



Kate Sommers-Dawes offers all teachers the means to take advantage of one of education's most effective tools: dual-language theater

All the World's Stage

In an education era increasingly characterized by bureaucratic buzzwords like 100 Percent Compliance and Adequate Yearly Progress, it is a worthwhile challenge to protect those elements of the education system the benefits of which, while obvious, are less quantifiable. Dual-language theater, in which a production is performed in a native and second language, is an educational tool which offers rewards, both intellectual and emotional, that are more elusive. By the same token, its assets are unique in their ability to provide students with learning experiences unmatched by any other study method.

In their 2007 book, *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*, Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner identify seven “studio habits of mind” that enrich student character, which are strengthened through study of the arts, but are virtually immeasurable by standardized testing. These include persistence over obstacles, self-expression, and the ability to make connections between school and the outside world: behaviors that assist student success whatever their eventual life path. In addition to these advantages, dual-language theater in particular fosters a spirit of cultural inclusion in its contributors and spectators — a disposition, incidentally, which has proven difficult to replicate on the national stage.

Employing these methods to great effect across the U.S. are three distinct innovators: Disney Theatrical Productions, playwright and educator José Cruz González, and the East LA Classic Theatre. In each dual-language case, Spanish is the language partnered with English. Yet, as Ken Cerniglia, dramaturg and literary manager at Disney has imagined on a grand scale, dual-language theater may be reproduced as easily with any two languages that are culturally entwined, such as Hebrew and Arabic. To replicate these programs in any language, however, educators and administrators must first defend and value drama courses independent of their effects on achievement in other curricula.

It is tempting to claim that quality theater education will improve scores in math, science, or reading, as districts with limited budgets struggle to meet standards. In a 2007 open letter, the president of the Texas Educational Theatre Association argued with good reason that; the “fine arts should remain a part of the required curriculum in Texas” because “involvement in the arts is linked to... increased standardized test scores.”

However, despite the research-supported correlation between aca-



demic achievement and an arts education, some of the field's top researchers argue that pondering whether the arts improve performance in core academics is asking the wrong question. "We have been so driven to measure the impact of the arts in education that we... forget that their strength lies beyond the measurable," argues Jessica Hoffmann Davis, a cognitive developmental psychologist. Her fellow researchers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero affirm, "Arts educators should never allow the arts to be justified wholly or even primarily in terms of what [they] can do for mathematics or reading. The arts must be justified in terms of what [they] can teach that no other subject can." In other words, the arts deliver something to the instructional table that can be neither appraised nor understood through standardized tests alone.

Dual-language theater is even less likely to receive widespread support than its more mainstream counterpart. Luis Ramos-García voiced this concern in his book, *The State of Latino Theater in the United States*, commenting that the U.S. "is perhaps the only country in the world in which speaking two languages is almost a stigma" (see its "English-Only" polemic for examples). Moreover, the resources of minority groups often pale in comparison to those of their peers in the majority. This discrepancy persists despite the fact that dual-language drama has the added benefits of improving relationships between communities and fostering cultural pride in minorities.

To overcome such impediments, dual-language theater has a strong support system in this country. Dr. Joe Rosenberg's 1985 interview in the *Journal of Employment Counseling* characterized the art form as a way to "break down barriers between cultures," as his actors "learned to be proud of their heritage," and were even "able to move into economically lucrative and prestigious careers." Furthermore, he reveals that the students improved their fluency in both Spanish and English as a result of their theatrical study, even though they "had been so conditioned against the use of Spanish that strong subconscious signals fought their attempts to speak in that language."

The tenacity of drama's supporters and its humanizing benefits notwithstanding, a recent California study showed that "arts courses are available only in a discrepant manner, with lower performing students — especially Black and Latino students — much less likely to have access to music and other arts programs." In response to this inequity (which persists despite the fact that the arts are listed as part

of core curricula in NCLB legislation), it is incumbent upon educators and policy makers to ensure that the most vulnerable populations have access to this method of instruction and its particular advantages. Achieving this end involves effort — much more than consigning arts programs to an afterthought, leaving them vulnerable to funding volatility which, as the above study found, is often the case in California public schools.

Thomas Friedman recently described the challenge facing educators in a global, post-meltdown economy, "Our schools have a doubly hard task now — not just improving reading, writing and arithmetic but entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity." Never have the arts been more relevant. Education agencies, especially those in underserved communities, can learn from the following experiences of dual-language theater programs that integrate such syllabi into core curricula. These are exemplary programs created by artists working hard to help students achieve their goals through theater in Spanish and English on the nation's main stages.

Disney Theatrical Productions, the division of the Disney

Corporation responsible for the 1998 Tony winner *The Lion King*, is new to the world of dual-language theater but lacks neither passion nor expertise. The group's first foray into bilingual drama began with a one hour theatrical production for middle school students, adapted from an existing animated film. Through the collaboration of Disney dramaturg Ken Cerniglia, dramatist José Cruz González, and South Texas theater educator Gilberto Zepeda, the short play was transformed into a musical, dual-language production of *Aladdin*.

In this bilingual-themed version, the royal characters are required, by decree, to speak Spanish and the rest of the populace communicate only in English. González, a prolific playwright and longtime project director of South Coast Repertory's Hispanic Playwrights Project, found that, in the staging of such a production, a powerful collective memory was activated. In this recollection, parents and grandparents who were forbidden from speaking Spanish as students witnessed their children studying, performing in, and thereby fundamentally honoring the language. "Spanish-speaking audiences here in the States are hungry for stories that can be told in Spanish and bilingually," González said, a shared desire reflected in the response from the small Texas community where the play opened to packed houses.