvisation, storytelling, physical expression, pantomime and the metaphoric use of tableaux, music and dance. Together we experiment with this wide range of techniques for expression to help the participants develop a vocabulary from which to draw when later we play-build. The first step also helps overcome a significant obstacle: an initial reluctance to "take center stage," especially in front of someone not of their culture (i.e., myself).

Once a vocabulary of skills has been built, the group then experiments with creating scenes, applying the skills learned earlier. Improvisation is the primary mode for creating scenes as it taps into the participants' talent for "talking story." Since most who participate in these types of projects are from homes or places where few make a regular habit of reading, conversation is the chief means of exchanging information and knowledge. Improvisation benefits from that conversational tone, encouraging the participants to build their dramatic interpretations in comfortable and recognized ways that will create an accessible connection with the audience.

With improvisation, loosely structured storylines guide the development of the scenes, giving the participants a great amount of responsibility and power. They realize quickly

they must contribute or nothing happens. This means the participants switch characters within developing scenes often to find out who is more equipped to delve deeply into a particular character or scene. Oddly enough, though, participants tend to become more involved if they jump in, in reaction to another participant's lack of ideas then if they start the process themselves. When participants take that kind of responsibility, the training becomes easier and self-sustaining. Building scenes improvisationally also helps if someone does not show up to class, rehearsal or are unable to perform. Other students can step quickly into a role and play a scene in a similar, but newly improvised, way.

Next, we find the story that will be the foundation for what follows. I learned quickly that the best way to find a story was to let the story find us. Instead of trying to pre-plan the story event, I find it's better to find out about the students, see what islands they are from, see what they know and remember of their culture, explore their talents for speaking, pantomime, dance and song. Somewhere in the midst of all this knowledge lies a clue to a story, possibly an almost forgotten or fragmentary one that needs just one excited individual to fan the flames to life. One goal I have carried is to have the students collect tales from relatives or elders of the community or culture so the story is not a watered down book version or even in a book for that matter. Another goal is to have a storyteller share one with us.

One of the other reasons I have found it beneficial to use cultural folklore is because folklore is often "epic" in nature, involving many characters or groups of characters. This simple means that many participants can be involved simultaneously, spreading the wealth of the process and building in the safety of numbers for those still a little shy to take the risk individually. Folklore also often incorporates song and dance, two art forms that significantly increase the effectiveness of the stories and increase the excitement of the participants and the audience. Finally, and most importantly to this article, folklore challenges all participants, including myself, to research correct ways of presenting the ancestral life of the cultures.

One challenge, however, that surfaces every so often is the question of finding the “correct” version of the story with which we wish to work. Since many of the tales are traditionally oral, it suggests that they are very influenced by perception and the teller’s purpose for sharing the story. Therefore, I continually ask, is it necessary for the participants to create the “perfect” or “correct” version of the story? The folkloric stories work for the very reason that they are meant to be orally transmitted, meaning the teller feels a sense of ownership of the story. This is exactly what makes the play-building process so powerful with young participants. When they feel a sense of ownership over the story, they are essentially reconnecting with a vital part of themselves and their culture. To belabor exact “correctness” robs the participants that joy of ownership.

One particular project of which I was a part highlights this last point. The project, conducted in Hawaii with Micronesian youth, was a part of a larger project with parallel versions conducted in other places in the US with Native American youth. As we finished the project, the evaluator of the larger project noted that ours was the only energetic, engaging version that deeply involved the youth in connecting to their culture and a sense of personal achievement. He attributed the difference to our flexibility; the parallel projects spent a great deal of time dwelling on the political and cultural “correctness” of the stories and performances, alienating the young participants.

This, however, is not to say that they have free reign to change the story as they will, but forgiving a few story details to capture their interest seems fair. More to the point, my experience has taught me that once participants have spent time with a story, hearing it, rehearsing it and performing it, they are much more interested in learning where the details may vary in authentic versions of the story. They do not forget the story; instead, they are more interested when next they hear it again.

