



THEATRE
EDUCATION
— I N T H E —
21ST CENTURY

OUTREACH

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

In a changing world, how one professional theatre makes it work

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

GATHER THE PERMISSION SLIPS, load the buses, and go see a show with your students. Sounds simple enough. But these days, the logistics of giving kids a professional theatre experience can seem more daunting than fully producing your own show from scratch.

Didn't it used to be easier, before high gasoline prices reduced travel, before test preparation dominated class time, and before you had to prove the standards-aligned value of a field trip?

The past two decades have brought tremendous growth and ever-shifting challenges to the world of outreach—to use the most common term for theatres' efforts to engage more fully with their communities. And if teachers at participating schools are feeling the changes, imagine what the impact has been on those immersed in outreach, who spend every day trying to make those connections.

Fifteen years ago, Nancy J. Shaw began working at People's Light and Theatre, in Malvern, Pennsylvania, as director of education. Here are some of the obstacles and opportunities she's observed since 1993:

- Long-term projects are harder to fund, and less classroom time is available for such residencies.
- Intergenerational projects are receiving greater emphasis—"which I think is a wonderful new development," Shaw said.
- Assessment is often required, and for specially funded programs, an on-site, third-party evaluator has become very important. "While we believe, and research supports, that participation in the arts improves student academic performance overall," said Shaw, "we don't think that an easy causal relationship can be demonstrated between a particular arts residency and students' performance on a test."
- Teaching artists are receiving more training, from conferences and other emerging resources.

In general, Shaw has seen a shift in the content of theatre education programs presented in schools. At one time, they were rather independent, then became driven by the curriculum. Now they are centered on the art with an awareness of curricular issues. The current state, she said, preserves the

Summer 2003 (above):
Laura C. Kelley wrote
about outreach as an
audience-building tactic
for school theatre
programs.

art in the work by asking, “What do we have to offer as artists? What can our art form give you,” not just, “can our art form make math easier?”

People’s Light’s artists offer a tremendous amount to their community, twenty-five miles west of Philadelphia. The company devotes nearly a quarter of its annual budget to education and community connections, all under an umbrella called Project Discovery. It began in 1987 as an audience-development measure, with subsidized performances for high school students. Rhode Island’s Trinity Rep provided the model, and every school in Chester County became eligible for free tickets to two select shows. As the largest student matinee program in Pennsylvania, it now serves between ten and twelve thousand students annually. The parents of some of today’s participants first encountered theatre through Project Discovery and now subscribe to the mainstage.

Funded primarily through individual, corporate, and foundation donors, Project Discovery supplements productions with study guides, pre-show teacher training and workshops, and post-show discussions. People’s Light’s three-play family theatre series also runs under the Project Discovery banner, as do school and community residencies, which can last from two weeks to three years; and the New Voices Ensemble, nationally recognized for its work with at-risk youth.

Engaging students in the theatre is the job of People’s Light’s resident company, a group dedicated to Project Discovery as well as to performing in award-winning productions of classics and contemporary plays. The theatre education team of forty teaching artists also includes actors from across the region.

Here’s a look at what they do. For those wondering how outreach might evolve over the next twenty years, the range and depth of activities sponsored by People’s Light might spark some ideas.

New Voices Ensemble

In 1994, as a student at Swarthmore College, Elizabeth Webster enrolled in

a playwriting course offered on campus by People’s Light and its New Voices Ensemble, which linked to teenagers from the city of Chester—nearby geographically, yet, with its high poverty rate, far removed from the prestigious, private liberal arts college. Through classes, original productions, and an array of opportunities at People’s Light, the theatre had dedicated itself to working intensively with the same students, most of them African-American, for six years.

“That was remarkable,” Webster said, “because usually the philosophy in outreach education programs is to try to reach as many students as you can. But their philosophy was, try to reach a few students but as deeply as you can.” The impact has been profound, as Webster illustrates with the fact that one of the students, a good friend of hers, still talks frequently about how the program changed his life.

It affected Webster, too. She had no idea that acting was a viable livelihood until she could question and observe actors while performing as a People’s

Light acting/teaching apprentice after college. Among her assignments was to assist Adams and then-associate artistic director David Bradley with the New Voices Ensemble.

For twelve years Webster has remained a member of the resident company, even while earning a master’s degree in classical acting from the Shakespeare Theatre and George Washington University and living in D.C. She performs in as many People’s Light shows as she can (one this season, John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt*), in addition to teaching in various programs.

Whether she’s acting or teaching, her People’s Light salary is identical. “It’s a big deal,” Webster said. “I think the institution does that to put them at the same level, to not value one over the other... In this case, [acting and teaching are] all part of the same process of creating theatre.”

Likewise People’s Light offers its students ways to participate across its broad theatrical spectrum. It’s not uncommon for New Voices students to participate in Summerstage—more later

JOHN WELSH



A performance from this year’s Summerstage, a four-week camp for fourth through eighth graders offered by People’s Light and Theatre.

on that program—and to emerge as leaders with such strong commitment that they become teaching assistants. Some even appear in mainstage productions alongside career actors.

This practice is so unusual, in Webster's experience, that she considers such integration through theatre to be radical. "It sort of challenges our assumptions about keeping groups of people separate," she said.

The New Voices Ensemble is mixing it up further. Recently it has maintained a strong focus on Chester while extending to neighboring communities with diverse demographics. Together these students have collaborated with resident artists in workshops tied to mainstage productions and, in theatre classes, they have explored topics such as "You and Your Culture" and Shakespeare's women. They've also attended some of the company's regular season and family-series performances. Usually the ensemble creates its own production.

