

Dani Snyder-Young

THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF THE REAL

Audience members sit at tables and desks in an interactive classroom, an immersive performance space designed to evoke a K–12 classroom. Blackboards are covered with homework assignments and test reminders, posters with test-taking tips and motivational quotes such as “For success, attitude is as important as ability.” Collaboraction’s production of *Forgotten Future: The Education Project* begins as an interracial, intergenerational ensemble of actors enters the space chanting and waving signs reading “Support our Schools: Don’t Close Them” and “Save our Schools” in protest of Chicago’s dysfunctional public school system. They wear red T-shirts, and several are clad in the real-life protest T-shirts worn during the school closure protests and the teachers’ strike during the 2012–13 school year. The audience soon claps and chants along: “There’s no power like the power of the people and the power of the people don’t stop” (clap, clap). Adult actors playing parents and teachers give speeches in between the chants. The kids in the ensemble try to speak, but the adults run right over them. By the end of the rally, the kids are standing off in a corner of the space, forlorn and ignored, while the adults yell on their behalf without ever asking for their perspective.

Theatre can reflect our lived experiences and social realities, but there are obstacles that make it difficult for theatre to contribute toward positive social change. This essay focuses on the case study of an immersive play with explicit goals of inciting positive social change focused on a current, hot-button local

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This piece contains material originally published in my review “Broken Public Schools and Community Dialogue at Collaboraction” under Creative Commons license on *HowlRound*, 4 December 2014, <http://howlround.com/broken-public-schools-and-community-dialogue-at-collaboraction>.

political issue. *Forgotten Future: The Education Project* was produced by Collaboraction, a twenty-year-old theatre company based in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago.¹ Since 2013, the company has been creating a series of documentary theatre projects on the impact of violence on Chicago communities, and the company's website explicitly states that these projects are what led it to shift its mission to focus on devising original work that engages with critical social issues "to explore the most pressing issues of our times, cultivate dialogue and incite change."² The play was conceived and written by Producing Director Sarah Moeller, cowritten by Adam Seidel and Michele Stine, and codirected by Sarah Moeller and John Wilson, using theatre as a platform for community discussion of the dysfunction plaguing Chicago's public schools. This production initially ran in Collaboraction's Wicker Park performance space from 18 September to 26 October 2014 and was remounted during 12 February to 8 March 2015.

The play tells the intertwining stories of three families—a Latino family on the West Side coping with a severely underresourced school, a black family on the South Side surviving the school closure crisis, and a white family on the North Side buckling under the pressure of applying to selective enrollment high schools. *Forgotten Future* examines each family's distinct problems and highlights the sharp inequalities within the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system. It reflects the lived experiences and social realities of young people—a group whose voices aren't often heard in the public/political sphere—from three different communities in a segregated city in which there isn't much exchange among disparate worlds. Moeller is herself a teacher, and her motivation for creating *Forgotten Future* was to educate audiences about the issues plaguing CPS. She observes that many people who do not have school-age children have no idea how schools are funded or what the recent conflicts are actually about. In addition, whereas debates in the media highlight the voices of politicians, Moeller and her team "wanted to focus on the voice of the students, rather than the adults in the room." They engaged in an extended process of interviewing teachers and students identified through snowball sampling,³ sifting through stories, identifying the gaps, and heading back into the field to conduct more interviews to fill in conspicuous silences. The draft of *Forgotten Future* that I saw in October 2014 underwent multiple major revisions through its development as new stories and perspectives were added, edited, and removed for both breadth and clarity.

Public schools are funded by property taxes, and in a racially and economically segregated city such as Chicago, this system reinforces and exacerbates inequality. For the past several years, passions have been running particularly high around problems in the CPS system. In the fall of 2012, a seven-day teachers' strike was followed by a wave of school closings the following spring that concentrated in poor neighborhoods on the South and West Sides of the city. Collaboraction highlights these substantial, hot-button local issues in this production. Lead creator Sarah Moeller's explicit goals for the production are to "incite people to at least be more aware of what's going on around them" and to "incite change."⁴ This essay examines how empathy and identification operate as both a method for and obstacle to achieving these goals.