To that purpose, the folkloric story is always presented to the students orally. Written sources are not used, as the participants will most often then rely on the printed words. Af-

ter the presentation, the story is deconstructed, examined and broken down into scenes and then reconstructed improvisationally. During this process, the group learns songs attached to the particular tale or, alternatively, collectively create new songs. They teach each other dances that accompany the songs, or learn them from cultural specialists. Older people are often consulted as resources, detailing to the young performers the ways of living from the long ago past and demonstrating dances and songs and sharing stories. The elders hardly get a chance to sit down as the youth ask them to go over the dances repeatedly. In that exchange, the ultimate goal has been reached. Instead of being apathetic about storytelling, song and dance, the youth are actively seeking information about these arts. They are involved. They want to make sure it is correct. It becomes theirs, just as cultural stories should be.

While working with the story, I do not let anyone write it down. A story becomes too definitive in people’s minds when written down. In shaping the story for our performance, it must reflect the way the young people understand it, hear it and eventually deliver it. That only happens if they make the words their own. We shape it through recalling and retelling it; we analyze it to decide how to recreate it through theatre, focusing on the characters and the drama. By telling it as we shape it, we are drawn to the fun, the mystery and the inconsistencies and find a way to use those elements to keep the tale unique and oral. In addition, by having the youth speak the story repeatedly, they advise and correct each other, thus becoming active participants in the shaping. They also become active participants in preserving the story. For students who may not be using their first language, the constant discussion, sharing and talking strengthens their language skills through purposeful and engaging work.

Once we have analyzed the story and agreed upon the basic plotline, groups of students are then challenged to improvisationally develop specific scenes, bringing the play building into the process. For me, this is still very much “storytelling” even though the tell-

ing is now more physical and visual than verbal. "Theatretelling," as it were, is extremely important in a day and age of multi-media. The impact of video, TV and movies on young people cannot be underestimated. This is the main reason we do the stories in this manner, to capture that sense of wanting to watch and not just listen.

A key element in this process is creating a sense of ownership in the students in their own cultural heritage. That heritage is a primary teaching tool. Storytelling, song and dance are still viable and important traditions throughout the Pacific. The oral tradition, however, has not been able to keep up with the quickly developing tradition of television and videotapes. Nor does dance seem to be holding up against the infusion of Western culture. Music and songs are still very much a part of daily life but are being challenged by church music on one side and rock 'n roll on the other. This drama process attempts to instill a respect for a culture in the midst of this change, while trying to stop the materialistic attitude of tossing out the old for the new.

The revival of these skills and cultural treasures does not end there, however. By combining western-style theater techniques with dance, legends and music celebrates cultural heritage by bringing the past to full life in a way that is engaging and fun, but most importantly in a way that makes it theirs; their stories, their dance, their language, and, as it is improvisationally built, their own form of interaction and humor. The youth learn the skills, but find ways to use those skills to touch their audience, as other media cannot. It is a selective syncretism that has fired a need within many youth who have participated in this process to seek out their unique traditions of storytelling, dance and song.

When artistic traditions of their culture are added into the mix, students become very connected to a process that reflects who they are and celebrates the unique and fascinating aspects of their ancestry. Students are then prepared to collect, share, read and write more such stories. The ideal residency advances to a new level by encouraging everyone in the class

to collect tales from their own family or relatives and bring them to class to share. Not only does this increase their personal connection to the process, but it also gives the students a chance to participate in the play-building process again, but this time small groups of the students play-build from a whole story of their own choice. The students, then, become experts, culturally, as storytellers and as the dramatizers of the stories.