Delaware Valley Friends School

Not far from the theatre, in Paoli, is a Quaker school for seventh through twelfth graders who have learning differences. With a college preparatory curriculum, the Delaware Valley Friends School prepares these students for future work and study. People's Light and Theatre has been a partner in that endeavor for the past three years, serving nearly two

hundred ninth through twelfth graders.

The program has trained teachers to use theatre strategies in the classroom, worked directly with students, and made theatre part of the school's culture. The collaboration, initially funded by a three-year professional development grant from the Edward E. Ford Foundation, was monitored by an on-site evaluator. The partnership among school leadership, faculty, and People's Light was so strong that the school ensured the program's future by securing an endowment from a parent.

The annual residency is continuing, thanks to that commitment, and likely will allow for a consulting relationship between the school and the theatre company, in addition to the formal programs. Teachers who want to infuse a lesson plan with theatre or movement will be able to call People's Light to request assistance from a teaching artist.

People's Light artists began their residency by working with the school's faculty as a first step toward enriching the entire school with theatre. Many of the students have reading problems, noted Shaw, the education director. "To have a movement-based, experiential art form come in," she said, "gave the teachers new tools for addressing their students' needs." The second year's work targeted the use of movement in art, science, and math classes, in addition to residencies for English and history classes.

With Delaware Valley Friends students themselves, company members

led workshops in preparation for attending People's Light productions and interacted during two-week residencies. Copying the successful New Voices model, the program worked with one class as it progressed from ninth through eleventh grades. Students from any grade could sign up for a weekly after-school program, Acting Lab.

This year the eager Acting Lab students had to wait until October to start. Their lab teacher, People's Light resident company actor Melanye Finister, was appearing in *The Persians*, Ellen McLaughlin's Aeschylus adaptation, at the theatre. She, too, was excited about returning to improvisation and theatre games with this unique group, which can be stymied by traditional methods of learning.

"One of the wonderful things about doing theatre with them is that they find themselves," she said. "It's been really gratifying to see their success and enjoyment and the liberation that they feel by working with the improvisation." (See below for a favorite exercise.)

"Some of them are just so naturally inclined, in some sort of way," Finister added, in a voiced hush with awe. "They just have extraordinary ideas about character and really wonderful invention and imagination."

Trust has been building over the past three years, and students' unease about appearing in front of others has

Do try this in class

People's Light and Theatre resident company actor Melanye Finister shared this exercise, a favorite of her students in the extracurricular Acting Lab that she teaches at Delaware Valley Friends School. It's called "One In, One Out, One Stays."

Start with two students in front of the room and a set of circumstances:

- Who are you?
- Where are you?
- What do you want?
- Who else might enter that space?

For example, one student plays a clerk at a department store return counter. Other students, one at a time, enter the scene as customers with returns. Throughout the exercise, the clerk has to handle every problem. When a new character enters, the other customer has to find a reason to leave. Previous characters can show up again—often resulting in an interesting story full of characters whose lives are connected.

Following one of the basic tenets of improvisation, students often have to

say *yes* when they want to say *no*, as they have to come up with something to say next.

Finister details the student benefits of this fun exercise: listening (hearing, understanding, and reinterpreting a story), thinking fast on their feet, unleashing the imagination, and instilling a sense of confidence—in front of a supportive audience.

—L.C.K

gradually been replaced with confidence. Last spring the Acting Lab met twice a week, for longer sessions, to prepare for its debut at the school's arts festival, traditionally a visual arts showcase.

This year a five-month residency will prepare the school's seventh and eighth graders to create a theatre piece and perform it in the spring. Seventh graders are new to the school, so the theatre project is viewed as a team-building experience that models an approach to the entire curriculum. People's Light will draw on years of facilitating original student productions during its summer program.

Summerstage

Finister directs one arm of Summerstage, a four-week program for fourth through eighth graders. This past July campers and company members explored the Greek myths. They created their own myths; took daily classes in acting, movement, and design; made music and wrote poetry; and worked alongside company designers, actors they had seen on the mainstage, and guest Aaron Cromie, a master puppeteer, to create, design, and perform their own show.

"This is their introduction to theatre," Finister said of her summer students. "It's an amazing experience of community, and, for me, an amazing experience of completion... It's making the notion [through brainstorming] and following it to idea, to a final product. It's a complete circle, and I feel like often kids don't have that experience, and they get it here. It's really wonderful and exciting to watch."

Such experiences contribute to her own education and artistry. She is reminded of the basics that may have slipped a bit. "And the exchange with



Melanye Finister performs with People's Light—she was featured in *The Persians* this fall—and teaches Acting Lab, a Project Discovery initiative at an area alternative school.

people who are living their lives in completely different ways than the way we tend to live our lives—that constant connection on a deep level, investigating art with people from all walks of life, background, and experience, is really enriching."

The resident company, with its familiar philosophy and method for working, is not exclusive, and Finister relishes opportunities to share resources with arts education colleagues. She's a member of the Stockton Rush Bartol Foundation, which promotes arts access through grants and resources, and participates in workshops with LINC Philadelphia, a program for teaching artists. Through these connections, she deepens her own experiences and carries the lessons back to her home company.

Like the best programs of its kind across the country, Project Discovery fosters creative exploration across the generations. It encourages established theatre artists to train their young counterparts while engaging with students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

True, People's Light and Theatre has uncommon resources to devote to community outreach; schoolteachers in most towns might look with envy at those in Pennsylvania who benefit from the work Shaw and her staff, with artists like Finister, are doing despite all the new hurdles. Still, the initiative's continued success, in so many forms, proves that there are discoveries to be made through projects everywhere.

Even now.

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