THE PROMISE AND POTENTIAL OF PARTICIPATING IN THE REAL

The audience is specifically framed as students in a classroom; we sit at desks, and the production's staging in the round enables us to see each other sitting at desks. The production design and the setup of the performance event evoke multiple layers of meaning: we are there to learn. We are asked to imagine ourselves in the shoes of the real students represented in the play. We are part of the story and not separate from it. The space was set up to reinforce a sense of *communitas* and common ground by physically locating the audience in a classroom and spatially framing these three different stories as happening in the same classroom in which we are all the students. These aesthetic choices encourage audience members to identify with the characters onstage. They unify a set of diverse "personal" problems and tell an overarching story about the common structural and political problems at their root.

Preshow projections scroll through statistics showing the total annual spending on education by country and international test scores, placing the United States in a global educational context—we spend more money and get poorer results than other nations. An audio track from a *PBS News Hour* segment on the school closures plays on a loop, including interviews with Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union. Lewis's argument that "the status quo is that rich people get richer and beautiful schools, and, poor children have bad schools. We are absolutely against the status quo" echoes through the space.⁵ This highlights the realness of the problems represented in the play. In the opening rally and at other points through the play, we are encouraged to chant and clap along, as we would in a real rally. It certainly isn't required, but I clapped and chanted along, as did the other audience members I saw next to me and across the space from me. We are fellow protesters—from the beginning, we are incorporated in the play's activist agenda. The production assumes that we agree with the message of the play. And that's probably true. Who comes to see a play explicitly about the problems with the school system who doesn't care about the school system? Chicago's public school system is highly dysfunctional, and there is a lot of press surrounding this dysfunction. It is unlikely that anyone paying attention to the schools and/or the local news would *not* think there are problems with the school system.

The Sunday matinee I attended had an intergenerational audience—about half the desks were filled with middle-school students. In the postperformance "town hall discussion" it became clear that many of the adults in the audience were their parents. In later interviews, Moeller confirmed that the production routinely attracted an intergenerational audience that included public school students, parents, and teachers.

By using real kids—real CPS students—the production foregrounds and highlights how they are at the center and yet totally marginalized in a contentious policy debate. The realness of the kids (and of the documentary audio track) highlighted the realness of the story. Carol Martin notes how "performance of the real can collapse the boundaries between the real and the fictional in ways that create confusion and disruption or lead to splendid unplanned harmonies in the service of the creation of meaning."⁶

The presence of these real kids is particularly useful in collapsing these boundaries. At the performance I saw, half the audience was present to support actor Leigh Aberman, who in real life has undergone the rigorous and stressful testing process to be able to attend a selective enrollment school. These audience members read the fictional story as a thin overlay of their lived experience of the actor's real life. Martin highlights how theatre is live and happening and therefore both real and not-real at the same time. The production intentionally highlights this overlap, and in the performance of this story line at this particular performance event, the real and the not-real overlap and blur. These audience members empathize and identify with the real girl as they watch her character's story line.

Moeller indicates that "it helps having youths in the play because they bring their friends." Putting real kids in the play convinced friends and families from their disparate communities to come see the play. The audience I experienced was full of people who might not otherwise take time out of their busy lives to come see a play on a weekend. This seems to offer the potential for genuine dialogue among community members in a segregated city who, as the play points out, do not routinely interact. Sonja Kufinec's essay in the present issue ("Do You Need Help?") highlights theatre's capacity to create a transactional space in which dialogue is possible, and I wanted *Forgotten Future* to be able to activate theatre's potential to create an encounter among people whose points of view might not otherwise have opportunity to come into dialogue. However, at the performance I saw, the audience was predominantly white. Aberman's friends and their families were present at this performance—white middle-school students and their white parents from the more affluent North Side of the city—and this group constituted a substantial portion of the audience.

OBSTACLE: WHITE HABITUS REINFORCES AN EXISTING (WHITE) WORLDVIEW

At the performance I saw, the mostly white audience focused exclusively on the white North Side narrative, to the exclusion of inequalities that were clearly present in the play and were highlighted by the talkback facilitator. Even when the facilitator pushed them to recognize the inequalities, they couldn't get past their own stories to see them. As a result, the "town hall meeting" after the show amplified the divisions the production attempted to bridge.

Moeller told me that "the [postperformance town hall] discussion oftentimes was driven by the audience members that were there, what their personal experiences were, what their takes on things were and that's completely what drove things." Many audience members at the performance I attended had lived the story of the white student applying for a slot at a selective enrollment school. They identified with that character, were excited to see this grueling experience represented onstage, and wanted to talk about it.