As scenes are developed, we often supplement the physical telling with dance steps and music. I do not mean songs and dances in this case. There are actions that are difficult to stage realistically that become more visually interesting when presented in the metaphoric style of dance. For example, in a story called JEBRO, the character Jebro and his brothers have a canoe race. In our presentation of the story we did not use canoes but found a dance step that gave the impression of the fluid movement of a canoe then added the suggestion of paddling. In the race, Jebro overtakes his brothers. To continue the dance style we chose to have Jebro remain center stage while the brothers danced moving backward and finally off the stage. The visual impression was of Jebro moving toward us. Simple, yes, and not a brand new idea either, but I think it is important to note that all of our choices are based on existent song, dance and story. We do not choreograph, we extend the metaphor.

The performance of the story, when a project culminates in such, is as rewarding as the process of creating it, as the audience shares knowledge of the songs and dances and the heritage from which the stories emerge. Laughter is the best indicator in the Marshall Islands, as applause is here, and you can almost hear the laughter echoing off the reefs and rolling across the dark lagoon. The performers, the youth backstage and the audience spread out on mats, gravel, logs, stones and wooden benches under the night sky share a unique experience that is almost becoming a new tradition in those islands. Outer Islanders are now regularly requesting copies of videotapes of the performances, and if that is not an interesting irony, I do not know what is.

The performances are most often a coming together of the community, a coming together that affirms a place for the past, present and future of the participants and their culture. They take charge of the stage as they learn to take charge of their lives, learning from the old as they create the new. Many young audience members chant bits and pieces of the performances after the show.

One of the most satisfying stories ever shared by the Marshallese group concerned a young man named Leli who, shunned by neighbors as a "momma's boy", wanted to be a warrior. Through a frustrating and enlightening series of adventures, he gained a magic that transformed him into a giant who defeated the enemy. To theatricalize the story the war was danced, canoe sailing was a combination of music, original song and rhythmic movement and Leli's ultimate triumph (transforming into a giant and defeating the enemy) was created by elevating the actor behind palm leaf screens while having him "kill" the others in a highly stylized slow motion sequence set to music.

In cases where more than one performances or sharing of the students' work occurs, the nervousness of the first performance is replaced by a second of wild performance. The youth have discovered their power. They milk everything for what it is worth. Moreover, the audience responds in kind. One of the first years I ever conducted a project like this in Majuro, a third performance was added last minute. From word of mouth only, over twenty-five hundred people attended that Monday night performance.

Playbuilding can be a powerful tool when the process weaves students' own cultural elements into it. A flood of emotion and personal accomplishment follows when the youth create ideas and are pushed to explore them as far as possible. Through the dialog, performance and cultural revival they discover a sense of power, of being able to do something, be heard, have others listen. It is a hard battle against the influx and influence of western ideals of beauty and style, but the excitement generated by performing stories of the past instills a pride in the

participants that, in a small way, vitalizes culture for the youth.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brauer, Gerd. (2002). *Body and Language: Intercultural Learning Through Drama*. Westport, Conn.: Ablex Publishing.
- Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C., eds. (1994). *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Kao, Shin-Mei, & Cecily O'Neill. (1998). *Words Into Worlds: Learning a Second Language Through Process Drama*. Westport, Conn.: Ablex Publishing.
- Kelin, II, Daniel A. (2003). *Marshall Islands Legends and Stories*. Honolulu: Bess Press.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY AND CONTACT

Daniel A. Kelin II is the Director of Drama Education for the Honolulu Theatre for Youth and Director of Theatre Training with a newly formed Samoan theatre company. He also served as a teaching artist with a Marshall Islands youth organization. His work with Marshallese storytellers culminated in *Marshall Islands Legends and Stories*. The American Alliance for Theatre and Education honored him with the 1995 Youth Theatre Director of the Year and the 2002 Lyn Wright Special Recognition award. His writing appears in *Storytelling Magazine*, *Parabola*, the *Kamebameba Journal of Education, Teaching Tolerance* and *Marvels & Tales*.

Contact: Daniel A. Kelin, II. Honolulu Theatre for Youth, 555 University Ave. #402, Honolulu, HI 96826  
 . e-mail secretwow@msn.com