A young white girl was the first audience member to speak up at the start of the discussion. "I could definitely really relate to Leah's character's comments on the stress of the selective enrollment process," she said. The discussion evolved to

clarify that all of the young people in the audience (and the actor in the production) went to a selective enrollment elementary school ending in sixth grade and last year went through the process to get into a seventh grade academic center. The stress over this begins, they said, as early as fourth grade.

Moeller, who was cofacilitating the discussion, offered context—selective enrollment high schools take 5 percent of students, and selective enrollment seventh and eighth grade programs are even more selective.

A woman in the audience introduced herself as Leah's former teacher and commented that she had teared up at points—the girl who had worked herself to the bone to get into the selective enrollment high school was “not necessarily going to be OK.” The discussion continued to focus on this story line. A parent said, “It's unlike anything you could ever imagine. And it's grueling.” A student told us, “The day my letter came, I ran downstairs every fifteen minutes to see if the mail had come.” Another student chimed in, “All of us were going to a different place; you weren't going to be with your friends.”

The discussion facilitator attempted to refocus the conversation to engage with the larger narratives of inequality in the play: “What does it mean that we live in a society where education is viewed as a privilege rather than a right?”

In response to this question, the discussion shifted to the plight of the white teachers. One teacher whose school was relocated told us, “Nobody cared how our furniture got there. Nobody cared if our furniture got there. But we had to be ready to teach the next day.”

No intervention on the part of the facilitators could get this audience to engage with either the problems of the black and Latino students or the larger structural problems plaguing the system. Megan A. Burke defines a “white habitus” as a framework of unexamined assumptions upholding white privilege.⁷ I quote the talkback above at length to provide evidence that despite this production's goals, audience members structured discourse in ways that supported a white habitus. Even when facilitators tried to refocus the discussion on the larger landscape of inequality, I watched the white audience members focus on elements of performances that reinforced their lived experiences and existing worldviews.

TALKING PAST EACH OTHER

I did not want to assume that every town hall discussion mirrored the one I observed at the single performance I attended, so I asked Sarah Moeller to tell me stories of performances I did not see where the audience was more diverse and audience members with differing lived experiences were present at the same performance. She told me about town hall meetings where some audience members were focused on their lived experience of trying to get into selective enrollment schools while others were saying “My school doesn't even have textbooks.”⁸ In these mixed audiences, Moeller told me, audience members talked past each other; they could not hear each other over the noise of their own lived experience:

I think it was hard for them to see each other's perspectives because we are all innately selfish, even if we don't want to be. Especially when it involves our

own children. That it's hard to hear each other. I do think people would try to hear each other, but everybody's individual problems run so deeply personal that, more so, we would end up having two completely different conversations.

Martin warns that “[p]resented with evidence, people can remain convinced of their own views without having to entertain, let alone understand or agree with, the views of anyone else.”⁹ Moeller's observation takes this argument a step further—even when presented with evidence, people can remain convinced of their own views. *Forgotten Future* connects the dots among diverse problems plaguing the CPS system, highlighting the ways that structural systems of power hurt everyone as they reinforce existing social inequalities. Even when explicitly prompted by facilitators, audience members had trouble pushing past their own stories to discuss these larger structural problems.

Moeller told me that during the remount in February 2015, the town hall meetings directly engaged with the contentious mayoral election. Identification and empathy activated audience members to want to *do something*, and they focused on voting as a concrete doable action. This was a spot, Moeller emphasized, where diverse audience members were able to come together and find agreement.¹⁰ Rahm Emanuel was the problem, voting the solution. In making this alliance, audience members focused their rage on a common enemy and a concrete action they could take to bring him down.

Lani Guinier highlights how “electocracy (rule by elections) reduces the role of citizens to a series of discrete choice points.”¹¹ Voting, within this framework, replaces more active forms of civic engagement. However, the play represents multiple active forms of civic engagement that parents, teachers, and students took—to no avail—to attempt to alter elected officials' actions. Street protests and speeches at Board of Education meetings fell on deaf ears: regime change via the ballot box appears to be the only hope for a more receptive administration. I do not want to be overly optimistic about the abstract possibility that *Forgotten Future* created progressive social change when that's not what I saw, but also I do not want to pretend that the production had no impact at all. Its use of identification and empathy did get audience members fired up to go vote. I suspect that people who are motivated enough to come watch a play about the problems plaguing CPS would vote in local elections anyway, but I see the value in using a play to rally supporters to the polls—after all, voter turnout rates in local elections are typically very low.

In her review of *Forgotten Future*, *Chicago Tribune* critic Kerry Reid argues that nothing in the play is *new* news to people who have been paying attention.¹² Moeller thinks that the problem is that lots of people—in particular, those who do not have children in the schools—aren't paying attention. The town hall discussion I saw and Moeller's characterization of the ones I did not see highlights the fact that many people mostly pay attention to how the problem impacts them personally. They empathize and identify strongly with the characters onstage, reading the fictional characters' journeys as a thin overlay of their own lived experience.

I do not want to single out this production as a project that is “doing it wrong.” *Forgotten Future* reflects diverse real experiences and creates a space in which audience members are asked to recognize and respond to a set of interlocking problems caused by inequitable and unsustainable political policy. I chose this case study because it uses a set of relatively common tactics theatre artists use in creating projects with interventionist goals. I chose it because I thought the play used interesting and affective aesthetic choices to draw useful connections across disparate-seeming problems. And I chose it because *Forgotten Future* is set up in some ways that feel like it *should* be able to engender substantial dialogue.

I want the performance event to include the friends and family of all three of the kids in the cast and to facilitate a space where students and parents from the South, West, and North Sides of the city can have a real dialogue about disparities across the larger system. These are potentialities I did not see play out in my experience attending this performance event, and Moeller confirms that even when a diverse audience was in attendance, they were not able to hear each other. However, what I want as a critic is perhaps not as relevant as the goals Moeller, as the lead creator, articulates for the production: inciting people “to at least be more aware of what’s going on around them” and inciting change.

Many theatre productions get audience members to take an emotional journey through which they empathize with other people’s experiences. When audience members recognize themselves onstage—when their lived experience of the real is directly represented—they focus on it. That is perhaps natural; as Moeller says, “we are all innately selfish.” *Forgotten Future* appears to succeed in using identification and empathy to get audience members to take action beyond the theatre by voting. But this comes at a price. Its use of real kids and immersive staging to create identification and empathy actually seems to act as an obstacle to pushing people to be more aware of what is going on around them. It seems to sharpen audience members’ focus on the things they already know and believe.

As a critic, I was disappointed when audience members could not seem to engage with big-picture problems in Chicago’s public schools. But I have no school-age children; at the moment I have the privilege of understanding this particular problem from a cool distance that would make Brecht proud.¹³ Though I may chant and clap along during the immersive experience of protest performed in theatrical space, I have not experienced the heat of my own anger and fear for my own child’s future. Polyvocal work such as *Forgotten Future* theoretically helps audience members see how diverse experiences interact in complex ways in a shared landscape. However, in practice, when audience members see themselves onstage—that is, see their specific reality portrayed—empathy and identification appear to reinforce existing worldviews and blind them to the larger structural systems of power in which they are embedded. The heat of reality beats cool critical distance.

ENDNOTES

1. Collaboracion Theatre Company, www.collaboracion.org, accessed 5 May 2016.
2. “Vision,” Collaboracion, www.collaboracion.org/#!/our-mission/c2mm, accessed 5 May 2016.

The Promise and Pitfalls of the Real

3. Moeller does not use this term, but it's the process she described.
4. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from Sarah Moeller are from an in-person interview conducted by Dani Snyder-Young in Chicago, IL, on 7 November 2014.
5. Televised interview by Jeffrey Brown of Karen Lewis, "Chicago Board of Education Plans to Shut Down Schools, Move 30,000 Students," *PBS NewsHour*, 22 March 2013, www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education-jan-june13-chicago_03-22/, accessed 7 June 2016.
6. Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.
7. Meghan A. Burke, *Racial Ambivalence in Diverse Communities: Whiteness and the Power of Color-Blind Ideologies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 95.
8. Sarah Moeller, phone interview with author, 2 March 2016.
9. Martin, 12.
10. Moeller phone interview, 2 March 2016.
11. Lani Guinier, "Beyond Electocracy: Rethinking the Political Representative as Powerful Stranger," *Modern Law Review* 71.1 (2008): 1–35, at 1.
12. Kerry Reid, "Review: *Forgotten Future* by Collaboration," *Chicago Tribune*, 29 September 2014, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/reviews/ct-forgotten-future-review-story.html, accessed 21 November 2015.
13. Ask me again in a few years.